

**SOME THINGS ARE BETTER
LEFT UNTOLD**

**By
Jason Hooper**

All rights reserved. No part of this book shall be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, magnetic, photographic including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior written permission of the publisher. No patent liability is assumed with respect to the use of the information contained herein. Although every precaution has been taken in the preparation of this book, the publisher and author assume no responsibility for errors or omissions. Neither is any liability assumed for damages resulting from the use of the information contained herein.

Copyright © 2011 by Jason Hooper

ISBN 0-7414-6621-X

Printed in the United States of America

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Published January 2013



INFINITY PUBLISHING
1094 New DeHaven Street, Suite 100
West Conshohocken, PA 19428-2713
Toll-free (877) BUY BOOK
Local Phone (610) 941-9999
Fax (610) 941-9959
Info@buybooksontheweb.com
www.buybooksontheweb.com

I apologies to anyone offended by the views expressed in the story. My intentions were to shed some light on a dark subject matter.

DEDICATION

To all family and friends that supported me unconditionally. Especially to my momma Lola, and my seven brothers and sisters, Lashannon, Lamar, Rachel, Michael, Brittany, Chastity, and Christina, thank you for giving me a push, when my life seemed motionless. Through all my hardships, it was God that I held faith in. To my friends Baby Doll (a.k.a. Kamina Allen, RIP) and M.D. (a.k.a. Marcus Dixon, RIP). The unforgettable memories will always keep me inspired and motivated.

Also, I would like to thank a dear friend of mine, Sarai Huitt, and my sister Rachel Ashley for looking out for me when I was starving. Much love to Uncle T-Kat for the shelter. I also would like to thank my two sons for keeping me strong through my recent struggles. Jason Hooper Jr. and Joshua Parker, I love all of you guys.

CHAPTER 1 - IN THE EYES OF THE BEHOLDER

Chauncey Wilson's dorm room at the university had the tang of sex in the air. Eighteen-year-old Sherise Fanari laid her beautiful, pecan-blushed casing across the bed running her mouth. Chauncey was delighted when he scooped his fine ass woman up from Rochester; it had been an eighty-mile drive, but it was well worth it. Right now, he was at a doctor's appointment, so the room had been hers all afternoon. Sherise was on the phone heckling one of her boyfriends as usual. "I can't believe you playin' me for that geechy, fat broad. You should be ashamed of yourself."

Darnell asked, "Who you talking about? Tasha?"

"Yeah Darnell, don't play stupid. You know you like Tasha. We both know you wanna ask her fat ass to make you some fried chicken! Y'all gonna have two fat kids. Watch."

"Yeah right, quit playing girl,"

Sherise ribbed, "Quit frontin' nigga!"

Darnell laughed bashfully, knowing that he only had eyes for the woman that was on the phone. He pleaded from

the bottom of his heart. “Yeah right, you my one and only, and as far as looks, Boo, she ain’t got nothing on you. Don’t play like that.”

She didn’t respond to his compliment. She went on teasingly. “Nope. Don’t even play yourself Darnell. You know you wanna hook up with big momma.”

Darnell’s voice firmed. “I wouldn’t do a thing like that. We were just talking. She’s your friend. She’s real cool though. Besides, I like her better than Fatima. That friend of yours acts like a dude.”

“Yo, don’t be talking bout my girl Fatima. That’s my bitch.” Darnell laughed again. “I miss you Boo. When am I going to see you?” Sherise just sucked her teeth and replied sarcastically. “Yeah, whatever punk, I got my eye on you. I invite you over my house and you try to hook up with my friend. That’s how you get down?”

After she spoke, she exploded in sardonic laughter.

“Okay, okay quit playin’, Boo,” Darnell uttered quietly.

He knew she was just teasing, but it bothered him. She began bargaining with more seriousness in her voice. “Okay, I won’t fuck with you about your fat, funny-talking girlfriend, but you gotta promise to take me shopping tomorrow, punk.”

He didn’t think twice before he answered. “Yeah, okay. Cool, Boo, tomorrow for sure. I ain’t a punk either.”

Sherise heard keys jingle outside of the dorm room. She cut their conversation off quickly, almost whispering. “Okay, thanks baby. I’ll call you back. I gotta get back to work.”

She left Darnell talking to a dead phone and hung up her cell quickly. Chauncey, her Syracuse sex toy, came gimping back inside his dorm room. His eyes shot directly toward the sweat-misted girl lying across his bed in a thong and a bra. He asked sharply, “Did that nigga Vince come in here?”

She glared at his long, skeletal face and huskily replied, “Not that I know of, I just woke up. Why you be checkin’ on that nigga every time I’m here?”

Chauncey ran his long tongue across his thin lips. Shaking his head, he exclaimed, “Yeah, I notice every time I got you over here, that nigga spends more time in the damn room! He’s not even an athlete, so I don’t know why he’s on campus so early.”

Sherise laughed and replied, “It’s his room too, ya know.”

Chauncey didn’t respond. He sat down on the edge of the bed to rest his busted knee. Sherise snickered at the thin beanpole of a man. He was the man she would have tried settling down with. At least she hoped she would, as soon as he got that pro basketball deal he was hoping for. But now the man was hopeless. Not too long ago, he had surgery for some knee injury. Now, his future in basketball seemed bleak, even though he swore he could make some great comeback.

Sherise jeered, “Doc take care of that old-man leg?” Chauncey’s jaws tightened. He remained silent, but he was cursing the smart-mouth bitch out in his skull. He took his injury issues personally, and his feelings were hurt easily whenever anyone reminded him of his setback. He became even angrier when Vince came whistling through the door. The brown-skinned man strolled in, smiling coolly. He grabbed a set of keys from the floor under his bed. He swept his dreamy eyes over Sherise as he turned back around to leave. The funny thing was that, while he was exiting the room, he and Sherise both burst out laughing like they knew something Chauncey didn’t. Chauncey’s pulsing eyes raced from the door and back to Sherise.

He sat dumbfounded, wondering what she and his roomie were laughing about. He would have never guessed that his roommate had just fucked the girl while he was at his doctor’s appointment. He frowned at Sherise as the door shut.

“What the hell is so funny?” he asked heatedly.

Sherise pursed her lips. “Your ass, that’s what, crippled boy.” She stood, and her incredible body shimmered in the light. Chauncey reached his long fingers out as she passed.

She glanced back at him with a grin and then rushed into the bathroom. She had to hurry, before he got curious and wanted to taste it.

* * * *

Love is a beautiful thing. Darnell daydreamed while gracefully positioning the latest portrait of him and Sherise on his oak nightstand. He and his girlfriend had taken the pictures at her crib during a cookout she had weeks ago. Since then, he had been waiting impatiently for the pictures to be developed. He adored the one of them staring into each other's eyes and holding hands. After he picked up the photos and looked at all of them on his way home from the photo center, he decided that was his favorite one.

He took a step back and eyed all of the portraits on his nightstand; he cherished them to death. A heavenly smile worked its way across his ill-favored face as he thought about all the joy he felt whenever he was with the lively girl. As far as Darnell was concerned, his girl was beautiful and bright. She loved him as much as he loved her, and he truly loved her.

He heard his mother shouting up the stairs. "Darnell, you gonna miss the bus!"

He hollered back through his closed bedroom door. "Okay ma, I know!"

He harbored his thought blissfully, believing the girl was all he needed in life. At times, he'd fantasize about starting a family with the pretty, butter-pecan-shaded girl while he worked hard busting down piles of dishes at Jimmy's diner. During his reveries, he would always envisage weddings. So, for the last seven months, Darnell had been working overtime to make up for his lousy hourly wage. His mind constantly dwelled on the ten thousand dollar wedding ring she always raved about while they shopped at the mall. Hopes of one day buying the ring for the girl kept him motivated through his hellish shifts.

He snapped out of his stupor, and glanced down at his plastic wristwatch. The time winked 1:57 PM.

Renae shouted again, “You gonna be late Darnell!”

Darnell grimaced wearily at the thought of his shift starting soon. He carefully lifted one of the framed portraits of Sherise and planted a gentle kiss on it. With three minutes to spare, he staggered down the stairs and out of his mother’s two-bedroom apartment. Blinded by his chimeric love, his childlike visions would keep him content through fourteen hours of a dreadful dead-end job.

He watched the number one Lake Avenue bus approach him; his sprint slowed to a trot. The bus stopped in front of Darnell, making a high-pitched squealing noise that never failed to irritate him. With a grit of his small, ridged set of teeth, he stepped on and prepared his mind for a long night. While relaxing on the bus ride, he reassured himself that he could do it. It was just 3:00 PM to 5:00 AM; he could do it.

* * * *

Hours later, inside of Cory’s Jewelry at the mall, Sherise stood with a cocky, bow-legged stance and idly twirled her micro braids. Her Apple Bottom jeans were so tight they looked like they would split at the seams if she moved the wrong way. Her skin-tight shirt showed a perfect outline of her firm humps. She had just cursed out Chauncey. She told him to lose her number after he dropped her off at her car, which was parked in the mall’s lot in Rochester. Chauncey had accused her of having sex with his roommate, but she denied it strongly and got pissed off at him even mentioning it. She needed a motive to cut him off anyway, so she figured the timing was perfect. Chauncey practically cried the entire time during his long ride back to campus.

Since then, she had gone home, showered, and changed. Now, she was back at the mall shopping. Sherise stared in admiration at the jewels glistening inside of the glass display case. She really didn’t have plans on buying anything in the

high-priced store, but as she was leaving The Lingerie Palace, directly across from Cory's, she couldn't resist the urge. She just had to take a peep at the glittery eye candy. She knew without a doubt that she would really have to get on her grind to afford any of this shit. She studied a white gold and diamond bracelet briefly before lifting her gaze from the display case to peer around the lengthy jewelry shop.

She zoomed in on the drop-dead gorgeous guy that would always be attending the place when she stopped in to window shop. Brandon Augustine, the assistant jeweler of Cory's, stood across from Sherise, behind the counter; he was deep in his own thoughts.

He hadn't even acknowledged Sherise coming into the place, let alone scoped the attractive vixen undressing him with her eyes. His distraction was a calculator that he was vigorously punching figures into.

For what seemed like days in her mind, Sherise glared at the tall, bronze-colored man intently. Then, realizing she had been staring too long, she dropped her keen eyes back upon the display case. Suddenly, she heard rings of laughter behind her. She wheeled around and saw Deana and Keanu, two animated girls that she knew from school. The two dainty, coffee-skinned girls noticed Reesie before they passed and stopped to say hello.

She cursed under her breath. "Ahhh, here we go, these two dumb bitches."

Keanu, the shorter of the two shouted shrilly. "What's good, Reesie?"

Sherise snorted back, "Damn, what up Keanu. I'm right here in front of you, why you gotta yell?"

Keanu blushed at Sherise's words. "Damn, my bad. You ain't gotta get all aggressive. What's up?" Deana smiled and lifted her eyebrows at the girl that she had been walking with. She knew that Keanu's big mouth would get her screamed on.

Deana flung back her long, black hair. "So, what did you cop? I know you got some hot shit for school, Reesie.

What's in the bag? Ke-Ke and I got a few of the same outfits. But I think I look better in them though. ”

Deana didn't bother to disguise her competitive tone. Sherise gaped at all the bags the girls were carrying and came up with a lie. “Yo, I bought my shit from the city. I dropped like five G's on outfits and shoes. I'm 'bout to cop some jewels now.”

The two annoying girls laughed at the same time, more out of habit than anything else. “Cory's is mad expensive. You sure you wanna buy jewels from out of there Sherise? Maybe you should check Benzer's out. I heard they got a sale on all Jewelry,” Deana suggested.

“Wow, Deana, I ain't a poor bitch. I do make money!” Sherise stressed looking at both women as if they were diseased pest. “Naw, I'm just sayin' girl,” Deana replied as her smile dissolved. Keanu cut in. “Ya'll know the mall 'bout to close right?”

Sherise ignored the remark. Deana nodded in the jeweler's direction. “Looks like Brandon 'bouts to close down right now.”

Sherise snapped, “Well, damn, let me get in here before he closes. I'll see y'all when school start back.” She grumbled something else, but the two girls ignored the rude remark. They almost replied jointly when they said, “Alright, see you later girl.” Both chicks strode off bubbly.

Sherise turned and took a glimpse over her shoulder before she attempted leaving Cory's Jewelry. Her irritation disappeared as she realized that she and the pretty boy were the only two in the place. She was glad that Deana and Keanu didn't come in and fuck up her game. She had been trying all summer long but could never get time with the man; there was always some chicken-head one step ahead of her, all up in his face.

She figured she might as well take the opportunity while it presented itself. She meandered sensually toward Brandon. He was squatting and fiddling with a stack of receipts from the day's sales. She moved with a deep sway. Her well-rounded hips and plentiful ass moved in on the

target. Her conniving mind went into overdrive thinking of angles to spark conversation. Sherise arrived boldly near the counter without Brandon noticing.

Her words spilled out in a nasally tone. “Hello sir, how are you doing today?”

Not giving the man a chance to answer her first question, she followed up with another. “Do y’all have layaway in this store?”

Brandon, thin and lofty, peered up sharply, startled by the girl. He recovered from his crouch and managed a mild smile. “Oh, my bad Miss, I gotta lot going on right now. I’m closing down in ten minutes, but what can I help you with this evening?”

Sherise smiled seductively at the pretty-faced man and repeated herself without giving her usual attitude for having to do so.

Brandon answered her inquiry silkily. “Well. Yeah. Actually, we do have layaway, just started last year around Christmas time. Did you wanna put something on? I can show you a few things that just might spark your interest.”

He followed up his approach up with a salesman’s grin. Sherise wasn’t paying much attention to what he was saying as her lustful mind worked. Her dark brown, alluring eyes took inventory of the six-foot, slender, but sturdy frame that stood in front of her. She stole a quick glance at his crotch and was distracted by an eminent bulge. She thought sarcastically, *He’s wearing very tight pants or he’s huge.*

Snapping back to reality, she rhapsodically replied, “No not today, but I was going shopping for some bling real soon, maybe a bracelet. I really don’t know yet.”

“Nice. Let me know when your ready to buy something. I can hook you up,” he replied for the hell of it. Brandon had learned from years of assisting his uncle Cory that when someone talked like that, that’s usually all they were ever going to do. He apprehended the situation, but reasoned that he may be missing out on some cash if his radar was off.

Considering the possibility of getting a sale, he began to rummage through what looked like a stack of catalogs. He found what he was looking for and handed one of them to Sherise and said, "Here, take one of our catalogs so you can see everything that we have in stock; we don't keep everything on display. You understand how that goes right?"

She stared curiously and asked, "Yeah, what's this?" She realized that it was a catalog and mechanically said, "Okay, thanks." With a smile, she retrieved it and began turning the pages of the catalog slowly. One of the items vaguely drew her attention. It was a diamond watch, and it made her ten karat shit look cheap. Then it all hit her at once; she realized that all the jewelry Darnell had bought her was only ten karat stuff. It was just starter-kit jewelry compared to the merchandise that was in this catalog. *Expensive things just looked better*, she thought.

Brandon watched Sherise impatiently. He noticed the girl was stalling. He rolled his eyes coldly at the young girl, upset that she was holding him up.

He was hoping to get a quick sell before going home, not some lame bitch trying to game him. Brandon interrupted her thoughts without covering up the sting in his words. "Excuse me. Are you aware that the mall closes in about two minutes? If you see anything you like, let me know, and we can handle this when you're ready."

Sherise almost snapped back, but she ignored his bitter tone and went into player mode. "Yeah, I'm feeling a few things in here. But I'm feeling something on display even more."

Their eyes met fleetingly. Sherise now wore a mask of achievement. She placed her hand on a hip and rapidly spoke before Brandon could reply.

"You know, I've been seeing you the whole summer throughout the mall. My name is Sherise. You can call me Reesie. What's yours?"

Brandon told her his name. She shook his hand, and he began to lighten up with her hungrily staring him up and down.

This little bitch is bold, he thought. He could figure out her next lines, but Sherise continued her audacious confession.

“I was just wondering if you wanted to exchange numbers. That’s if you don’t have a girl or anything.”

He chuckled. It was just as he figured. He was used to all the attention he received from the women who stopped in the place. He figured that some of them had a genuine interest in him. He believed that others, such as the female in front of him, were only interested in discount jewelry or a good time in bed, if not both.

He pegged Sherise immediately and pretended to be surprised. “Naw, I don’t have a girl. We can exchange numbers.” He continued on, lying for no good reason. “Yeah, I’ve been seeing you around too, but I’m usually busy as hell with work. You know how that goes, right?”

He had never seen Sherise up until now. He lied just to see if he could get the girl to blush more or something.

She was glad he didn’t reject her, not that it ever happened before, but just the word rejection made Sherise’s stomach turn.

Brandon read his number off. She stored it in her list of contacts. He also took her number. All of a sudden, he began locking the display cases that were closer to the two of them. Sherise decide she wasn’t going to take up any more of the man’s time. She could tell Brandon was anxious to leave. “Brandon, I hope you’re not mean all the time. I’ll let it slide for now, ‘cause you seem like you’re in a rush to get out of here,” said Sherise jokingly.

“I am in a rush. I’m sorry if I came off rude, but I really have a busy night ahead,” replied Brandon. He glanced at his watch, throwing her a hint that it was past closing. She got the picture. “Okay, Brandon, I’ll call you some time.”

“Yeah, do that.”

They both laughed lightly. Sherise turned on her heel and walked away, swaying her hips deeply. Making her way toward the exit, she bent over like she was brushing something from her foot, giving him a bold view of her

voluptuous ass. *He wasn't feeling her so much right now, but once he got a taste of her sweet egg bread, he would have a change of heart*, she thought.

She was thrilled that she got a one-on-one with the man. Now, it even crossed her mind that she might come up on some of that high-priced shit. She exited Cory's Jewelry with a feeling of accomplishment.

Brandon passively watched her tease show as she left. It didn't really excite him today. His mind was elsewhere. Usually, a man would enjoy a beautiful woman coming on as strong to him as Sherise had done.

The only problem was that ladies weren't Brandon's first choice. He had tried his damndest to be attracted to females. But after a year of a relationship with a mirror image, he finally accepted the fact that he was attracted to men. However, women were fun too, sometimes.

He imagined himself pummeling the slut once or twice and sliding off. Just like he did with the last female he fucked. Instinctively, he harbored a hatred for women, despising his own mother for giving birth to a faggot. That was who he was, and he angrily accepted it. He closed the jewelry shop down expertly in ten minutes flat, locked up, and bounced out the rear of the mall.

CHAPTER 2 - LOVE IS BLIND

The next morning was hot and humid. The temperature had all ready reached 87 degrees in the city. Darnell tossed and turned in his sleep as his clock radio speakers bellowed the sounds of old-school rhythm and blues.

Musical genius Stevie Wonder delivered the bridge on “Superstition” over the jazzy, blaring horns that jarred Darnell from his much-needed sleep. Sweat beaded on his face, and he recoiled from the drenched pillow that he’d been hugging tightly. He pushed himself up on one elbow and grunted, still dreary eyed. “It’s too early to wake up and too late to be asleep.” He scanned the digital numbers that glowed 10:27AM.

“Damn it’s sticky in here!” he exclaimed, rising from his bed.

He started toward the bathroom. Once inside, he turned on the cold water and began splashing his face heavily. Then he patted it dry with one of the towels from the rack behind him. He grabbed his toothbrush and the toothpaste and brushed his teeth, which were worn from constant grinding. He couldn’t stand the sight of his small, grooved teeth.

Darnell stared into the mirror over the bathroom sink long enough to take in the image that peered back. His self-esteem gasped for air. His dark, beady eyes under bushy, mysterious brows were enough to make a person leery of the man. His bright yellow skin was pitted with acne that looked worse because of his complexion. The man's nose looked as if it was jacked from a bull, and his nostrils flared dramatically. He swore this was some sort of curse. He thought his face was clear evidence that God didn't love him. He always got teased in school for being short and unattractive. At the age of twenty-two, Darnell stood only five foot five, and for a short man, he had a huge head that looked like it could have been screwed on. He dreaded his awful features, and he rarely thought of his positive qualities that outweighed lack of physical beauty.

Darnell was a gentleman most of the time. He possessed a huge heart, and he knew how to treat a woman. He was a homebody, so he found plenty of time to exercise. He had muscles on top of muscles and was strong as an ox. He worked out and jogged as if he was training for the fight of his life.

Darnell's mother had taught him how to save at a young age. Since his first job, he'd been dedicated to the skill she'd instilled in him. For the past seven years, he had saved just around fifteen thousand dollars. He hadn't realized that after he met Sherise, his savings began to dwindle. He had spent thousands of dollars on his precious supposed wife-to-be throughout the two year's they'd been dating, mainly on jewelry and clothing. From time to time he would even pay her car note, and the irony of that was that he hardly ever rode in it. While he was catching the city bus under the sweltering sun, she was joyriding in her 2004 Honda Accord, enjoying the cool breeze from the air conditioner.

He snarled at his own reflection as he clicked off the bathroom light. He strolled past his mother's room, grumbling under his breath about his misfortune. He glanced in quickly to see that she wasn't inside. She was probably downstairs sleeping or working until noon today, he guessed,

continuing down the stairs and into the dining room. He peered through the dining room into the living room, where he could see the couch, just to make sure that his mother wasn't home yet.

He picked up the house phone and dialed the numbers to Sherise's cell phone. It rang three times, and then went to voice mail. He heard her voice after the prompt. "Hello, yeah, this Reesie. Who is this?"

He stuttered sheepishly, "He...hello." Then he realized that he was talking to the answering machine: Sherise played in the voice mail greeting like she'd answered her phone. He hung up and redialed immediately, only to get the same results. He slammed the phone down roughly and stalked down the basement stairs, feeling his irritation growing.

He headed toward the back of his mother's basement to grab the batting gloves that he used for weight lifting. They were in on the counter in the corner. He continued over to the weight bench and added 60 extra pounds to the 240 that was already on the weight bar. He positioned himself beneath the weight and began to pump iron viciously.

He worked up a champion sweat, thinking that it would calm his worries. But time passed, and he grew more and more curious as to why his girl hadn't called him back. Darnell sat up on the weight bench with his elbows planted on his thighs, bleakly staring off into space. Unexpectedly, his phone began vibrating inside his jeans pocket. His heart skipped a beat as he rummaged for his cell phone. He stuttered awfully with butterflies kissing the walls of his belly, "Hello."

Sherise screeched in corny excitement. "Hey baby, how was your night at work?"

"It was peace, Boo, just be trying to get through the night. I need to find something that's going to pay more, though. I'm tired of working mad hours. It's stressful. But anyhow, how was your day at the mall, Boo?"

"It was all good, you know. I make it do what it does. I only had to work like four hours. They always are trying to

play me on the hours just 'cause I'm a student. That's some straight bullshit."

He smiled at his girl's pimped out slang and with hopefulness said, "That's okay, Boo, wait until you graduate. Then you won't even need that little bit of change they're paying you."

"Yeah, I know, I can't wait until I graduate. The job is for kids. What the fuck is eight dollars an hour?" Sherise had the man fooled all the way. She had him believing that she had worked at the mall since the time she'd met him, but she really hadn't worked a real job in her life. She amused herself by taking advantage of him. She quickly changed the conversation and lied again: "Baby, I miss you so much. I was thinking about you all night. I can't wait too see you."

Darnell, gassed up like Exxon, replied, "I miss you too, Boo. We're gettin' up today, right?"

She snickered. "Yeah, you know it, babe, as long as we're still going shopping."

"Huh?" Darnell asked, forgetting what he told her just yesterday. She continued pressing to get her way. "Remember you said we were going shopping this Saturday? I wanna go to Eastview Mall, baby. I seen this pair of new Air Max's that I wanted. Only the mall out there sells them."

Though it didn't matter to Darnell, she practically had his evening planned out for him. She continued on with her egocentric display. Darnell just leaned against an old, dusty pillar with a Cheshire Cat's grin on his face. He was pleased he heard from his woman and forgot all about his curiosity from just moments ago. He answered coolly; now that she slowed down to take a breath. "Yeah, Boo we're still going. I almost forgot about it. I got you for sure."

"How you gonna forget about me Darnell?"

"Yeah, right, I would never forget about you Sherise."

"You better not. Thanks, baby. I'll pick you up after I get off. Okay, I love you baby! See you later."

Darnell replied, his heart pounding at her words, "I love you too, Boo."

He got off the phone feeling radiant and like a winner. That fourteen-hour shift had worn him out, but now he was full of energy. He flew up the basement stairs soaked in happiness. He was so excited that he hadn't even stopped to talk to his mother. Renae sat on the living room couch, flipping through channels on the television. He just waved and said, "Hi, Ma," distractedly as he passed. The only thing that was on his mind was getting ready to see his wifey. Usually he would stop and talk, or at least ask what they were eating for dinner that night. Renae shook her head miserably, watching her only child saunter up the stairs happily. She knew why he was in such a good mood. She couldn't stand the little no-good slut. She knew that the bitch was using her son, but she didn't want to involve herself with her son's relationship.

A couple of years earlier, Darnell had been deeply depressed and attempted suicide, so destroying his happiness was the last thing she wanted to do. Still, she realized that her son would probably end up hurt in the long run if she didn't step in. After all, that's what happened to her. She reflected on her past relationships and how she got played by the men she had loved. Some of it still hurt now.

Renae's thoughts wandered to when her son was just two years old. Back when she lived with his dad. The slithering snake had cleaned her out. He had earned Renae's trust enough to convince her to give him the pin numbers to her bank accounts. That was a big mistake. He emptied every penny out of both of her accounts, quit his flakey gig in Rochester, and got in the wind to Cleveland. In Cleveland, he took up a new career as a "Street Pharmacist." She had been saving up all her money trying to build a stable family. She had tried with all her might to live up to that sitcom vision that she saw in her dreams. But she had failed, and now she was spurned, devastated, and alone.

Darnell was the man of the house, plus he was a good son. The more Renae thought about it, the more the Sherise situation pissed her off. For the past couple of years she had been watching him get played, and she'd be damned if she

would let little miss fast ass take advantage of him any longer. With that thought racing through her mind, she yelled in the direction of the stairs, “Darnell!” She waited for a reply, but she got no answer. She turned down the television and listened closely. She heard the sounds of old-school R & B and the faint gushing of the shower. She decided that she would just talk with him later while they ate dinner that night. They both had Saturdays off, anyhow. Renae took a deep breath and exhaled, maneuvering her small frame from the sofa. Her long night at work had her feeling weary. She wanted to stay up, but her morning coffee wouldn’t hold off the sleep she desperately needed.

CHAPTER 3 - FEMALE PIMP

The fall of light rain cooled the summer night. Sherise lay across her canopy bed. She was feeling restless. She and Darnell had gone to the mall earlier and the man had bought whatever she'd asked for and then some. She was going over her options for the night. There was always an after-hour to hit up on Saturday, or maybe she'd check out one of those clubs on St. Paul or even the East Avenue strip.

She sat up and propped her back against the headboard as she sifted through the possibilities in her mind. She began pulling new footwear and clothing from the shopping bags that sat by her bed. The short trip to the mall with "ugly" had paid off. Besides the pair of black stilettos and the new Air Max sneakers that she got out of Darnell, she had also managed to talk him out of three outfits plus two C-notes before ditching him. Not a bad night's work.

After they finished shopping, they walked through the corridors near the mall's restrooms. She caressed Darnell's crotch area, glanced around to see if anyone was looking, and then tongued him down with a slack kiss. She felt his nature rise and stopped abruptly, catching an older white

man and his two sons quickly look away as they walked by. She giggled and whispered in Darnell's ear, "What you going to give me for that, baby?"

Darnell just smiled like a kid in a candy store and shrugged his shoulders foolishly. Later, just before she dropped him off at home, she started squawking about not having all the money for her car note. The sucker went into captain-save-a-ho mode and whipped out two crisp hundreds from his wallet. He handed them to the girl without one question. She took the money, grinning inwardly, and thought to herself grimly, *What a fuckin' do-boy.*

"Thanks, I don't know what I'd do without you." She gave him a kiss on his bumpy cheek.

When Darnell had gone inside for a change of clothing to spend the night, she told him she would wait outside in the car for him. But when he came outside with his backpack full of overnight stuff, Sherise was gone. Since then, he'd been calling her constantly.

She laughed at his simple ass, placing the shoes back inside the box. She had figured out what she would wear for the night. She would wear her small, leather skirt and a tight matching top. "Damn! The stilettos gonna look crazy wit' it." Sherise chimed grabbing the outfit from the closet.

She got up from her bed, strolled over to her computer desk, and scooped up her phone. She decided to call her homegirl Fatima. She hadn't talked to her in weeks. Besides, Fatima always knew where something exciting was jumping off. She flopped back down on her bed and excitedly punched in her friend's number. Fatima answered on the second ring in her plastic, New York City accent. "Yo, what's good, Shorty? Finally calling me and shit, it's been like two weeks! What up?"

Sherise could tell Fatima had been smoking weed by the raspy swag in her voice. She liked Fatima because she was the type of chick that would fight a dude before she would a bitch.

Sherise exclaimed jokingly, "What's good with you? I see your forever gettin' high bitch!"

“Just chillin’, don’t really have anything planned. We should hit the Spotlight up tonight. Where the fuck you been, bitch?”

Sherise laughed frivolously. “You know I gotta handle my business, Shorty. I gotta keep the hoes in check, girl.” Both women laughed pitilessly; Fatima knew just what her friend meant.

Sherise continued playfully, “Now I guess I can take a night off to hang out with my one and only bitch.”

There was more insensitive mirth before Fatima spoke. “Good. Now since we got that settled, you can pick me up so we can get a bottle of Goose before we hit the club, and I won’t have to wait for that slowpoke ass Tasha. You feel me?”

“Yeah, the fat bitch is type-slow. But yo, I hope you got some snaps on the petrol, bitch. You live way cross town!”

Fatima giggled, she knew her friend was teasing. The two of them always talked shit to each other, but their third wheel Tasha didn’t like to be called out of her name. She was more of the serious type.

Sherise snickered and continued jokingly, “I ain’t playing, bitch. You over there laughing and shit!”

“You must be having some unproductive days over there crying ’bout some damn gas money. Bitch, please! You ain’t pimping!” Fatima comically spat.

Sherise sucked her teeth good-naturedly. “Shut up, bitch, with your smoked-out ass! You know I’m a pimp, so quit talking. You’re just a sidekick-ass ho, so you can’t tell a pimp when you see one.”

“Bitch, please, I’ll pimp you.”

“Never that,” Sherise argued playfully.

“No, but for real Reesie, you better pick me up.” “Fatima, I got ya girl, let me get fresh first. I’ll be there in about an hour. You better have my money too bitch!” Both women fell into wild laughter. “Bye bitch!” They hung up.

They both knew this would be a night just like all their other nights together: one to remember. The night would be

off the hook, Sherise thought excitedly. Her shoes were right, her gear was right, and her pockets were straight.

Before Reesie could ruminate on her evening plans any longer, her cell phone suddenly began to blare. “Bitch Betta Have My Money,” the song made famous by AMG. She looked at the phone’s screen and saw Darnell’s number. She puckered her brow and let the call go to her voice mail.

“Sorry, ugly, your services are no longer needed today,” she said to an empty house.

She laughed like a ghetto witch and strode with her luscious, well-proportioned frame into her bathroom to start the water for a shower. A sharp knock at her front door stopped her in her tracks. She backtracked, looked through her peephole, and realized it was Jamma, her piff contact. She opened the door. “Damn, nigga, you took so long I damn near forgot I called you.”

Jamma, five foot ten and light-skinned with hazel eyes, blushed. “Damn, my bad. I had to pick up my little man from my baby momma’s crib. Here, take this free sample of haze for that long wait.”

He took time to eye the beautiful body before him. Sherise was wearing tight booty shorts and no shirt, just a lacy bra. He went into his pocket and came out with three bags of light green weed.

“Thanks, Jamma,” Sherise said, grabbing the bags while caressing his hand. She handed him the money and said, “Yo, Jamma, you should come by sometime and chill with me.”

“Yeah. I will later, but I gotta run now. I got my little man in the car. The kid might pull off in my shit or something.”

Before Jamma could turn on his heel, Sherise stepped in closer and hugged the man tightly. Jamma didn’t resist. He even squeezed her big, round ass. Sherise laughed and pushed him as if she didn’t enjoy what he’d done. “Okay, bye Jamma! Get at me though.”

“Alright Reesie, later,” Jamma said, grinning as he closed the door behind him. He idly wondered if she had felt his instant woody.

CHAPTER 4 - THE REASONS

Sherise turned on the hot water, and then added some cold to make it tolerable. Once the water felt suitable, she undressed and slipped into the shower. She relaxed as the droplets of water rolled down her attractive frame. Feeling relaxed from the water's soothing rhythm, she rolled her neck as if she was enjoying a massage.

Her nipples stood at attention after the feeling of the shower arrested her sexually. She began to twist her dark nipples slowly, her mind drifting back to yesterday. She was out in Syracuse with Chauncey. The long-tongued freak had licked her until she had convulsions. His roomie, Vince, just didn't get the job done; she smirked at her own duplicity.

Her dark, oval lips quivered as she climaxed. The running shower water had cooled a bit. She snapped back from the past, grabbed her body wash, and briskly scrubbed. As she rinsed she felt as though her sins funneled down the drain with the suds. She got out of the shower and dried her beautiful, butter pecan skin and stared at her body with the confidence of beauty queen.

She loved the way her D-cup breasts were perky in or out of a bra. She loved her huge mound of ass that received compliments all day, every day. She even felt good about her shapely, bowed legs that everybody noticed because they made her walk and stand like a pony.

She looked into the mirror at the keen combination of Italian and African-American features. She had a sharp beak of a nose and dark bedroom eyes that could entice the wisest of men. She realized grudgingly how she favored that evil mother of hers, the woman she loved and hated, all in one. She loved her simply because Tina was her mother and gave her life, along with some beautiful attributes. Other than that, she couldn't stand her when she was alive. She supposedly had died from a drug overdose.

With her mother's image pulsing in her head, she thought back to when she was just nine years old. Tina had cursed her out pretty badly all that morning. The woman had been shooting up like crazy, and all her dope was gone. She had already sold everything of value to the pawnshop and was desperately in need of a fix. Usually, when she ran out of cash she would just turn tricks for some heroin. But lately she'd had no luck.

The rumor on the streets was Tina had AIDS. All the tricks and dealers that used to pay Tina for sex stopped dealing with her because of it. Nobody wanted to take a chance sleeping with her, knowing that the rumor was probably true. Frantic with the thought of not being able to satisfy her dope cravings, she began to plot. She considered her daughter's overdeveloped body from across the raggedy living room, her mind working furiously.

Tina's H connect, Snuggy, was convinced of Tina's condition. He could vividly remember the good times he'd had in bed with the attractive Italian woman. Now he couldn't stand to touch her hand when they exchanged dope for money. Tina, along with little Sherise, trudged through the heavy snowfall in the dead of winter to Snuggy's dope spot on that memorable evening. The portly, dark-skinned man wondered what the pair wanted as he let them in. Tina

usually bought what she came for and got on her way, unless she was going to give him sex or suck him off. But the junky bitch knew that sex was a dead issue now. He told her months ago that he heard the word on the street about her, and there would be no more sex between them—not even with three condoms. So what the hell was she there for?

Snuggly began harshly, “Yo, I hope you got some cash because...”

Before he could get the rest of it out, Tina interrupted desperately, “I know Snuggly, I already know what you’re about to say. I’m fucked up now.”

He threw both hands into the air confusedly and spat. “What the do you want then? You got that AIDS, so they say. What you around here for with no cheddar?”

Tina nodded in the little girl’s direction. “How much would you give me for that virgin box? I know it got to be at least worth a gram or two, man?”

His face twisted into a bizarre sneer as he ranted, “Tina! Have you lost your fuckin’ mind?”

Tina dropped her eyes to the floor and shook her head desolately. She almost regretted the offer she’d just made. She nearly puked as the withdrawal symptoms intensified. She pleaded tearfully, “I just don’t know what to do, Snuggly.”

The man looked away in disgust, rubbing his potbelly distractedly. He glanced at the little girl momentarily and then turned for the door.

He grunted, “Well, I don’t know what the fuck to tell you.”

“Snuggly, don’t do me like this!” Tina cried.

Sherise stood a few feet away from the two. She dreamily gazed at the gold medallion that dangled from Snuggly’s creased-out neck. She’d been staring at it since the time she’d stepped in the door.

Snug opened the door to let them out. Tina exited first, followed by little Sherise. Before Sherise got all the way out the door, she paused. She turned, cocked her head, and with

a hand on her hip inquired like a child who was much older, “Dannggg, how much you paid for that chain?”

Snuggy looked shocked, and then grinned. Tina glared at her daughter and ordered, “Little fast bitch! Come on and stay out of grown folks faces.”

She grabbed her daughter by the hand and yanked her roughly off the porch. Tina was upset she wasn’t leaving with any dope. Snuggy shut the door on the ass-backwards woman. First she was trying to get the little girl fucked and then in the same breath chastising her about being too grown. He sighed in dismissively and went back to counting his trap money.

He stashed the money he’d been counting and pulled back the raggedy curtain on one of the side windows. Snuggy caught a glimpse of little Sherise’s backside as she made her way through the snow. “Damn,” he said to himself, scrutinizing her perversely. He’d had daydreams of being up in something that tight on occasions, but maybe with a girl a bit older, he thought, like sixteen or seventeen. He figured, knowing Tina, the little girl had already had been having sex. His mind couldn’t escape the thought of how pleasurable it would be. He fondled his small organ as it throbbed.

Before he knew it, he blasted out the door and into the front yard of the shabby dope house, yelling down the street for Tina to come back. She was so excited her heart almost burst when she heard his voice. She knew that the fat, freakish fucker had most likely changed his mind about the offer, and she was right.

When they got back inside, he tossed Tina two grams of H and told her to get the fuck on. He would bring little momma home once he was done taking care of business. Tina took the junk and disappeared like a phantom, scurrying out the door clutching her get high like it was life itself. She wasn’t concerned at all with her daughter, now that she’d gotten what she so dearly needed.

Snuggy had his way with the little girl, and to his surprise it happened without much struggle. He was relieved that she didn’t bleed or flip out. And if he wasn’t mistaken,

she seemed to know how the whole thing worked. While he began dressing, he started feeling like shit for sleeping with the nine year old. She was young enough to be his granddaughter, he reflected ruefully. He yanked his huge bankroll from his pants pocket and peeled off a one hundred dollar bill and handed it to the little girl. Little Sherise grabbed the crisp bill and smiled innocently at the old, obese rapist. She stuffed it into her inside coat pocket and openly followed the man's every move. Her pretty brown eyes met his when the fat man ordered gruffly, "Now don't be dumb and show that to your mother because all she'll do is put that shit in her arm."

Sherise nodded. She knew just what the man meant. Then he went on to say, "And don't tell nobody you was over here, okay!" He repeated louder and extra gruffly, "Nobody!"

Sherise understood. She kept her bright eyes on the man in front of her. Snuggly managed a smile, thinking how tender the child was, and that if his conscience didn't bother him too much, he would do it again. "Okay, come on little momma, it's time to get you home."

Little Sherise trailed the man. Snuggly prodded her to go ahead of him. As she squeezed past him, he saw the money he had given her slip from under her coat and fall onto the rug. He started to give it back, but thought he might as well keep the cash rather than let her lose it elsewhere.

Once she got home, Sherise discovered the money was gone. Tina pulled her damn hair out listening to her daughter snivel over the money. Tina figured she was crying about the experience with Snuggly. The persistent whimpering was driving her mad, and she lurched out of her gloomy room, her eyes blazing balls of fire.

She ripped an extension cord from the wall and beat the little girl brutally. "Bitch, I'll kill your black ass if you don't shut your fucking mouth now! I know your butt ain't getting big for nothing. I know you be screwing those teenage niggers across the street!"

She was right about that, but too high to remember that she had been the one to pawn Sherise off to sixteen-year-old Arndell for a bundle of H. Sherise eventually started sneaking over to the boy's house on days Tina left her home alone. She would get taken advantage of, but she would also get fed well, which was rare in her mother's household.

Sherise's father was out of the picture; Tina had him locked up on a false rape charge before the girl was old enough to talk. She had wild sex with him that night and then created a story that made him appear to be a stone-cold rapist. As a result, he got a three-year prison term; one year in, he was murdered in a prison fight. Tina collected a small check every month for the man's death and always told the little girl she didn't have a father.

The beatings from Tina continued for months. A year or so after the Snuggly incident, and a few other, "first times," Sherise's mom died of complications due to AIDS in General Hospital in Rochester, New York. It was grim foster homes and uncaring detention centers for Sherise after that. Her primary role models during her childhood were her junky mother and the delinquents she was raised with. Sex was her outlet for her pain and frustration.

Her thoughts recoiled from the past events of her life as she finished getting dressed. Sherise smiled causally at herself in approval. She winked at her reflected image, entertaining herself in the mirror.

Sherise exited her one-bedroom apartment with a fatalistic view of her future. She firmly believed that she lived for today, not yesterday, and damn sure not for tomorrow. She knew she had problems, but the odds seem to be stacked against her ever solving them.

The rain sprinkled lightly on the concrete of Clinton Avenue, where crime plagued the corners around the clock. Sherise locked her door, feeling nervous for no good reason. She hit the button on her keychain to disarm her alarm. She opened her door and slid easily into the driver seat of her white Honda Accord. She started the engine, but didn't put the car in gear immediately. Instead, she let the motor run

while she dug through the small black purse that she carried with her everywhere. She found her diminutive blade and caressed it, but left it inside her bag.

When she slowly pulled off from the curb, a woman full of silent rage was behind the wheel. Sherise made her way to Fatima's house slightly earlier than planned. For some reason, she felt the rare twinge of loneliness, and she was somewhat anxious to see her friend.

CHAPTER 5 - TELL IT LIKE IT IS

Inside the home at 675 Lake Avenue, Renae Wilkinson and her son, Darnell, sat down to a rather large meal for a Saturday; Renae had cooked like she was making a hearty Sunday dinner for a family reunion. They ate dinner late because Renae's plans went off course when she fell asleep and didn't start the pot roast soon enough. Along with the pot roast she made stuffing, homemade macaroni and cheese, collard greens, and homemade mashed potatoes. For desert, they had vanilla ice cream and Sara Lee's apple pie.

They both enjoyed the delicious, filling dinner and desert, and like any other Saturday night, they sat at the table, talked, and got caught up. This had become a routine, except for the few Saturday nights Darnell had missed on the account of Reesie. But Renae understood that her child, like any other human being, needed a life of his own. He was twenty-two years old, so it didn't bother her when Darnell didn't come home some Saturday nights.

He was now sitting at the dining room table, repeatedly dialing Sherise's cell phone number as fear and anxiety exploded in his mind like a nuclear bomb.

That shit had agitated him: how she just pulled off on him so rudely, after he had just blown his whole paycheck on her. He had started trying to reach her before dinner, and now it was nearly midnight and she hadn't answered one of his calls yet.

Renaë cleaned the kitchen with an energy fueled by aggravation as she occasionally glanced at Darnell through the open doorway. He reminded her of how she had been when it came to his dad. She hadn't mentioned her feelings about Sherise yet. Instead, they had talked about work and how they both needed a vacation. Renaë mentioned that a trip to Florida to visit his aunt Jacquelyn would be nice. They could go in three weeks, on the last weekend of August, if they both used their vacation time.

Darnell loved the idea, but Renaë didn't like his suggestion that his girlfriend come along. She could see right through the girl's phony ways. She could also see that her son was on cloud nine and clueless to what he was getting himself into.

* * * *

Renaë had made her mind up about the girl shortly after they first met. Two years ago, Sherise had showed up early one morning around 4:00 AM. She banged on the window in Renaë's front door so hard she cracked the glass. Sherise was fleeing an angry gang of women that had chased her from an after-hour spot on Lexington Avenue.

Luckily for her, the after-hour had only been a block away from Darnell's house. The only reason the whole altercation started was because Sherise was flirting with Kashia's man. Kashia approached the much more attractive girl aggressively. "Yo, could you respect me and stop pushing all up on my man? I've watched you all night with that same bullshit, and I ain't feeling it."

Sherise had rolled her eyes at the brute of a woman. “What? Bitch, please. I’ve been fuckin’ Tyshawn for months. So if he was really your man, no one could tell.”

Tyshawn stood there, looking as if he’d almost choked. The partiers around the two women became silent, anticipating an entertaining exchange. Sherise smirked at the woman’s expression. The huge girl was stunned; her face turned to stone. She caught the look in Tyshawn’s eyes that indicated that Sherise’s claim was true. Kashia wanted to punch the drunken bitch in the throat, but the top-heavy, figureless woman knew Reesie wasn’t an easy win. She knew the bowlegged bitch got down for hers. She also knew that she herself wasn’t as tough as she looked, at least not alone.

Kashia quickly whirled on her heel. Without saying a word to either of the two, she rumbled out of the party angrily. Sherise laughed nastily at the departing girl. “Why are you playing with that ugly ass hoe’s heart? You know I got your ass on lock, Ty.”

Tyshawn just shrugged and frowned at the smart-mouthed girl and said, “I don’t know why Kashia’s playing herself. She know I don’t fuck wit’ her like that. But, damn, why you had to put my business out there, Sherise.”

“Yeah, right Ty, your business is my business. You’re my little play-thing. Its okay if you lay it down on that ugly broad, because I can have you anytime I want.” He knew that he had made a mistake by once sleeping with the fat woman, now she thought she owned him. Sherise was causing the whole scene for shits and giggles. It was funny to her, because she really had slept with the brown-skinned, stocky dude, but she never had any feelings for his lame ass. She just wanted to press Kashia’s buttons. Later, when the after-hour ended, Sherise stepped outside, shocked to see her car in shambles; the tires had been slashed and someone had thrown bricks through the windows. She stepped off the front porch to get a better look at the damage.

Suddenly, Sherise’s drunken mind registered four burly broads materializing out of the darkness. She quickly

sobered up when she realized that the women were after her. Her tires were flat, so she wouldn't be able to escape in the car. She came to her senses quickly and remembered that the ugly kid she had met recently stayed up the block. Sherise took off as fast as her bowlegs would carry her, leading the mad posse that chased her by a short distance.

Renae never told Darnell that she had answered the door for the girl that morning, although now she wished she would have. But at that time, her son had been depressed and suicidal, so she never told Darnell about the things those girls shouted that night. She had stood on the porch for a good while and encouraged them to leave. When that didn't work, she told them that she would call the cops if they didn't get off her property. After ranting a few choice words and making it clear to Renae that Sherise was a real whore, the four large women vacated the walk way.

"What in the world have you gotten into out there, young lady? What are you doing out this time of morning?"

"Coming from a party," Sherise nonchalantly replied.

"You better be more careful out there. You could really get hurt." Renae warned.

"I know Miss, I understand how it works in the streets. It's a lot of haters out there. I can handle it though."

"I don't know about you kids these days. When I was a kid, my mother and father raised me to be respectful toward others as well as myself."

Renae called a cab for Sherise. They sat in silence and waited for her ride. Renae could smell the alcohol on her breath from across the dining room table.

"Sherise, do you know those girls that were out there?" Sherise stuttered, "Ms. ... um ... them bitches out there trippin', they just jealous. All mad because they big and ugly."

Renae glared at girl. "I just asked you a simple question. I don't really care about all that crap you're talking now, Sherise. Just don't tell my son any of this. He already has enough going on in his life, and your nasty mouth in my house.... Watch it!"

Sherise just looked stupidly at Renae with her mouth wide open and remained quiet. She knew the lady didn't believe her. But Darnell never found out about that whole charade. He paid the bill for a tow, a new paint job, and windows for the girl's Honda. Once Sherise saw how easy it was to get things from Darnell, it was a wrap. That was one of the things that drew her to him.

* * * *

Renae despised her own stupidity for not telling Darnell about the situation at the time it had occurred. It probably would have saved him from a lot of grief if he'd just left Reesie alone.

Renae stopped cleaning and reluctantly entered her dining room. She took a seat in front of her son at the small table. "What's bothering you, Darnell?"

She delicately placed her hand on top of his. She already knew what was bothering him. He shook the fatigue from his mind and smiled weakly. "I'm good, ma, just a little tired, that's all."

He rubbed his beady, bloodshot eyes. "Yeah, I think I better get some sleep."

Renae sighed. "Yeah, it is a bit late, but Darnell, can we please talk for a moment?"

"Sure, what is it ma?"

She held her son's hand firmly. "Darnell, how are you and Sherise doing?"

His eyes opened wider at his mother's words. Wondering why she had asked, he replied in an unsure tone, "Oh, we're doing fine, ma."

She knew that they weren't doing fine. Renae decided to get to the point and tell it like it was. She searched her mind for the best way to phrase what she was about to say. In seconds, she would release something she had been holding in for a long time. She made eye contact with her son.

“Darnell, I really don’t know how to tell you this. So, I’m just going to be honest.” She paused. “Darnell, I don’t feel Sherise is the one for you. She’s a sneaky girl and I don’t see how you can trust her. I’m not saying all this for no reason. I just want you to understand that I’m trying to look out for your best interest.”

She paused to see whether what she said had any effect on her son. He just sat there with a puzzled look on his face, speculating where his mother was going with this. She repeated herself after the blank expression Darnell gave her. “Darnell, I want to let you know that Sherise ... that girl is no good for you. She’s fast Darnell. Can’t you tell?”

Darnell sat stiffly, shocked at the words that his mother had just spoken. Before he knew it, he snatched his hand roughly from under hers. “And why do you feel that way, huh, ma?”

Darnell never had raised his voice at Renae before. And right now it angered her to see him try it at the mention of that troublesome, piss-tail girl. Renae considered telling him about the incident that took place a couple years back. Telling him that she had lied when he came home from work that morning and saw the window broke. That she had made up the story about some menacing kids in the neighborhood coming through and breaking the window with stones. She decided to hold off, at least for the moment.

Renae instead looked at him seriously with pleading eyes. “Darnell, baby, you gotta look at things for what they really are. That girl doesn’t have special feelings for you, like how you got for her. Look at how she’s got you feeling down on your night off! You’re a young man. You don’t need to be up in the house all stressed out calling her all night. She ain’t even answered the damn phone for you, now did she?”

She didn’t mean to get so worked up, but she couldn’t control her anger on the matter. Renae looked at Darnell again with the same pleading eyes. She knew her love-blinded son would resent the words she spoke and possibly her, too, but she began to tell the whole story without leaving

out any of the things the girls had said about Sherise. She told him that the girls said Sherise slept with two of their men, that she sells herself, and that she has diseases.

Darnell listened uneasily, confused and hazy. He recalled the day he asked his mom about the window. Renae looked guilty and uncomfortable with the story about the kids busting the window out with a rock. He hadn't paid his mother's odd behavior much attention that early morning two years ago. But why would she wait until now to tell him? Darnell sat silently in disbelief.

Then he felt the anger building inside him. He rashly determined that he didn't care to know how his mother felt. He began to sense that she had a personal problem with his girl, and furthermore, her story didn't check out in his delusional mind. He began to get defensive. He never once that thought that his mom would have tried to hide this story from him for his own good.

He quickly became frustrated by the jumble of thoughts overwhelming his mind. Renae's story had pissed him off royally. And he was already pissed from being left behind by Reesie.

Darnell's blood boiled. His face warped into a distorted scowl before he shouted at his mother, "Yeah, now I see why dad left you! You making up shit like that. You probably made up the story of why he left too. You're just a damn liar!"

Renae's face fell at those words. "No, Darnell, I'm not lying!" Darnell went on in with his verbal assault. He flung the small wooden chair that he sat on against the wall behind him. "You just a jealous-ass bitch, you goddamn liar! You just hatin' on my girl because she's fine and has a man and you..."

He couldn't even finish his sentence. He had fiercely unleashed all his hurt, anger and frustration on his mother, as he watched her tears roll down a face that resembled his. Then he started up again viciously, only because he was angered and threatened by the truth that the story might hold.

“Fuck it! I’m leaving. Fuck you and this place. I’m getting a crib with my girl.”

“But Darnell,” she cried weakly. He stomped up the stairs, ignoring his mother like he was a petulant child rather than a grown man.

Upstairs, while packing his clothing slowly, he thought about the awful things he had just said to his dear mother. He could feel the guilt bellowing up, but he was too upset to apologize. Right now he didn’t want to care, though. He would have to leave sooner or later, and he figured there was no time better than the present. He would just rent a nice loft downtown so he could have his own kingdom. Then he would ask his queen to move in with him. Sherise would love the idea; she had always wanted a loft, Darnell imagined. He loved his mom dearly, but he had a deep-rooted obsession with Sherise that not even his mom’s honesty and love could penetrate.

Downstairs, Renae fought back her tears enough to yell upstairs sternly, “Boy, I would never lie to you about anybody! Nobody at all! Not even your sorry, conniving-ass daddy!”

He faintly heard her shrill words and thought to himself ruefully that he must have really upset her, because his mother rarely cursed. Renae turned and staggered away from the stairwell helplessly. Her thoughts spun in a whirlwind of grief and confusion. Her face was sodden with tears.

She hadn’t expected the whole thing to get out of hand like it did, but now it had, and she wished she would have just kept her mouth closed. She sat down on her living room couch, feeling light-headed from the first argument that she could ever recall having with her son. Nevertheless, even her heartache could not keep her awake, as she was overcome by exhaustion and fell asleep where she sat.

Darnell had packed all his clothes up, but grew tired as the night dragged by slowly. He still had more things to pack, plus he was relying on a ride from Sherise to move all of it. He called her once more and still got no answer. He left a message telling her he was moving out of his mother’s

house, and he needed a way to move his things. Then he hung up the phone, feeling somewhat apprehensive about his rash decision.

CHAPTER 6 - MISSING LOVER

It was around 1:00 in the morning on the outskirts of Rochester. The rain that had been pouring all night abated to a drizzle and finally stopped altogether.

Brandon lounged in the plush, comfortable bedroom of his ranch-style home in the suburb of Henrietta. He stretched his long, lean frame across his expensive, king-size pillow top and yawned, flipping through the channels on his fifty-one inch flat screen. He idly watched the TV, unimpressed with the droning infomercials that always came on at that time on a Sunday morning.

He lay there thinking about how much tougher it was to pay all the bills after his boyfriend Chad had picked up and left him.

Brandon rolled off his bed, feeling type ill about that situation and remembering that he hadn't been collecting the mail from his box for the last four or five days. He hoped that maybe the man might have written him a letter saying he was sorry for ditching him so coldly and wanted to come back home. He started to feel aroused just at the thought.

He grabbed the mail from the box eagerly and rummaged through the envelopes. *Damn*, he thought. There was nothing but bills and a hunk of junk mail with coupons. His handsome, young face grimaced as he closed the front door. He tossed all the mail onto his red suede sofa.

One piece of mail slid from the pile and onto the floor. He stopped sharply and kneeled, scooping the envelope off the plush carpet. The letter was addressed to Chad Torres. Brandon's eyes lit up briefly. He scrutinized the yellow envelope closely; there was nothing to indicate where it had come from. He started to open it and then quickly changed his mind. He chucked the letter back onto the sofa with the other uninteresting stack of mail and went back upstairs to change out of his silk robe into some street clothing. He peered into his closet at the few outfits that were clean: mostly women's clothing. Brandon never made himself up like a female in public, but he did like to put on a dress and heels every once in a while—always behind closed doors.

He went into his walk-in closet and picked out a tight-fitting, black V-neck T-shirt and some equally form-fitting black pants that he hadn't worn in awhile. Brandon planned to wash clothes this Sunday, his day off, so he wasn't concerned by the lack of clean options.

The penetrating ringing of his phone made him grin. He picked up the phone without checking the screen to see who was calling. A womanly voice shot through the speaker: "What's goody with you, Brandon? I know its crazy early slash late, but are you trying to see me this morning?"

He knew right away that it was James, a short, thin, light-skinned homosexual who had an obsession with colorful gear. Brandon replied wryly, "Yeah, I know it is crazy that you're calling me at, like, 1:00 in the morning. You must be drunk."

James laughed flamboyantly and sang "Yeah, you're right, and you know what that means, sexy." Brandon's anger rose. The man had been hounding him since he told him about Chad leaving. Brandon replied calmly, "Actually,

I have plans to do my laundry. I'm gonna have to get with you later."

"Later?" James said in an edgy voice. He continued annoyingly, "You always say 'later,' Brandon. What's really good? Here I am trying, to get at you, and you're just giving me the cold shoulder."

Brandon answered sharply, "Damn could you give a motherfucker a chance?"

James choked and apologized, "Oh, I'm sorry, Brandon, it won't happen again. I'll call you back later I guess."

Brandon shouted into the receiver. "Good!" and hung up the phone.

After hanging up, Brandon's mind drifted back to the real source of his frustration. Before the summer, everything between him and Chad was grand, and then for some reason, Chad decided to drop the bomb on him. He told him he was leaving and told him that he had applied to transfer schools. Then he really caused Brandon to snap when he told him that he already had a new place set up in Atlanta.

Brandon had been devastated by the unexpected news. He argued and fought with Chad until the next day. He knew that this was probably the last time he would get to see Chad, and he would have done anything for the handsome man to stay. Brandon desperately ran through possible scenarios in his head, trying to figure out why he was getting dumped. Chad was bisexual—had he found a girlfriend? Brandon didn't think so. Although Chad talked like he was all in for leaving, Brandon noticed the man's body language didn't quite match his words. It was almost as if someone or something was making him leave.

The morning Chad left for Atlanta, Brandon cornered him in the bathroom. He waited at the door, artfully listening for the shower to stop. When he heard Chad take the slide lock off, he burst into the room, gripped the man's bare buttocks with both hands, and tongued him down aggressively. Licking his way down to the man's organ, he began to perform oral. Brandon only had anal sex up to this point, and

he had never performed oral on anybody, male or female. He only did it now in the hope that Chad would change his mind and stay. Brandon slobbered sloppily on the man, trying his best to satisfy his soon-to-be ex-lover. Chad grunted in pleasure. He palmed the back of Brandon's head and violently pumped in and out of Brandon's mouth before he came down the man's throat. Brandon almost choked. Frantically, they made their way to the king-size bed, both feeling hot and feverish. Afterward, Brandon fell asleep. He woke up to only the cold bed. He lay there and cried over the man like an inconsolable child.

Brandon shook the horrid day from his memory and continued getting his laundry together. He had started feeling better about the break up, and he decided it was time to get his life back in order. Yeah, that's what he would do, he thought to himself, as he separated his mostly red-colored clothing from his whites.

CHAPTER 7 - MAKE THIS A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

Saturday night went by too fast for Sherise, Fatima, and Tasha. They had an exciting night overall. Well, Reesie and Fatima did at least; Tasha had gone home early. She had been vomiting all over the place. Sherise and Fatima laughed drunkenly at the bartender when Tasha threw up all over the skinny white woman. She was pretty pissed off and cursing Tasha under her breath, but she wouldn't react anymore than that. She had seen the other two girls with Tasha all night, and she didn't want to have to face the trio after the let out.

Sherise left the dance floor to follow Tasha to the restroom. Once inside, she stared at the southern girl and shook her head disdainfully, watching her clean vomit from her shoes. "Damn, girl, drinkin' is not for you."

Tasha shot a defiant glance upward; knowing who the voice belonged to, and replied sarcastically, "Yeah, no shit!"

Sherise smacked her lips, walked over to a sink, and began to wash her hands. "I'm just saying. You shouldn't drink more than you can handle."

“I can take care of myself. Thank you Reesie!” Tasha washed her hands at the next sink over, dried them, and started for the door. As Tasha opened the door to leave, Sherise laughed louder than she had to and spewed, “Probably from all that KFC you ate.”

Tasha gritted her teeth and slammed the restroom door behind her. She was well aware of the girl’s feelings toward her.

Sherise and Fatima stayed on the dance floor for most of the night. They danced with anybody that was willing to dance with them. Before Tasha got too drunk, she had positioned herself at the bar, jealously glaring at her two friends on the dance floor. She was envious because she was too shy to dance herself.

They were just too loose with too many men. She never did like that about her two so-called friends, but she always had fun with the girls, which is probably the only thing that kept her around the duo. She had moved to Rochester from North Carolina six months ago. She had plans to finish up her bachelor’s degree at the University of Rochester and had big dreams of going to medical school after her last semester of college. Everything just depended on her grades.

She was glad that she had met these chicks. Besides an old, gray-haired aunt in Rochester, she hardly knew anybody. Her mother had talked her into moving to New York; somehow she thought it would make her daughter become a better doctor.

Tasha was shorter than the two other girls and a bit on the heavy side, but her features were beautiful. Her D-cup breasts provided an eye-catching cleavage. Everything about the rosy-cheeked girl fit her southern attitude. With her darkish redbone complexion, tip-tilted nose, and glossy, full lips, Tasha looked like a young version of the singer Chaka Khan.

Fatima, on the other hand, was thinner than both of her homegirls, but she had a big, round, apple-shaped ass that looked oddly amazing attached to her petite frame. Her breasts were just a handful; she wasn’t busty like her two

friends. She owned brown-skinned, keen features that made her slightly resemble a fox. Her nippy, slanted eyes and high cheek bones dominated her face. Sherise and Fatima had been friends since junior high. They understood each other better than Tasha would ever understand either one of the wild girls.

It was nearly 1:30 that morning when Fatima helped Tasha out of the club and over to the parking lot across the street. She asked Tasha with concern, “Girl, you sure you gonna be okay driving home by yourself? Cause’ you know I can make that bitch in there come take you home!”

She referred to Sherise, who was still inside the club and clearly not as concerned about Tasha’s condition. She had been too busy putting moves on a dope boy who was giving her the eye all night.

Tasha smiled wearily. “Naw, that’s alright, Fatima, I’ll be fine,” she said in a tired southern drawl.

“I know you not really feeling Reesie, but that ain’t no reason for you to drive home drunk. Are you sure you don’t want her to take you home, girl?” Fatima asked.

“Yeah, I’m good,” Tasha replied lightly. She was feeling better since they had walked out of the jam-packed club. The night’s breeze had awakened her. She hit the alarm on her key chain and easily climbed into her 2005 Navigator. Fatima, like a big sister, ordered, “Now make sure you give me a call once you get home, okay?”

“Oh right, I will, girl.”

Her truck came to life as she turned the key and put her seat belt on. Fatima dallied as she left the parking lot, looking over her shoulder at her friend and hoping that she really was sound enough to drive home. Making her way to the club entrance through the masses of club hoppers, she heard a horn blow loudly over the buzz of noise around her. She turned, looked back toward the street, and saw Tasha’s Navigator. She smiled, relieved to see the rosy-cheeked girl roll down her window and yell, “I see ya peepin’, girl, told ya I was fine!”

Fatima chuckled good-naturedly and hollered back, “Good, now take ya ass home!”

Tasha laughed benevolently and pulled her flawless white truck off into the flow of traffic. Fatima reentered Spotlight feeling content. She used her gigantic booty to sort through the gangs of clubheads. When she made it back to where she and Sherise had been before she walked Tasha out, she spotted her friend still yapping over in a corner with the dope boy. The liquor was catching up with Fatima rather quickly, and she felt her legs begin to wobble as she stood there.

She thought about the fifth of Grey Goose she had shared with her friends, as well as all the cognac she had mixed with the clear. She spun around slowly and gazed over at the bar for an empty stool, but there was none. She turned back around and spotted an empty section of the club near a pillar on the other side of the dance floor. She sloshed her way through the tuft of zombies, and some guy she didn't see slapped her across the butt while she made her way through the middle of the crowd.

Fatima didn't bother to look back; there was too much going on to tell who might have done it. Had she caught the guilty person, all she probably would have done was curse him out and cause a scene that she really wasn't needy for. She reminded herself that she was out past her probation curfew and needed to keep a low profile.

She made it through the crowd of want-to-be dancers and settled her big bubble booty against the pillar, feeling drunk and bored. She examined the atmosphere and watched the dozens of strobe-lit figures having a great time grinding up on each other. She caught Sherise parading through the gleam of the flashing lights. She was glowing like an angel of seduction, draped in her golden Cuban links, lapping Xs and Os. Fatima stared intently at the bowlegged, pecan-complexioned woman. Her whole body was enveloped by a warm, tingling feeling of lust. She had always felt that way about Sherise, especially when she was high or drunk. She had always believed that if she had ever tried to, she could of

have fucked the freak bitch way back. But she just never took a shot at it. On a number of occasions, she had idly wondered if Sherise had ever slept with a girl before. Sherise emerged from the crowd and patted Fatima's petite shoulder, yelling humorously, "Wake up, bitch!"

Fatima lifted her leering stare, not wanting to break out of her fantasy, and paused as she processed Sherise's words. "Bitch, I'm up and ready!"

"Bitch, ya ready for what? You're over here in a daze. Ya lookin' type wasted"

Fatima grinned. "Ready to fight, bitch, the way you came over here yelling. And who wasted?"

Sherise pushed her shoulder playfully. "Don't play ya self."

Sherise giggled, adjusting her micro braids out of her eyes and asked sarcastically over the thumping bass, "How was slowpoke holding up when her fat ass bounced?"

She continued, her voice dripping with sarcasm, "Did she puke up her little southern guts?"

"Naw, she was good once we got outside."

Fatima, changing the subject and being nosy at the same time, asked, "So what's goody with ol' dope boy you was hollering at? I see he all blinged out."

Sherise threw one hand up in a hesitant gesture and replied casually, "Yeah, damn bitch, that's what I wanted to tell you."

She continued excitedly, "This nigga said he got a G stack for some pussy, and I guess you know, bitch, I asked when and where, okay?"

The fox-faced girl marveled, slightly jealous, but somewhat amused by her friend's swagger. "Damn, I wonder if he really got bread, to be breaking you off like that."

Sherise didn't bother to answer the question. She took a long sip of her Courvoisier through a straw and said, "That's not all, he had seen you with me earlier and asked what was up with you, too. He said he'll pay twenty-five hundred plus the hotel fee if we did the threesome thing, girl."

Fatima thought she must be mistaking what she had heard, and she read her friend's face carefully for any signs of jocularity. She didn't see any.

All she saw was wet, sparkling lips curled into a seductive smirk. Sherise was fairly sure of the answer she would get from her best friend. She sucked down the rest of her drink and carelessly tossed the plastic cup of ice on the floor. She asked encouragingly, "So are you down with it, apple booty?"

Fatima pretended to think about it and forced a stammer. "Oh, alright, bitch, I'm down. What's his name, anyways?"

She brushed imaginary dirt off her shoulders, watching Sherise swing her pleasing hips around to start for the back exit of the club. Sherise searched her memory for the name that the dope boy went by, but all she could think of was the money he promised.

She turned to Fatima. "I think he said Lex. Yeah, I think that's it."

Fatima followed her friend closely through the scattered clusters of zombies. Sherise continued in a dubious tone, "Yeah this nigga talkin' about he got a Beamer. He said come out back and holla at him if we was serious about the paper, so we 'bout to see what's up."

Reesie pushed the huge door open, and both of the girls stepped out into the warm breeze of the muggy night.

CHAPTER 8 - POPPING OFF

The two hoppers scanned the parking lot, searching for a rare BMW. Earlier in the club, when the dope boy had told Reesie what he was pushing, she had thought that he must have been doing pretty well for himself, or just frontin'. The women hadn't seen the silver convertible across the street, its headlights flashing on and off. It was difficult to see past the herd of parking lot pimping machines that seem to be competing in a loudest speaker contest."

The two women stood there talking about what they thought might be the car. Sherise spotted the lights blinking and grabbed her friend's hand, demanding anxiously, "Come on, I think that's him!"

Lux signaled with his headlights for them to come across the street as he sat in his machine, waiting. Both of the ladies stepped side by side, grinning and strutting their bountiful treasures across Franklin Avenue. The friends conversed gaily, passing a group of teenage thugs who leered openly at the buffet of ass bopping past them.

One of the young hooligans shouted back in feverish appreciation, “Damnnnn, ya’ll see that? I ain’t never seen asses that fât!”

His partners laughed ignorantly and clapped their hands in amusement. The women enjoyed the bold compliments, continuing their half-drunken strides past the gates of the parking lot. The dazzling rims gleamed as they reflected the glow from the streetlight. Sherise and Fatima both gazed hypnotized at the sight of the sporty, chrome machine.

The two women waved like innocent children at the shimmery-eyed driver. He waved back coolly, showing a top row of evenly spaced white teeth. His reddish brown, keen features gave a strong impression of confidence and prestige. Putting on a priceless smile, he said smoothly, “What’s good, ya’ll?”

The girls seductively sang back, “Shit. What’s poppin’, yo?” Sherise introduced Fatima to the man behind the wheel of the BMW.

“Fatima this is Lex, Lex, Fatima.” The girl didn’t get his name right. He ignored it and let her squawk on. Overlooking Sherise, he waved at Fatima. She smiled, easing closer to the whip flirtatiously.

The dapper, fresh player winked back in approval while he stared openly at the girl’s mountain of ass. He eased out of the sports car and leaned casually against the machine. He grabbed his lighter from his Red Monkey jeans and sparked a Vanilla Dutch packed with marijuana. His eyes twinkled with anticipation and impatience. He sneered sarcastically. “These silly-ass niggas need to come on. Shit! Ain’t much worth looking at in there, it’s all out here.”

Both of the ladies giggled fuckishly; they were pleased by the angled compliment. He tucked his diamond-linked medallion into the neck of a fresh white T. Then he stared back and forth at each girl’s ass, taking a deep drag of his L. He played with the smoke, then released it through his flared, leonine nostrils. He was thrilled at the sight of the ladies’ voluptuous rear ends and how stunningly attractive the both of them were. *Damn!* He thought to himself. *Fuck*

it! He would just have to give the broads the money. It didn't mean much to him, anyhow. He had at least two million stashed in profits from killer seasons of slinging crack, so twenty-five hundred was just the crumbs off his huge platter. He was just looking for a good time that night with some new bitches; he was tired of the same old hoers. *I'm keeping these to myself tonight*, he reflected doggishly.

Reesie broke into his fantasy when she loudly called him by the wrong name again. "Hey Lex, so lemme know how this 'bout to pop off tonight. And where are we getting a room at?"

Fatima added her two cents, "Yeah, what's really good, son?" He let them screech, then he turned his stare on the pecan-complexioned girl and stated coolly, "It's Lux, shorty."

Sherise replied loudly, "Well, whatever!"

Lux cut in flatly, "Chill mah, you just a little too feisty. I was thinking maybe a suite at the Hyatt or the old Crown Plaza downtown." After he spoke, he turned his attention back to the club. Fatima whispered to Sherise, "I know you gonna try and bag him up hoe. Did you see this nigga's chain?"

Sherise muttered, "Naw, he's too conceited. And fuck that nigga chain. It ain't mines."

Fatima jeered softly, "Bitch, you're stupid. That nigga got dough."

Sherise smiled and elbowed her friend playfully. Lux didn't hear the women. He was too busy concentrating on the rear door of the club to pay attention as the ladies looked him over. His face tightened while he waited impatiently for his boys to emerge from the sea of mostly black faces that poured out of the place. In seconds, his expression relaxed. He saw the three young, sharply dressed do-boys departing from the pack.

Fatima shouted, "That shit was crazy packed tonight!" Her narrow eyes scanned the crowd. "Damn, I ain't even noticed half of these muthafuckas up in there."

“I know, right. Half of these people in here are wack, so why would you notice them anyways,” Sherise added. The dense throng scattered for their rides as the sounds of drunken merriment drifted across the parking lot. Two tight-skirted hoppers scurried by Lux, talking back and forth about who did what. Their heels clattered a staccato beat with their steps. Sherise and Fatima stared, grossly smirking at the other two girls’ tattered outfits. Sherise thought to herself, *They had cute faces but their swagger was fucked over.* She snickered inwardly.

The trio of soldiers, for whom Lux waited impatiently, stepped up beside the much-shorter, but much more sophisticated, fellow. They wore stupid expressions as they damn near drooled at the sight of the ladies.

Lux snapped, “You stuntin’ ass cats took forever.”

He continued boldly, “You niggas ain’t bagging shorties in the club. I got mine, ya’ll betta’ get ya’lls.”

He laughed harshly at the other men. Both ladies smiled, hoping to hear one of the other guys challenge Lux’s bravado. The tallest of the men pleaded timidly, “Yo, Lux, I know you gonna let me roll. Come on, I’m your best boy.”

Lux just ignored the man’s request and asked brashly, “Yo, got those jump-offs, scrap?”

The light-skinned teenager dug into the back pocket of his baggy LRGs and pulled free a brown paper bag. He was the youngest of the three. He tossed the bag to Lux from where he stood. Lux caught it and quickly peered inside. He snorted arrogantly. “Thanks, family, I’ll get you straight on these tomorrow. I’m good for it.”

The young man wanted his money right now, especially after how the nigga tried to play him in front of these bitches. Lux gave the women a look that told them to get in the car. The skinny teenager grunted. “Naw, Lux, I need that cake right now.”

Lux turned, glared at the kid with violent, black eyes, and pulled a neat G stack from his bulky jeans. He shoved it into the scrawny kid’s sweaty palm and sneered. “You trying

to embarrass me scrap? Here, now you owe me, you funny-ass lil' nigga. Now getcha' lil' bitch-ass outta here."

The boy wanted to count the money, but he was too nervous after the ferocious look Lux had given him. He knew that it was more than what the man owed him anyhow. After all, he had sold him fifty e-pills for eight hundred and fifty bucks. Lux was so anxious to jet with the fine women that he let the boy slide with an extra hundred and fifty dollars and an insult. Any other time there would have been consequences for a smart mouth. The jittery kid nearly scampered as he caught up with the other two men and hopped into their burgundy Tahoe.

Later, inside an elegant suite at the Hyatt, both women laid across the plush bed in their thongs and bras, sipping Nuvo and smoking on a long Dutch stuffed with Purple Haze. They laughed and talked comfortably, enjoying the fruits of a street dream.

"Yo, you are damn fool if you don't hook up with this nigga! He got paper out the ass," Fatima whispered loudly.

Reesie replied, "You know this nigga got a bitch at home. And he's paying us for pussy. Why would I want a nigga like that? Why don't you get with him?"

I will, bitch, just wait, Fatima thought slyly.

Suddenly, Sherise's phone began to sing that chopped and screwed ring tone. She got up and strutted over to the other side of the room to retrieve her phone. She looked at the screen and saw Darnell's name and number. She grimaced and pushed the call end button to silence the ringer. She thought angrily to herself how the bumpy-faced muthafucka had been calling her all night. She looked down and noticed that he'd left her a voice mail.

Fatima saw the look on her friends face and hooted, "Who was that? Your ugly-ass man, bitch? Why do you waste your time with a creature? And a broke creature at that."

"Yeah, that might be true, but I be getting the dumb ass nigga to spend his whole check on me. Start getting' it like

that, and then I'll probably let you give me some pointers, until then just watch a master at work."

"Whatever, Reesie, you know it all." Fatima shook her head. Sherise rolled of her eyes. Lux smiled at the women as he strolled out of the bathroom in his boxers. He had just taken a shower, and now it was their turn. Sherise and Fatima gaped at the hustler's five-foot-nine chiseled frame. Beads of water glistened as they streamed down his muscle-bound back. Before the women could disappear behind the bathroom walls, he cleverly asked, "Can one of you girls hand me my pants and shirt from out of the bathroom."

"Oh, you want maid services too?" Sherise asked jokingly.

Lux laughed, "What? You want me to pay more for that?" He had remembered the brown paper bag, his money, and the baby .380 he kept on deck to slow down fast beef. He didn't trust the women around his money. Sherise carried the bulky jeans to Lux and asked childishly, feigning ignorance, "Why are your jeans so heavy?"

She had seen the gun when she lifted the jeans from the sink. Lux stayed silent and just smiled at the bowlegged young beauty. She turned back for the bathroom, and he smacked Sherise on her incredible rump and watched it jiggle wildly. His nature began to throb at the sight of the pecan-shaded booty bouncing in front of him. Sherise threw back her famous smile, stuck out her butt, and began swaying her hips for the man. Lux gazed at Sherise seductively gliding into the bathroom.

She closed the door and removed her lacy, black bra. Then she removed her thong and displayed a clean shaved cat. Fatima grinned lustfully and bit her bottom lip as she peeked at Sherise from inside the shower. Reesie laughed in a carefree manner, relaxed from the bomb greenery and liquor. She slipped into the shower with her friend. At the sight of Fatima's ratchet, she exclaimed, "Damn, bitch! How your fuckin' booty get so big?"

The fox-faced woman, two inches taller than Sherise, slapped Sherise's ass and replied, "Its genetics. My momma got a budunka too."

Fatima had a small rack, but her breasts perched perkily on her shapely torso. But Fatima's ass looked make believe. Sherise couldn't get her head around it. At times she thought that the bitch just had to have an ass implant, shots, or something.

"He better be paying us up front," Sherise said.

Fatima replied undoubtedly, "I wouldn't worry about it. Trust me, that nigga got cake."

This bitch doesn't care anyways, Sherise thought scathingly. She knew her friend liked women, and she knew what her friend was really there for.

Sherise wondered aloud, "I hope he got a big dick."

"I know that's right." Fatima idly agreed, soaping her body. Sherise answered her own question, watching the water run from her own skin. "He probably doesn't, cause if he did, he wouldn't break bread like he is."

Fatima foolishly sputtered, "Do you know who mini me is?"

"No, bitch, I don't. Who is it?"

Both girls laughed whorishly at their own presumptuous joke. The two aroused women played with each other as they showered, happy, horny, and high.

Lux faintly heard the women laughing through the walls. He thought about all the freaky shit he would do to the girls once they got started. He waited patiently on the bed with his feet kicked up, smoking a dutch of Haze. Before long the women came out of the shower completely naked. Lux couldn't contain his excitement. His boxers rose in the crotch area as his eyes glittered lustfully. Lux put the L out in the glass ashtray that sat on the end table. He popped one of the colorful pills from the paper bag into his mouth and swallowed it with a gulp of Nuvo.

Sitting down on the bed, one girl on each side of him, he offered each of them the bag of pills. Reesie and Fatima had never tried ecstasy before, but each of them carelessly

took a pill and chased it with a shot of Nuvo. Lux thought to himself with satisfaction, *Shit, I got these bitches now.*

He stood and turned on a radio that he brought to the room. Lil' Wayne's song "Make It Rain" began to pump from the speakers. As the pills took control, the three of them began to imagine vivid sex scenes. Sherise started to feel a warm sensation all over when the drug settled into her system, her body went completely numb with pleasure, and she instantly became soaking wet.

Lux began to act extreme. He jumped up frantically and began to dance to the music. Then he grabbed a knot of bills and flung them all over the girls. He started chanting conceitedly, "A.k.a Mr. Make-it-rain on these hoes! Yeah, I make it rain on 'em!"

Sherise was turned on by the man's performance. Both girls joined in swaying and bopping at the same time; they were in the mood for whatever.

Before long, Lux fell back on the bed with a pickpocket's grin and the girls knew what time it was. Sherise leaned toward Lux, giggling sensually as she ran her delicate hands up the man's thigh and grabbed his shaft through the leg of his boxers. She was shocked at the size of it.

She massaged it expertly, lowered her face, and pecked at it gently with small huddles of kisses. He almost crumbled when Sherise put his organ inside of her hot mouth and worked wonders with her tender lips and tongue. Sherise sweet-talked Lux as she licked him like a Lolli-pop. "You like it like that, huh? Yeah, you like that shit, huh?"

Fatima soon followed suit, hotly and zealously stroking Sherise's kitten. She let the juice flow down her long, thin hands, murmuring, "Damn this fat pussy wet, uhhh. That pussy getting wet, bitch. Ooh..., I want that shit so bad!"

Fatima buried her face between her friend's thick thighs. She worked her tongue like rattlesnake could. Within minutes, Sherise squirmed in freakish, pleasurable jolts, howling, "Oohwee, I'm 'bout to cum! Oh, I'm 'bout to cum!"

She nearly choked on the man's swollen stick while he played pool with her tonsils. She came quickly, squirting on Fatima's chin. "Oh shit, bitch, you fuckin' backed up or something," Fatima said, whipping her tongue around her lips lustfully.

Lux stood up shakily, gesturing toward Reesie, "Lemme get that pussy from the back, mah."

The girls switched positions. Fatima relaxed on her back while Sherise buried her lips into her friend's pinkish peach. Her ass was tooted up, waiting for Lux to hit it doggie style. This was a new experience for Reesie. She had never had sex with a woman before, but now here she was in full force. She ran her slithery tongue up and down the dark, flooding crevice. Fatima cried out joyfully, "Lick it bitch, uummm, lick it, uummm. Fuck. I'm gonna cum!"

Lux watched in amazement as he pumped in and out of the girl. He thought, *these little bitches are professionals!* Then he thought about the condoms still sitting inside of the BMW. The ecstasy might have had something to do with it, but he kept carelessly rolling the dice with his dick. The girls were in the same quandary.

Sherise plunged her pussy selfishly onto Lux's stiff pole, trying to take every inch of it. She pumped fast, unable to control her sexual spasms. She bawled like a banshee and came hard for a second time. Her feminine juices squirted uncontrollably. Lux pulled out of Sherise and beckoned Fatima to lie down submission style. The whole scene was like a crazy porno.

He plunged deep into Fatima's tightness; it queefed outrageously. Fatima yelped in pain. Lux was astounded at his own performance. After besting Fatima, Lux ordered both women on their hands and knees, side by side. He alternately rammed his bulging, stiff organ into one lady and then the other.

The women cried out in pleasure, enjoying multiple orgasms. The sex went on for what seemed like forever, until eventually the drugs and alcohol wore off. By day break, they all lay on the bed, totally drained.

CHAPTER 9- MIGHTY STRANGE

Darnell awoke to the sounds of soulful gospel music from his clock radio. He gritted his mouthful of tiny teeth. He felt like wilding out on some crazy G shit. He usually loved the music that WDKX played, but he was a bit pissed that it had disturbed his sleep. He wasn't up for facing reality yet. He was also angry at the bullshit dream he just had.

“Shit!” He cursed at himself for no particular reason. He slowly massaged his sweaty temples with his left hand while his right hand stayed clutched to his chest. He laid there with his head pounding like he had just been in a boxing match. Then the thought dawned on him, where was the picture he was holding before he fell out cold last night. He grimaced. “Damn!” he shouted and thought, *where in the hell could it be*. Darnell looked around the room frantically and found the picture. It was lying face down on the hardwood floor with the glass shattered around the broken wood frame.

After he took a few seconds to come to his senses, he reasoned that he must have dropped it during one of his ghastly childhood nightmares. He rose from his bed

mortified as his mind recalled the image of his sobbing mother. He stumbled over to the loud radio and violently yanked the cord from the outlet. Then, he went to the other side of the bed and crouched by the broken portrait. He carefully lifted the pieces of jagged glass piece by piece, being sure not to cut his hand. His temples throbbed harder; his headache became unbearable as he crouched and rose repeatedly to toss the broken glass into his waste basket.

He strolled out of his room, quietly passing his mother's door. He quickly peeped in to find that Renae wasn't inside. He continued down the stairs, expecting to see his mother relaxing on the couch and watching television, but she wasn't there either.

He made his way to the back of the apartment and into the kitchen, where he searched guiltily through the fridge for something to ease the rumbling in the pit of his stomach. He didn't notice the plate of eggs, toast, home fries, and sausage sitting on top of the stove.

Renae decided to leave early to take a long walk, something she hadn't done in a long time. She had been thinking about how refreshing a bit of summer breeze would feel while she prepared breakfast for herself and Darnell. She had woken up hours before her son. She had listened to him snore heavily that morning. She had heard him the night before from where she lay on the couch. He had been fighting with nightmares and shrieking madly, just as he had done for the past fifteen years.

Renae realized that her son slept rather hard during the late morning hours. She never bothered him while he gritted his teeth thoughtlessly on those certain mornings. She left the house as soon as she ate.

She decided she would walk downtown to the Strong Museum to see their newly remodeled establishment and check out their display of dinosaur fossils. She had been amused with fossils from the time she was a little girl.

Darnell spotted the plate of breakfast on the stove while waiting for a pair of pop tarts to warm in the toaster. He decided to eat the food that his mother had, undoubtedly, left

for him. He wrapped the pop tarts in aluminum foil and put them in the refrigerator.

As he ate his big breakfast, he thought about where he would end up; there was no way for him to rent a house on a Sunday. He finished the last of his home fries, washed his dish, and placed it on the dish rack. He hustled up the stairs, took a quick shower, and dressed in basketball shorts and a white T-shirt.

He fumbled through his unmade bed, searching for his cell phone. He found it and tried calling Sherise for the first time after getting out of bed. The phone rang three times and went to her voice mail. Darnell hung up his phone up in disgust at the sound of greeting, which he had become accustomed to hearing that entire weekend. *She usually changes her greeting every weekend*, he thought idly. He moped around the room, thinking, *what the hell?* He just wanted to know whether or not she could help him move his things. He wondered why she was ignoring his calls. He sat, frustrated, on the edge of his bed and kicked around other alternatives for a couple of minutes.

* * * *

Leah, a young, blue-eyed girl with curly, blond hair, heard the cell phone ringing. The housekeeping staff at the downtown Hyatt Hotel had found it while cleaning room 107 that Sunday morning.

The young desk clerk forgot where she had put the phone after one of the ladies from housekeeping had reluctantly given it to her that morning. From the loudness of the ringtone, she knew it was somewhere close by. She opened the top drawer of the counter behind the desk and looked under her guest log sheets. She saw the cell phone glowing, indicating that someone had called it. She decided to call the number back, thinking that it maybe the owner of the phone calling to see if he or she had left it behind. She had already checked for an owner by looking in the options

section on the phone. There were no names or alternate numbers that looked suitable to call. So, Leah hit the call button and the phone began dialing Darnell's number.

Darnell was shaken by the sound of his phone ringing. He scrambled for the phone that sat behind him on his bed and answered it without bothering to look at the number. He stammered, "hey, uh, hello."

The desk clerk replied in a friendly tone, "Hello, my name is Leah. I'm calling from the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Rochester. How are you today?"

The lady spoke with a fast country accent. Confused, Darnell replied, "fine."

Leah responded quickly, "Our housekeeping staff found this cell phone in one of the rooms they were cleaning this morning after check out. Do you know the owner?"

Darnell listened in stunned bewilderment. Finally snapping back to reality, he replied, "Where did you say you were from?"

She repeated the hotel's name repeated the whole bit again while Darnell sat on the edge of his bed feeling withdrawn from the conversation. He quickly came out of his trance again and said, "Okay, I'll come get it."

"Sir, is this your phone, or does it belong to someone you know?"

He hesitated briefly, thinking up a lie. "It's my little sister's phone."

He continued, hoping he would be able to retrieve the cell phone with no problems. "She told me to call it to make sure that she hadn't dropped it anywhere outside."

Darnell wasn't a very good liar; beads of sweat began forming on his forehead.

Leah, clearly concerned, replied, "Sir, where is your sister? I would rather she pick it up."

Darnell protested, "Oh. No, she can't. See, she's at work for the day, and she told me to pick it up if I happened to find it."

Leah paused a second then said in a skeptical tone, “Okay, just bring a photo ID, and make sure you have the description of the phone.”

Leah didn’t fully trust the man. She would make sure to copy his ID when he picked it up.

Darnell replied shakily, “Oh, okay, I’ll be sure to bring my ID. My sister’s phone is pink with a clear case. It’s a Samsung.”

Leah pulled the phone from her ear and briefly examined it. The man’s description was accurate. “Okay Sir, come to the Hyatt hotel, downtown, and make sure to use the main entrance.”

He hung up the phone incredibly mystified; crazy thoughts ran through his mind. He naively thought to himself, *what was her phone doing at the hotel?* He darted down the stairs to retrieve a phone book. The call from the hotel had given him an idea.

He would stay at a cheap motel until the weekend was over. He flipped through the yellow pages in search of a reasonably priced hotel. He had made up his mind to catch a cab to Motel Six on Buell Road, on the west side of town, and drop off his belongings. Then, he would head downtown to the Hyatt and get Sherise’s cell phone. He called a cab and packed a few more of his things while he waited.

His mind spun frantically and his anger began to rise. Within minutes, the taxi was in front of his mother’s home, loudly blowing its horn. He gathered all of his bags and stuffed them into the trunk of the taxi. The Arab driver stepped out of his taxi and, in a muffled accent, courteously asked, “Would you like some help with your bags, my friend?”

“Naw, I’m good,” Darnell responded rudely.

He stuffed the last bag into the cab’s trunk with attitude. The cabbie warily sunk down into his seat. Darnell plopped down in the back seat and ordered, “Motel Six on Buell Road!”

As the taxi leaped from the curb Darnell thought about his weight set in the basement and the clock radio he always

relied on to wake him up in the morning. He would just have to pick those items up when he got a chance. The real fact of the matter, however, was that he didn't want to face his mother, at least not now. He watched all the early morning happenings as the driver drove up Lake Avenue toward the express way.

He absentmindedly stared into the clear, blue sky above. The streets were dead besides the few children playing in the sun. Most people were still laid up from the night before or were attending church. As they approached a red traffic light at the corner of State Street and Allen, the driver asked, "Which way would you like me to take you, my friend?"

Darnell cut the man off sharply, "The fastest way, my friend."

He was sick of the driver trying to be so damn friendly. He sighed deeply and focused his mind back on his troubles. Could his mom be telling the truth about the story? He knew that his mother never really lied to him before and never about anything that serious. So, why would she start so late in the game? He was stumped, none of it made sense to him.

Why was his woman ignoring his calls, and why was her phone found at a fancy hotel. It all was too much for him to cope with. He even began to worry if something awful had happened to her.

The driver made a left off of Chili Avenue onto Buell Road. Darnell was amazed at how fast the taxi made it to that side of town. He glanced at the meter; it read 15.90. He pulled a crumpled twenty dollar bill from the inside of his tube sock and handed it to the driver.

"Wait for me, I'm gonna unload my stuff and have you take me somewhere else," Darnell barked at the cabbie.

The driver nodded, and Darnell began moving his things out of the trunk. The pudgy, black-bearded taxi driver scooted out of the cab, unsure if he should help the kid with his bags. Darnell had snapped at him before, but he seemed to be in a rush. The cabbie began to help, watching Darnell

out the corners of his eyes. He was hoping he didn't make a mistake by touching the bags.

After Darnell and the cab driver managed to get all of his things into the small motel lobby, Darnell got a room for sixty dollars a night. He paid for the room with his debit card.

The attendant slid Darnell the key card to his room. The thickly built Hispanic chick managed a counterfeit smile; she thought Darnell was the ugliest person she had seen in a long time. She shook her head slowly when Darnell wasn't looking, turned quickly to her coworker, and stuck her finger down her throat. The teenage girl snickered quietly and watched the taxi driver and the ugly kid move his belongings.

He glanced around the room quickly to make sure it was to his liking and brought the last of his things inside. Then, he darted out of the Motel Six to meet the driver back at the cab. In a condescending ton, Darnell said, "Now you can take me to the Hyatt downtown!"

He didn't show the man any gratitude for helping him with his bags. Darnell was usually courteous, but his mind was too tied up in Sherise's web of deceit.

CHAPTER 10 – SEEK AND YOU SHALL FIND

The cab seemingly made it to the Hyatt at the speed of light. Darnell looked at the meter; it read 29.35. He quickly dug into the side of his tube sock and wrestled out another crumpled up bill, the last of the seven hundred dollars from yesterday evening. He grunted angrily. “Stay here man! You gotta take me back to the motel!”

The driver gave Darnell an uncertain look, wondering what he was up to. Darnell saw the man’s skeptical glare and said, “I got more fuckin’ money!”

He sneered coldly at the man as if he was the reason for his troubles. “Now chill with your money-hungry ass! Wait until I come out!”

The driver nodded, confused. He remained silent as Darnell marched off, pitching a bitch under his breath. He bumped through a crowd of people that was enjoying the beautiful August day.

The cab driver didn't care how rude his customer was; he had heard the two magic words, more money. That's all he had to hear to smuggle a masked murderer to the farthest border. He was a gluttonous, plump Arab. He owned two successful small grocery stores and a clothing store. Many people assumed the man must be greedy or bored to also drive a cab. He parked near the curb and waited patiently for Darnell.

Darnell tried to calm his nerves before entering the extravagant hotel. The stunning appearance of the lobby was like sugar to shit compared to his hotel. He pushed his short puffed-up frame through the vestibule doors.

There were three groups of people in front of him. He stood there, hunch-backed, gazing through the people that were in front of him as if they were transparent.

A young white kid about four years old with blondish hair and green eyes turned and glared back at Darnell in whimsical manner. He was standing in line with his mother.

The kid patted his mother on the back and ridiculed Darnell. "Mommy, look out, there's an ugly monster behind us!" The kid began to scream and laugh all at once.

The lady hushed the smart-mouthed kid and turned toward Darnell; she tried to control her own shock. *Wow, she thought, little Josh is right, this kid is gruesome.* She mustered up the words and apologized for her son's outburst. "Sorry sir, this kid is something else."

She ruffled Josh's head full of golden hair and smiled crookedly. Darnell grumbled back, "Whatever, Lady."

He was used to those kinds of reactions toward his features. The look in his beady eyes told the shapely, white woman that it was her turn. The woman noticed his look and, clutching her son's hand firmly, turned around and hurried toward the desk.

Within seconds, Darnell was also at the desk. He stood there dazed, waiting for the older desk clerk to finish up some paperwork. The old man, slightly wrinkled and gray, limped over and asked in a raspy voice, "Good afternoon, sir, how may I assist you today?"

“I’m here to pick up my sister’s phone. I talked to someone on the phone earlier about it.”

Darnell kneeled and pulled his ID out of his tube sock.

“Ah, yes. Leah told me about that. I just need to copy your driver’s license and you can be on your way, sir.”

Darnell quickly slid him the ID. A few moments later, the old man brought Darnell’s ID back along with his girl’s clear, pink-colored T-Mobile phone. Darnell’s adrenalin soared; his heart pumped overtime, and he trembled as he held the phone. He stuttered, “Thanks, sir.”

Then, he turned around and got out of the place quickly. He felt as if he had just committed an armed robbery as he hurried out of the place.

The sun beamed brazenly on his bumpy skin while Darnell made his way back to the taxi with the phone in hand. He wiped the mist of sweat from his brow and slipped into the back of the cab. “Now, take me back to the motel.”

The pudgy driver stayed silent, checked his mirrors, and pulled his taxi briskly into traffic. He stayed silent the whole ride, realizing the kid looked more agitated than before. He didn’t want to chance getting his ass whipped. The fare for the trip was 47.65. Since Darnell had already slipped him forty dollars, he decided to let him slide on the difference. It was a good thing he did; without saying a word, Darnell got out of the cab, slammed the door shut, and walked through the doors of the small motel lobby.

He sat in his room in a deranged state. He quaked awfully as he tried to control tears that were destined to flow as he looked over the list of male contacts in Sherise’s phone. He was crushed when he saw one of the pictures saved in her phone. It was a picture of Lux, with his keen brilliant smile and big, glistening chain.

Who is this? Darnell thought as he looked at the image. He realized it was dated the tenth, which was today. He noticed there were more photos. The next one was a picture of a dude with a Syracuse jacket; he was long and thin with his tongue sticking out of his face and cheesy grin.

The next picture was Fatima on the dance floor, dancing closely with some dude. Darnell scrolled through the call list again and started to call all the numbers one by one. Then, he somehow changed his flustered mind and decided not to.

He used the options on the phone to go back to the pictures. Darnell eyes began to well up into two bowls of tears that poured freely from his eyes. He was bewildered and devastated. He gritted his teeth and slammed his head back against the headboard. "What the fuck!" He cursed. He blinked uncontrollably, unable to hold back the tears. *No, it can't be, not his girl*, he thought.

He whimpered and trembled; he stared, heartbroken, at his dear wifey getting fucked by some dude in the next image he opened. Sherise had known the picture was a bad idea when Chauncey snapped it, but she didn't bother to get rid of the obscene thing. It had been in her phone for months. It was the only thing that could have convinced Darnell that the woman he loved wasn't who he thought she was.

She could have easily lied about all the other numbers and pictures, and he would have forgotten them. But now, the truth was staring Darnell in his tear-stained face.

He almost crushed the cell phone when he flipped it closed. He was feeling ill. What would he do now? In a labyrinthine situation already, everything had just taken a turn for the worse.

Darnell's mother always used to say, "Seek and you shall find." Now he started to understand what she meant.

He sobbed and sniffled for the next hour or so. After crying his eyes out over the girl, he gained enough control to call his job and tell Jimmy that he wouldn't be able to make it because he was sick. Jimmy was always there on Sundays. He told Darnell it was fine and thanked him for calling. He said that one of the other dishwashers would be thankful for the extra hours.

Darnell walked into the bathroom and splashed his face with water to clean the dried tears and planned his agenda. He changed into some clean clothing without taking heed of

his funky body odor. The weather had been sticky that day and he hadn't stopped moving since he woke up. In addition, he hadn't put deodorant on that whole day. He was too busy trying to flee before his mother returned.

Later that same day, he eventually built up the nerve to confront Sherise about the whole thing. He turned her phone off after he saw the picture that had made him weep, but something inside told him to turn the phone back on. He pushed the power button and quickly stuffed it into the pocket of his denims, still not wanting to face reality.

He wanted everything to not be true. His mind was far gone as he left the hotel room and walked down the hall in calculated strides. He had no idea what he would say once he made it to her house. He had never popped up at Sherise's place unexpected before, He didn't know what would become of it, but he was anxious to act on the situation.

As he reached the side doors of the hotel, Sherise's phone began to buzz inside of his pocket. He retrieved and stammered as he answered, "He..., hello."

Fatima paused, and then replied angrily, "Who the fuck is this?"

Darnell snapped back, "Yo, who the fuck is this?"

Fatima snarled when she recognized his voice. "What the fuck are you doing with Reesie's phone? OI, crazy ass!"

Darnell foamed at the mouth. "Fatima, you fuckin' dike. You better..."

Fatima's words detonated in his ear as she cut him short to shit, "She ain't even feeling your stupid ass anyway. Keep talking smart, I might have to get my brother to come see your punk ass! Da... Da... Darnell, ya stuttering ass can't even speak right!"

Darnell replied angrily, "You can get your punk ass brother, bitch! Where's my girl?"

Fatima laughed and responded, "Yo, son, you think my bitch really like your stupid ass! C'mon, look at yourself."

Darnell couldn't think of the words fast enough. He started roughly, "Bitch." That was all he got out before he heard silence. Fatima had hung the phone up.

CHAPTER 11 - WHEN SHIT HITS THE FAN

Sherise paced her living room floor, retracing her steps. She was trying to figure out where she had misplaced her phone. She had been so wasted the night before that she couldn't remember half of what happened. All she could remember was the pleasurable threesome she had with her best friend and Lux. Her vagina still throbbed as a reminder. She was trying to call Lux to set up a future date, because the money he paid was good and the sex was too.

A knock at the door stole her attention; she grabbed her twelve hundred dollars from the coffee table and crammed it deep into the couch cushions. She strolled curiously over to the front door and used the peep hole before she opened it.

It was Fatima. She was wearing fresh gear that she had bought with her share of the money. Sherise opened the door for her friend. Fatima, looking a bit vexed, asked, "Bitch, did you just wake up or something?"

"Yeah, not too long ago, what's up?"

"What is Darnell doing with your phone, Reesie?"

Before Sherise could answer, Fatima continued, “I had called you up about an hour ago, just to check on you. That bumpy face ass nigga answered with a fucking attitude. I had to curse him out!”

“I wonder where he got my cell phone from. What did he say?”

“The hell if I know where he got it from,” Fatima mumbled angrily.

“That stalker must have been calling me this morning and somehow got a hold of my phone from wherever I left it. It was probably at the hotel, I think.”

Fatima put her bag down on the floor. “Ooh, he might whip ya ass if he finds out you was at the hotel”

“Yeah, right Darnell ain’t crazy. He ain’t bout’ to do shit. I think Mr. Lover Man’s expiration date is up. I’m kinda glad he found it. Now, maybe he’ll leave me the fuck alone! I know he definitely peeped at some of them pics I got in there.”

Sherise shrugged her shoulders and laughed. She spoke mostly to impress her friend. She knew that she would miss the weekly shopping sprees if she lost Darnell. She thought that she might just butter his stupid ass up and keep things the way they were.

A few seconds later, she asked Fatima if she could use her phone to call him. Fatima handed her the phone from the case inside of her new Prada bag. Sherise dialed the number to her own phone, wondering what to expect from Darnell. The phone rang once and went straight to the voicemail. She waited about ten minutes and tried it again; she got the same results.

She started to call his phone but thought that was pretty pathetic considering she didn’t even know his number without having her phone. Sherise handed Fatima’s phone back, but she wouldn’t take it. She said that if “shitface” called back, she didn’t want to be the one who answered because she would curse him out again.

Sherise put the phone down on her coffee table and watched her friend dump the insides of a dutch into a plastic

grocery bag. Fatima crumbled up the light green buds on the top of one Sherise's magazines from the end table. She expertly rolled a perfect baseball-bat-shaped L and dried the moistness with her lighter. Once she lit the weed up, her face seemed to glow. Her words spilled out happily, "Damn, I didn't expect that short ass nigga to be packing like a mandingo last night."

Sherise stood up and looked out her front window out of habit. "I know; I still feel him inside of me."

Both of the women laughed at that, because both of them could still feel it.

Fatima took a small puff of the reefer and inhaled, chuckling lightly.

"Shit, that nigga wasn't trying to leave nothing for our future husbands, you feel me?" She took a drag and passed the L to Sherise. A cough stifled her giggles.

What husband? You dike, Sherise thought disapprovingly. "What's up with that? I thought you said, you ain't never gettin' married, Fatima?"

"Huu, if the nigga got cake like Lux, I'm in."

"Yo, its like you stuck on that nigga, you can't see that he's just a good trick, when ya need that bread?"

"Yeah I know that Reesie, but I'm just saying, damn. Lux is a gold mine. If he'll give you twelve hundred for a night, imagine what he could do for you on the regular."

"Fuck Lux. I dated niggas like that when I was a lot younger, and all they do is sell you dreams. That's why I make sure I get all I can outta nigga nowadays. I don't need to be with him."

"So you saying you wouldn't fuck with him, on some serious relationship shit?" asked Fatima.

"No! You act like you just don't believe what I'm saying. But to keep it funky, I was just 'bout to call him to set up another date."

"Oh, word. I hope you ain't trying to pimp me. Is that nigga giving you extra money on the side or something?" asked Fatima half humorously.

“Bitch, no. I’m trying to get mine. I looked out for you last night. I coulda been a greedy bitch and left your ass out. Besides I like dick. I usually don’t get down like that, but you’re my bitch.”

“I’m just fuckin wit ya Reesie. I know you looked out.” Now, more relaxed, Sherise acknowledged Fatima’s new gear. “This bitch done spent up all her money already. Look at you, trying to stay with the hottest shit. I see ya taking notes.”

Fatima replied with a sheepish grin. “Yeah, I had Tasha take me out to the mall earlier. I picked up some of that Burberry and Donna Morgan shit. Then, I got her little munchkin ass to drop me off, before she went to her aunt’s crib.”

Sherise leered, blowing a thick cloud of smoke in the air. “Oh, you don’t fuck with me when you with big momma, huh? Why you even fuck with her anyhow?”

Fatima grinned, recognizing the salt Sherise threw whenever Tasha’s name was mentioned. Suddenly, Fatima’s phone began to play a throwback ringtone; Mystical’s song, “Shake your ass.”

She stood and scooped her phone from the table as Sherise watched with suspicion. Fatima answered her cell in that plastic New York City voice she used at least once a day. “Okay, I’ll be at Sherise’s for a while,” she said to the person on the other end of the line.

Sherise leaned back in her sofa wondering who her friend could be talking with. She knew for sure that it wasn’t Darnell because her friend was much too calm.

Fatima quickly said, “Okay, then just come on girl. We’ll be here.”

Sherise could tell that it was Tasha who had been on the line, She asked Fatima anyway as her friend passed her the L, grinning. “Who is that you’re inviting to my crib? You high bitch.”

Fatima put up a middle finger then yelled, teasingly, “Who was high last night?” Sherise laughed as she drew in smoke and let it float from her dark, oval lips. She was

waiting to hear what she already knew. Fatima cheekily answered, “That was just Tasha, the bitch is mad bored so I told her it was aw’ight to come cool out wit’ us.”

Sherise cut in swiftly. “Damn, she finished visiting that crippled old lady already.”

Sherise didn’t really care too much for the idea of Fatima inviting anyone to her house without her saying so. She gave her friend a peculiar look as she stood up and handed her the weed. Fatima noticed, but didn’t say anything.

Although Fatima had love for her friend, deep inside, she always enjoyed seeing Sherise uncomfortable when the other woman came around. It gave her a sense of confidence and leadership among the three of them. In fact, she also enjoyed the drama that was poppin’ off between Sherise and that special ed case. She thought how funny it would be to see Darnell’s ass give Sherise a slap upside her dome for those pictures. It would bring the bitch down a peg or two, she thought, coldly.

Sherise got up and walked to the kitchen, “You want some cranberry juice?” she asked Fatima.

Fatima leisurely watched her friend’s ass from the seat she occupied. She replied sarcastically, “Yeah, I need some cleansing of the system, especially after last night. You feel me?”

Sherise rolled her eyes, even though her back was turned. She remembered how eager her friend was before the threesome shit popped off last night. She could tell that Fatima always wanted to have her in bed. Although she never had proof until last night, she was certain she had a knack for knowing shit like that.

Sherise had known for a fact that she was strictly dick, and she only had done the threesome for the extra money, for her and Fatima. She would have expected the same from Fatima. Sometimes, she couldn’t really understand why she hung out with the troublemaker. She knew that Fatima loved to instigate things between her and Tasha. However, she

realized the truth as she finished pouring both glasses of cranberry juice. She and Fatima were like two peas in a pod.

She put the container of juice back in the fridge and strolled into the room, swaying those shapely hips unconsciously. She handed one of the glasses to her friend and took a gulp from the other one. She sat back down on her couch, feeling dehydrated from the weed and all the liquor they had drunk the night before. She thought the shower she'd taken when she woke up that afternoon would help her shake the weak feeling, but it only helped temporarily.

“Those fuckin’ pills from last night got me feeling drained.”

Fatima chuckled. “It ain’t the pills. It was the good fuckin’”

“Shut up. Damn, I’m hungry as an Ethiopian,” replied Sherise. Her stomach growled loudly, and both women began laughing hard. Suddenly, there was a knock at the door.

Both women stared at the door through hazy eyes before Fatima got up from the small sofa. Sherise was going to tell her to sit down and she would get it, but she couldn’t produce the words fast enough.

When Fatima used the peephole, she focused her vision and saw the distorted features of Darnell leaning weakly against the screen door. He was staring through the thing as if he knew they were inside. He knocked again, pounding on the door relentlessly. Before she could decide whether to let him or not, she panicked.

She quickly opened the door and grabbed a front row seat. Sherise yelled out of built up frustration. “Who the fuck are you letting into my crib, bitch!”

Fatima turned, feeling every bit of the sting in Sherise’s words.

Darnell slid through the door with his beady, black eyes glaring at Sherise. She stood up, ice grilling her friend for taking it upon herself to open her door. Sherise snarled at

him before he could find his words. “Nigga, give me my muthafuckin’ phone!”

“It was at the hotel.”

“So what, Give it here!”

“Tell me why you were there, first.”

“Nigga I ain’t got to explain shit to you!”

Dismayed, Darnell scurried past Fatima, giving her an evil glare with the phone in his hand. Sherise had managed to control the whole exchange from the jump. He wanted to throw the phone at her, but he changed his mind as he neared the evil, but beautiful, witch. He couldn’t find it in himself to cause harm to her.

He held the phone out to Sherise and tried to meet eyes with her, but she denied him and continued to insult and belittle him in front of her friend.

She continued to blast Darnell, snatching the phone from him roughly. “You ugly, bitch-ass nigga, was you snooping through my shit?”

She smacked him viciously across his pimpled cheek. “Huh? Darnell, was you looking through my pictures!”

She pushed her microbraids out of her face to look at the heartbroken man.

Darnell was torn apart and trying to keep his angry vibe going, but he just couldn’t. It seemed like she had just flipped the whole shit on him. How did she manage to make him feel guilty?

A question escaped his mouth beneath all of Sherise’s ranting rage. Darnell asked softly, “What were you doing at the hotel, Boo?”

Then, more questions followed; his voice was starting to weaken. “What about the dude you were with in the picture?”

A tear rolled down Darnell’s face and he feebly asked, “You were really sleeping with another man, Boo?”

Fatima laughed openly at his question and shook her head in disbelief. *What a simple bastard*, she thought to herself coldly as her eyes raced back to Sherise to see what slick remark her friend was going to have next.

Sherise threw one hand on her hip, leaned back, stared at Darnell in a confused manner, and spat. "It's none of your goddamn concern. Nigga, get a life. You're not my fuckin' daddy! Please, Darnell, just stay out my fucking business!"

"Boo, just come with me to my room for the night. We can talk about it."

"Talk about what, Darnell. There ain't nothin' to talk about. I'm good. You need to go before I hurt ya feelings."

He had thought of a bunch of things to ask her on the double bus ride to her apartment, but he seemed to be at a loss for words since his arrival. He felt a large lump form in his throat when she maliciously ordered, "Get your ugly ass out of my crib, right now!"

A crazed feeling came over Darnell. He stared blankly at the woman he loved so dearly. A quick flash of red took over his vision. He turned and dragged himself away hopelessly, not able to stand anymore of her thrashing. Before he walked out, he turned to look at her beautiful, butter-pecan face with pleading eyes.

She was leaving him no choice; she had called him everything under the sun besides a child of God and was testing his manhood over and over. He just had to go. If he didn't, it would turn out bad for her. Darnell slammed the door behind him and sunk his head down between his beastly shoulders. Sherise's jeers had broken him down brutally.

Fatima laughed hysterically when the door slammed shut. Sherise strutted to the door and locked the deadbolt before sitting down hard on her couch. Fatima watched her friend with a gleam in her eye. It was all a big show to her, but she was hoping that the spineless bastard would have at least raised his voice. It wasn't as much action as she had hoped for. "Yo, Reesie, you buggin' callin the nigga ugly to his face like that."

"He knows he's ugly I ain't the first muthafucka to tell him that."

"Well, I tried to tell him you didn't want him, when he was on the phone acting all crazy earlier."

"What are you talking about Fatima?"

“I just told him that you ain’t feeling him. That’s all.”

“I don’t need you to speak for me. I know how to talk.”

“Oh, wow, don’t tell me you got an attitude, Reesie.”

“You know what Fatima, forget about it. When is the fat bitch gettin’ here? She can take your ass home. I don’t really feel like having no company now!”

Fatima didn’t reply to her friend’s stiff remark. She just rolled her eyes and punched the numbers into her cell. Sherise sat there, still upset from the way things played out. She hadn’t planned to run Darnell off totally. But it had enraged her that he was expecting her to explain herself, especially in front of Fatima. She would have never heard the last of it if she would have folded and not handled the situation as she did. Both women sat in silence, waiting for Tasha to show up; Sherise wanted to be alone. She wasn’t feeling her friend right now.

CHAPTER 12 - NO FUNNY BUSINESS

Out in the quiet, suburban surroundings of Henrietta, Brandon tiredly sat at his kitchen table clutching a mop and sweating. He had a long list of cleaning to get done. He had been up washing clothes since three in the morning. He hadn't finished his last load until after nine that morning.

Since then, he had been cleaning his house from top to bottom, even the basement and the attic. He cleaned both of his bathrooms to a squeaky shine. Now, reluctantly, he wound up in his dreadful dine-in kitchen.

He dizzily stood up, stumbling as he began mopping the bigger half of the kitchen. It was the biggest room in his entire house. He pushed the heavy-duty mop, feeling his muscles tighten up from the work out.

Finally, he was all finished. While he was purging his house of Chad's left behind and unwanted items, he was regretting not spending his day off just relaxing. However, he felt that nothing comes before cleanliness.

Brandon, tall and slender, strutted to a back storage closet where he kept the cleaning supplies and turned his mop upside down in small corner over a ground drain. He slammed the closet shut and headed upstairs to take a bubble bath. Upstairs, he watched the tub fill, thinking about his chances of really enjoying a Sunday evening by going out somewhere. Why was he kidding himself, he thought. Where in the hell would he go on a night like tonight? He poured the bubble solution in a half-filled tub of steamy water and stepped out of the bathroom quickly to grab his cell phone from the charger. The time on his Blackberry glowed 7:40 PM.

How time flies, he thought to himself, beginning to scroll through his phone's contact numbers.

He stopped next to Tamika's phone number; she was some girl he had met last month. Brandon found it amusing that he had fucked her already. Being with her was just something to relieve his frustrations until he got his mind situated.

He thought bitterly to himself how he had picked Tamika up from the heart of the ghetto. A whole bunch of hoodlums had been standing out front. Brandon thought that they might have been plotting one thing or another, but they didn't say anything to him while he waited on the girl. He remembered Tamika coming out of her mother's dingy shack, looking sexy and vulnerable. They went to The Black and Blue for dinner. It was some posh restaurant out in the town of Pittsford.

After they finished eating, Brandon had cruised through the city with the overjoyed, light-skinned girl riding shotgun in his blood red 2007 Escalade. Once they made it to his house, the night was still young. Brandon had let her swim in his pool. He remembered her astonishment. It was unforgettable; when she went inside of his home, the young bitch nearly creamed her swimsuit at the sight of his elaborate, ranch-style house.

He punched in her numbers for sport. Tamika's phone rung once, and she snatched it up answering eagerly. "Hello! Brandon?"

He answered nonchalantly, with a hyena's sneer. "Hey, what's up Tamika?"

"Waiting on you. I haven't seen you in a month. What happened, I thought you were feeling me?"

Brandon charmed her, "I am, really. That's why I called. I wanted to come scoop you."

"Really? Okay, I'll be ready in an hour. I gotta get dressed. Are you coming for real?"

He lied easily, "Yeah, I'll be there in an hour."

He hung up, knowing that he wouldn't be there. He just liked to fuck with the girl's mind because he knew she liked him. His vanity ran deep. Brandon was the type of guy that didn't like to see people around him doing better than himself, especially women. He had the urge to fuck them over. Mainly, his behavior was due to his theory that Chad might have left him for a woman.

He scrolled down to the next unfamiliar number on his list. It was Sherise's, the girl from the mall the other night. He laughed out loud and tossed around the idea of calling her. *Nope*, he thought, *I'm not in the mood to deal with no wack bitches tonight*. He remembered how she was standing there, fronting like she was looking for jewelry. All the while, she was scheming on bagging him up.

He thought, *damn, bitches are sure thirsty these days*. He settled his slender, cut body into the steamy, bubble-filled tub. The relaxation of the water was all he needed to feel replenished for the night. He decided to take a cruise to see what he might run into.

Brandon got dressed in a costly, red and black, Sean John three-piece suit. He also put on his golden Rollie and an iced-out Figaro chain. He looked at his reflection in the nightstand mirror to check how fresh his cut looked. He had just gone to the barbershop that past Friday. He decided it looked sharp enough and made sure he had everything he wanted to bring along for his joyride. He locked the door that

led to his two car garage, feeling like he was unstoppable. Bronze-skinned and handsome, he glanced down at the gear he was wearing. His thin lips formed a charismatic smile; he knew that he was dressed to impress. For whatever reason, however, he didn't quite know why. He started to feel overdressed for no good reason. He turned quickly on his heel and went back upstairs to change into something more suitable for an evening that would most likely just include cruising the city and idle sightseeing.

Within minutes, he had changed out of the three-piece suit and into a white and red valor jumpsuit that he quickly matched up with a pair of red and white Air Force Ones. Now that Brandon was satisfied, he hit the button on his key chain that raised the door to his garage. He hopped into the comfy leather driver seat of his blood red Escalade, and a conceited thought passed through his mind. He thought, *who in their right mind would want to leave him*. He had great things going for himself. He bought his house at the age of 23. He drove a nice Caddy truck and now, at the age of 27, helped run his deceased grandfather's jewelry store. In addition to his comfortable lifestyle, he thought he was the finest black man under the sun. Period! With that thought stamped in his mind, he said out loud to himself, "Some people don't know a good thing until it's gone."

He turned the ignition. His truck purred quietly when it came to life. He backed out of his driveway carefully and headed toward West Henrietta Road. He made a left at the light and started out toward the city. Driving expertly, he admired the soft, purplish flare of the skyline.

It was nearly 9:00 PM, and the sun was beginning to set. He grabbed the box of Marlboro's out of his glove box and lit one up, driving aimlessly through the west side of the inner city. Along the street he saw men, women, and children outside, soaking up the last of the day's light. Some were hustling, some were playing, and others were sitting on the porches of their rugged slum apartments.

He always came to explore the inner city when he had nothing to do. It made him feel more worthy of himself. He

carried a belief that he was somehow better than all the people from the ghetto. In Brandon's mind, if you lived in the hood, you had to be broke and beneath him.

He was tempted to call off his night of useless driving, but then an idea suddenly came to him. Brandon made a left off West Main Street onto West Broad Street. He continued his way north up Lylle Avenue and took it to the outskirts of Gates Chili to a bar and grill where homosexuals hung out.

He had remembered Chad telling him about how the spot use to jump, even on a boring Sunday. As he drove slowly down the street toward bar, he spotted the glowing signs in the windows. He parked in the small, mostly vacant lot. He glanced at his surroundings, noticing the night gradually falling.

After minutes of deliberating, he slid his lean frame from behind the wheel of his truck and made his way into the murky place. When he entered, all attention turned in his direction from the decent size group of people inside. He found a stool, off to the far left corner of the bar, and sat down. He was a bit annoyed at how everyone stared him down. He tried to make eye contact with the bartender, but the fat, white guy didn't turn his face from the big screen that was high up in the corner. He was watching some sports highlights on ESPN. Brandon shouted at the man from where he sat, "Bartender!"

The man whirled around, glaring at the slender guy as if Brandon had taken a shit on the hood of his car. He cleared his throat and replied in a gravelly tone, "What's up, bud?"

The fat bartender called everyone bud, except for women. Brandon thought about what drink he would order when a shadow appeared from behind him. Brandon shouted over the clatter to the red-faced bartender, "Just give me a Red Stripe!"

The person coming from behind grabbed Brandon's wispy shoulder in a sudden motion. The face he saw when he stared up from his barstool in shock was unfamiliar. Brandon grimaced, the Hispanic man who stood over him smiling with delight had startled him pretty badly. Then, he

recognized the man. Angel, chipper and dapper, shouted excitedly. “Hey, how are you doing man? You actin’ like you don’t remember me no more. What’s going on, pal?”

Angel gave a tight-faced smile and hugged Brandon unyieldingly. Brandon stood up from the barstool smiling. “How are you doing man?”

Angel replied in a thick accent, “Good, I’m okay, man.”

Brandon tapped the man on the shoulder softly and said amiably, “Man, I haven’t seen you around in a while and now you come up in here scaring me like that. What’s up, man? What you doing here?”

Angel replied casually, “Ah man, I’m just cooling out from the wife and kids. I’m here to throw back a few drinks. You know how we guys do.”

Before Brandon could reply, the bar tender pounded a Red stripe down on the counter in front of him and said, “That’s three bucks, bud.”

Brandon smiled wryly and pulled a crisp twenty out of his pocket. “What you want Angel? First round is on me.”

“Sure, thanks pal, Hey bartender, give me a rum and coke!” Angel shouted.

Soon after, the bartender brought back Brandon’s change and gave Angel his rum and coke. Brandon slid the man a two dollar tip, and both men walked over to one of the tables that were on the far right of the place. They sat across from one another and began to casually talk and drink. Angel asked Brandon curiously, “Hey, have you talked to Chad recently?”

The question caught Brandon off guard. Then, his face saddened, unrecognized by Angel. He wanted to lie, but he told the truth and answered robotically, “No, I haven’t seen him since he moved. All I know is that he lives in Atlanta. I don’t even have an address.”

By the way that Brandon replied, Angel could tell that he probably shouldn’t have asked the question. He never realized how serious their relationship was. Angel had just got married to Chad’s older sister Monica a year ago. That was how he met Brandon during the past winter. The two

lovers would always visit Monica, Angel, and their two little girls.

They had come by together on Christmas, Easter, and Memorial Day to celebrate with Angel and his family, but, all of a sudden, Chad decided to run off to Atlanta. Angel and Monica thought the spontaneous move was a bit strange. Shortly after Chad bounced, Monica shared with her husband that in all the years she had known her brother, he was always impulsive.

Brandon took a long drink of his beer. “So, I take it that no one in his family has talked to him since he moved?”

Angel’s eyes shot up and he rubbed the stubble on his chin. “Naw, at least, I haven’t. I really don’t think Monica or her mom has either, but I’ll ask her.”

Angel went for his cell phone. Brandon waved him never mind and yelled over the roars of life in the place. “Angel, it ain’t that serious!”

He knew the man only tried calling because he sensed that Brandon was still bothered by Chad’s absence, which was true. Brandon changed the subject quickly, but he still had Chad on his mind. “Hey man, how are the wife and the girls doing?”

Angel replied with a smile, exposing a row of well kept teeth, “Oh, Monica is just the same as always and the girls are growing up so fast. Give them another week, they going to be bigger than us.”

Both men laughed at the comical exaggeration. They drank and talked some more. Before Brandon knew it, time had skated by, and it was getting close to midnight. Angel sipped the last of his fourth rum and coke and told Brandon that he was going to the restroom. He staggered around the bar toward the rear.

Brandon thought it was strange that no one had heard from Chad since he had run off three months ago. He thought, *why wouldn’t he at least call his own sister?* The questions began to ring like chimes in his mind.

He watched Angel approach, staggering from the restroom drunkenly. He noticed a ring of white dust around

the man's tiny nostril and instantly knew what he used the restroom for. Brandon brushed his own nose, making eye contact with Angel to let him know that he was wide open. Angel looked momentarily stunned, but he got the hint. He smirked at Brandon shamefully. He wiped his nostril clean of the substance and asked mischievously, "So, what now?"

He winked a seductive eye at Brandon, who stood there staring at the man like a pathetic two-dollar whore. He ignored the man's slanted invitation. "I'll catch you later, man. I really have to get some rest for work in the morning."

Brandon walked out of the bar, leaving the man standing there paranoid and dumbfounded.

When Brandon made it to his truck, he practically died laughing at the new discovery. He couldn't believe that Angel went both ways. The whole time they were chatting, he never thought, *what the fuck is Chad's sister's husband doing in a well known gay bar?* The question never crossed his mind.

He coldly thought how fucked up the man would be if he told Monica. Although he never had intentions to do so, he got a kick out of the possibilities. He gradually tucked the new information away while he cruised through the empty streets smoking a cigarette.

He was puzzled by Chad's actions. Why was he closing everyone out, he wondered. He put on his earpiece and punched in the number to Chad's phone. Then it struck him that he had promised himself he wouldn't call the man. He waited eagerly for the phone to be answered, trying to figure out ways to talk to him if he happened to answer. He was nervous. Then, suddenly, he heard a voice and his heart flickered. "The number you have dialed is temporarily out of order or is no longer in service. Please try a different number; this is a recording."

Brandon drove home with a distant, foggy mind. He needed something, or somebody, to do to keep Chad off his mind. He tried James's phone, now feeling defenseless. "Hello. Hi James, this is Brandon. You down?"

James crooned with coolness, “Oh, now the shoe is on the other foot and you wanna...”

Brandon cut the man off quickly, “Shut up and bring your simple ass on!”

James sung feverishly, “Ooh, I like it when you to talk to me like that. Hey!”

“Just hurry up!”

He sighed deeply, battling with his sexual preference. But the agitation wouldn't keep him from getting a man in his bed that night.

CHAPTER 13 - JUST THREE WORDS

“Renae Wilkinson!” Her supervisor bellowed her name from inside a private office. The large white women stuck her head out of her door and smiled warmly at Renae.

Renae stood and strolled toward the office. “Hello, how are you Renae?”

“I’m just fine, Pauline, how about yourself?”

Both women took a seat in Pauline’s office. Pauline replied sincerely, “I’m splendid, dear.” She went on grinning. “Now, I have some good news for you about that vacation request you put in on Monday of this week.”

She cleared her throat and cheerfully said, “I know you put in for just a week of vacation, but since you have been working for this nursing home for over twenty years now, I’ve decided to give you an extra week off with pay. If you would like, you can start that vacation time today. Consider it a gift from me to you for your dedication and hard work.”

Pauline smiled widely and shook Renae’s hand. Renae happily accepted her offer. Before getting up to leave the office, she gratefully replied, “Thank you so much, Pauline. I really appreciate it.”

Things were going great for Renae at work, but home was a different story. She hadn't heard from Darnell since he'd fled the apartment after their argument five days ago.

Renae took the stairs down to her work locker and grabbed her umbrella for the rain that seemed to threaten every weekend lately. She exited the nursing home to find the rain coming down twice as hard as it had been when she came out on her break earlier. Renae doubled back and used the phone at the lobby's desk. She called a taxi, then took a seat in the lobby and waited for its arrival.

Renae watched the cab pull into the loop through the barrage of rain and walked swiftly out the door. She got in the taxi and told the driver, "675 Lake Avenue, please."

The driver nodded and pulled out of the parking lot. Once she got home, Renae felt a bit restless. She had been used to working through the evening, and on some occasions she worked through the whole morning. She decided to try and call her son. Maybe he would answer now, she thought hopefully.

She had tried calling him every day since that morning she had returned to find him gone, but he hadn't answered one of her calls yet. She picked up her house phone and dialed the numbers slowly, praying silently for Darnell to answer. The phone rang four times, and then went to the voice mail.

She strolled into her living room, plopped down on the old-fashioned sofa, and sighed heavily in distress. She now believed that she had been selfish that night in telling her son the old news just to prove a point. How could she have been so thoughtless? Now her son could be somewhere lying stiff, overdosed from pills. He had tried it before.

He had been lucky that the staff in the emergency room only had to pump his stomach. Thankfully, they had pulled him out of the dark hole that had nearly consumed him. After he gained his strength back, he was released from the hospital and was recommended counseling. But he would get upset whenever the doctor or Renae would mention it to him. Months later, Renae thought her son was fine. That was, up

until just recently. She thought sniffing behind that little whore's tail might be a sign that he wasn't actually over his depression.

She sat on the couch, beating herself up mentally for putting her feelings before her son's. Her eyes began to tear up; one tear rolled down her cheek like rain off the leaf of a tree.

She began to think about her only son as a kid growing up. He was such a good boy. He never gave her much trouble. He never hung out in the streets, and through all the tough times he had while in school, he still managed to graduate.

School in general had been a tough process for Darnell. He was constantly picked on and teased, so he got in fights, which landed him on a short yellow bus to and from school. He also had to eat his lunch inside a classroom with eight other children instead in the cafeteria with everyone else.

Over time, she noticed that her son showed more signs of aggression after being transferred to his new classroom setting.

Darnell was flattening so-called tough guy's noses and blackening the eyes of bullies during his freshman year at East High. His last few years went by more smoothly, as Darnell started working a job and learning advanced responsibilities and gaining independence. Now Renae just wished she would have taken him out of the city school district all together and got him a tutor. Maybe he would have had an easier time learning. He barely graduated at the age of nineteen, nearly twenty.

Her mind was a total wreck. The only good thing she had going for herself was a vacation, and even that seemed to be doomed because her dear son wouldn't be there. Still, seeing Darnell settling for the illusion of love was too much for her to cope with, for the simple fact she could sense the ultimate result.

Renae propped her feet up on her comfy sofa and continued anxiously considering her problem. It angered her that she had focused so much on her relationships rather than

on her child. She became embittered growing up as a woman recognized for her physical imperfections rather than for the merit of her kind soul. She couldn't remember a relationship in which she had not been used.

She felt fidgety and got up. She wandered into her kitchen to brew up some of that Eight O'clock coffee that she enjoyed drinking. A lone, salty tear rolled into the corner of her wide mouth. She wiped her cheek with a swift motion and sniffled, her anxiety rising.

She wished so badly that she could rewind her life and change the past. She would have spent a lot more time with Darnell instead of leaving him at his grandparents' house with that phony couple. After their cold-hearted son ran off with her money, they stop dealing with her and her baby and moved on to Cleveland.

Renaë wallowed in sorrow, feeling as if the burden of guilt was smothering her. Just three words: "I love you," she whispered, trying to control her self-contempt.

CHAPTER 14 - THE HEALING

Darnell was at work. Still in a state of shock from losing Sherise, he ignored his mother's call while working furiously, cleaning dishes as if he were born to do that job. He ran one set through the dishwasher and washed another bunch of dishes in the sink when the crowd got big in the place.

Jimmy had taken note that Darnell never let the restaurant run out of clean dishes on busy days, like his other three dishwashers did. To show his gratitude, he gave Darnell a fifty-cent raise in addition to overtime hours. None of the other dishwashers ever got overtime; in fact, Jimmy had so much confidence in Darnell that he let him work his shift alone. The other men had to partner up for most of the time on their shifts.

Jimmy, short, darkish man of Sicilian descent, snuck up on Darnell. "Hey kid, is everything alright?"

Darnell didn't get upset when the man startled him by coming up from behind. Jimmy kept his distance because of Darnell's foul body odor. One of the waitresses told Jimmy

how bad Darnell smelled when she passed by him while he was picking up a buss cart earlier.

Darnell turned from the sink, staring at Jimmy through his beady, confused eyes. Hoping his boss didn't come any closer, Darnell fibbed awkwardly, "Yeah, everything's good. Just moved into my own place. It's been kind of tough."

"I don't know kid. Lately you've been pretty distant. You got something on your mind Darnell?"

"Not really. Well, I just have a question."

"Well, spit it out."

"Jimmy, how do you know when a woman loves you?"

"That's kinda tough for me to answer Darnell. It's hard to tell what a woman is thinking. I've been with Sharon for twenty years and I still can't tell what she's thinking at times. Have you asked the young lady?"

"Yeah, she tells me that she does, but I don't think she shows it."

"Well do you love her?"

"Yeah."

"Well you know it's impossible to read minds. So, all I can tell you is to follow your heart."

Darnell thought about Jimmy's words for a few seconds then replied. "Thanks, Jimmy, that's what I'll do. I'll follow my heart."

"Okay, man, if you need to talk about anything, let me know pronto, all-righty kid? I'll grab your buss carts for you tonight, okay?"

Darnell nodded, and the man turned on his heel and walked off. He was glad that Jimmy wasn't his usual chummy self and kept his distance; normally, he would play fight with him. Darnell had grown accustomed to the friendly man's ways over the five-year period he'd been working at the diner. Sometimes he would ask the man random questions about love and marriage. Jimmy was the closest person Darnell had to a dad and a friend.

As he washed more dishes, he thought about the misery of the hotel room. It was eating at him daily. He hadn't washed in days. He had become a prisoner of the hotel room.

The room had become filthy, with fast food bags strewn on the floor and top of the dresser. All his bags were scattered randomly around the small room. When Darnell wasn't at work, he slept or stuffed his face with food all day, drearily watching movies that he had already seen dozens of times.

He kept the, "Do not disturb" sign on his door. He just lay there for hours in a deep daze, and occasionally he thought of ways to win Sherise back. He had forgiven her about the pictures and everything he had found in her phone. He just needed her back.

He wished he hadn't gotten so curious and played detective. He figured a guy like him was lucky to even get to share someone as beautiful as that girl, and he didn't have enough confidence in himself to look for another girlfriend. His mind was pretty much set on getting his woman back. His cell ring tone startled him. He answered a call from the 315 area code fanatically. "Hello?"

The voice shot through the receiver scornfully. "Yo, tell that stink pussy bitch I'm good, I know you probably fuckin' the hoe like everybody else. But, your boy right here good. I'm straight on that fuckin skank."

Darnell hissed, "Who the fuck is this?"

"It don't matter who this is," the voice said. Then continued, "But your bitch, or whoever she is to you, ain't shit. I advise you to leave the whore alone too." The caller hung up after a snicker.

On the other end of the line, Chauncey nearly died laughing at the fact that he had beaten the odds and come back from his injury. And he would rub it in Sherise's face. Even if he had to do it through the phone numbers he had stolen out of her phone one night. He never did trust the girl.

After the prank call riled him up, Darnell finished the mound of dishes by hand. A small voice in his head told him that the call pertained to Sherise, but he ignored it and figured the guy just had the wrong number. He decided that he would ask Jimmy if he could take a fifteen-minute break. It would be his first break of the night. He usually took three to five breaks altogether. He tried to space his breaks out as

much as possible, especially for the nights that he worked a straight fourteen-hour shift.

After getting the go-ahead from Jimmy, Darnell hung up his apron on the coat hook near the rear exit of the diner and made his way around the building and across the street. Once the warm summer breeze hit his face, he pulled out his phone and tried to give Sherise a call.

He blocked his number so she wouldn't ignore the call, but then he remembered that this was usually the time she claimed to be at work, so he hung the phone up in the middle of a ring. He called Marketplace Mall and asked for her at the security desk. The guy working security was nice enough to check the employee log, only to tell Darnell that there was no such person employed in the mall.

He hung up feeling lost and crossed the busy street over to the Family Dollar store in the plaza. He knew they sold stuff like deodorant and toothpaste, which he desperately needed. He knew he still had these items at his mother's house, but he was still not ready to face her.

He returned to the diner and gave Jimmy the stuff that he'd bought from Family Dollar to put away safe in his office. Darnell put his apron back on and started running a new stack of dishes through the machine. He scrubbed the food-encrusted plates with a scouring pad before sending them through the dishwasher.

From the front of Jimmy's place, the newly hired waitress, Kamina, slowly worked her way back to where Darnell was washing dishes and said politely, "We need more steak knives when you get a chance, mister."

Kamina had only gone back there because Sharon, Jimmy's wife, made her go. All the other waitresses had laughed and joked and told Sharon to go back there with the stinking dishwasher; instead, she sent the new girl.

Darnell answered without bothering to turn to see who asked. "Okay, one second. Let me get them together. There are some going through the rinse right now."

The small, shapely chocolate girl smiled graciously at his back and strode off without reply. Before she got out of

sight, he was finished racking at least a dozen steak knives. Darnell caught her just before she turned the corner.

“Excuse me, um, can you take them up front for me please?” Without getting a reply, he stepped up quickly and sat the carrier full of knives on the slicing table a few feet away from him. Far enough away that he reasoned the girl wouldn’t be able to smell his offensive odor.

Kamina retraced her steps quickly and grabbed the carrier, flashing a pearly toothed smile. She introduced herself to the man for the first time. Her voice was heavy for such a small woman. She spoke politely, “I never got a chance to really meet you. Hello, I’m Kamina.”

She tried to move in closer to shake his hand, but he stepped back, almost bumping into the sink. He managed to stutter, “Oh, uh, yeah hi ,I’m Da...Darnell. Nice to meet you.” Before Kamina could respond, Sharon yelled to the back, “Can we get a move on those steak knives, please?”

Kamina smiled at Darnell, then hustled her slight frame back to the front of the place with the knives. Darnell racked more silverware, thinking about how Kamina was so polite to him. She wasn’t like most girls that he came across. She seemed to see right through his homely looks. The only other person that he could remember looking at him in that manner was his mother. Sherise didn’t even look at him that way.

He wanted to get to know the girl better, but he couldn’t right now, especially not smelling musty. Darnell began to smile genuinely, something he hadn’t done in days. Besides worrying about keeping some distance between him and the other employees, the rest of the night went by easily. A few times during his shift, Darnell had tried to wash up in the bathroom, but it didn’t do any good. The smell still stuck to him.

By 7:00 the next morning, he was good and ready to go back to the motel room; work had tired him out. Waiting at the bus stop for the 24 Market Place bus to arrive, he remembered that guy Ross he had talked to about the place that he might be leasing. He had to get ready for the appointment that he’d set up during the week. He was going

to see a one-bedroom loft on State Street downtown. He knew it would be rough to hold down the lease if any unanticipated expenses came along, but he wanted to impress Sherise.

He didn't want to go to his appointment looking a mess, so he planned to go to the barbershop after he showered.

By the time he had left the motel, still fatigued from a long night's work, it was half past eight. The scorching sun was already beating down on him. He guessed that by the time he made it to Thurston Avenue, the barbershop would be open. Darnell was feeling fresh after taking a shower. He was glad to get rid of the funky odor that had nearly smothered him.

When he made it to the shop, the place was still closed. So just to kill some time until they opened, he decided to cross the street over to the convenience store to see if they had an ATM. It had been awhile, and he wanted to check his bank balance. He waited until the line of cars went past him, and then dashed across the street.

Entering the store, he spotted the ATM machine over in a corner. He strolled to the machine and removed his wallet from the back pocket of his jean shorts and slid his bank card out. He swiped it through the scanner, typed in his pin, and looked at his receipt. For the first time since he had met Sherise, he realized how much his savings were dwindling.

The receipt showed that Darnell had just over twelve thousand dollars, and the majority of that he had saved just that year from all the overtime that he'd been getting. He shook his head slowly, staring at the small piece of paper and wishing that he hadn't decided to check his balance.

He lifted bulging eyes to see a few young men lifting the security shaft of the barbershop. He strode to the back of the store and grabbed two blue quarter waters from the cooler and a bag of barbecue pork skins. On his way past the counter, he tossed a one-dollar bill to the big, bearded Arab man and hurried out the door and across the street. He wasn't sure if all the guys he had seen opening the place were

cutting, and he didn't want anyone else to show up and take the first spot.

Inside, Darnell waited patiently for the men to get ready. Once they were done setting up their trimmers and clippers, the men procrastinated a bit. The men watched Darnell suspiciously, moving slower than they normally would have. They were unsure about this beady-eyed character.

They never really had any customers in so early, unless it happened to be a regular who called in ahead of time. Darnell stared back at the barbers in amusement as the three looked confused about who would cut his hair. Neither man wanted to show greed in front of the owner, so they let the opportunity pass.

The owner, a huskily built, brown-skinned man spoke up cool and friendly. "Hey, what's up player? Ya waitin' on Andre?"

Darnell didn't know who Andre was. He answered perplexedly, "Andre? No ... I just want a cut."

"Oh, okay then, come on and have a seat here. I can hook you up." The other two barbers sat in their seats and watched the man take the money from right under their noses. They both shared the same thought: they should have just taken the customer. They ended up paying the owner at the end of the day anyhow. The owner placidly asked Darnell, "What's your name, player?" Darnell told him as he sat down on the stool.

"Teddy," the barber said, shaking Darnell's hand.

"This is my place here."

Giving Darnell one of his cards, he asked, "So how you want it, player?"

"Just take it down to about a one, and can you get my face, too?" Darnell requested easily. Teddy almost talked his ear off while cutting his hair. At some point, Darnell fell asleep on the man. Teddy laughed at him slipping off and just continued talking. Eventually he did manage to make Darnell crack a smile or two, especially when he told his string of non-stop ghetto fables.

What a character! Darnell thought, rising from the seat. He paid the man with a smile. He peered in the mirror behind Teddy and saw the new him. Teddy grinned slightly; he believed the hair cut made the kid look at least five times better. Darnell left the place with a sense of pride, feeling much better than when he'd come in. It had been months since the last time he'd experienced the relaxed surroundings of one of the coolest hood establishments around: the barbershop

CHAPTER 15 - IDEAL WIFE

Darnell contently made his way up Thurston Avenue. He spotted a white Navigator turning from Marlborough Road. He knew it looked familiar to him. The driver slowed down while passing and stared at him with a kind smile.

Tasha yelled from her truck excitedly in a thick southern drawl, “Hi, there, Darnell. I thought that was you.” Her rosy cheeks and soft, beautiful skin shone. Darnell recognized the girl and waved. He had met her only a few times, but they always got along better than he and Sherise’s other homegirls. He had to think a second before he remembered her name. He said, serenely, “What up, Tasha? That’s your name, right?” Tasha’s balmy lips curved into a smile. “Yeah, that’s my name.”

She continued talking from inside her ride. “Yeah, you’re out pretty early for a Saturday morning, Darnell.” She pulled the dazzling truck to a complete stop on the side of the curb.

“Yeah, I just got a haircut, and now I’m on my way to see a rental agent; I’m trying to rent a loft downtown.”

“Do you need a ride? I can take you. I ain’t doing much today.”

Tasha got out of the truck walked toward Darnell; she hugged him like she had known him for years. He responded by hugging her back, shocked that she hugged him at all. Darnell’s mind and senses overwhelmed by the full-figured woman’s perfume. He almost felt drunk.

Goose bumps budded on the back of his neck when she pressed her bosom against his chest. Darnell was in Heaven. She finally pulled away from the long hug and smiled at him. she headed back around to the driver seat, giving him eyes that said, “come on.”

He broke out of his stupor sat down on the plush leather seats of her machine. She glanced flirtingly over at Darnell before she pulled off into traffic. She noticed him smiling, and she was proud of it. She liked for him to feel good about himself.

Since the first time she met Darnell through her whorish so-called friend, she always thought that the woman did Darnell wrong. She just didn’t understand the crazy girl. She thought to herself, bewildered, *Sherise has a good man, maybe not be the greatest looking specimen in the world, and she is throwing it all away.*

Tasha had been hoping for a decent boyfriend ever since she graduated from high school down south, but only ended up stumbling across a couple of losers. Neither of her relationships had lasted past two months because the men were too impatient to wait on the woman to have sex with them. At twenty-one, Tasha was still a virgin.

Breaking the short silence, Darnell asked, “So, what are you doing out so early?”

Tasha replied softly, “Oh I’m just leavin’ my auntie’s house. She lives in the nineteenth ward over there. I go see her every Saturday.”

Darnell smiled at the lovely young lady. “That’s cool. So, you’re an early bird?”

Tasha replied, “yeah, believe it or not, I’ve been up since six this mornin’. I got to my auntie’s house at 7:30; been there ever since.”

Darnell wore a relaxed face while listening to the woman talk about her day. Sherise had escaped his mind temporarily. Then, curiosity struck. “Have you seen Reesie around?” Darnell asked, trying to sound casual.

“Naw, not since last Sunday evenin’.”

“Oh okay, I was just wondering, because she wasn’t answering her phone for me for the past few days.” he said, hoping the girl would offer information.”

Tasha replied quickly, “We ain’t as close as you think, Darnell. We go out from time to time, but we’re really not that close.”

Darnell played stupid. “Oh, really? I didn’t know that?”

He knew that Sherise really had no friends at all. Except for Fatima. She talked about most of the females she hung out with from time to time like they were dogs.

“Darnell how long have you and Sherise been dating?”

“For two years.”

“Do you love her?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Some girls are so lucky. I hope I can find a man as nice as you.”

“One day you will Tasha. You’re a sweet girl.”

“I sure hope so,” She replied with a half smile. As Tasha neared downtown, she changed the subject. “So, what time is your appointment?”

“ten o’ clock,” he answered.

Tasha checked the time on her digital stereo. “It’s around that time now.”

The clock read 9:51 PM when she made a left off West Main onto State. A few blocks up the street, Darnell pointed out a building located two parking lots away from a bar and grill. The building was where the lofts were located; the building was immaculate and looked new. Tasha pulled slowly to the curb. She parked and sat there as if she was going to wait.

Tasha's soft, ebony eyes scrutinized the building. "Those places cost a lot?"

Darnell replied, "Yeah, about a grand a month or more."

"So you gonna be living here all by yourself?"

"I'm not sure yet."

"Well I hope everything works out for you." She smiled proudly at the idea that was doing something positive for himself. He was already planning to catch the bus, so he saw no reason to hold her up. "Thanks for the ride."

"You're welcome,"

He offered her a ten spot for gas as he was getting out of the truck, but she kept turning the money down. He managed to talk her in to keeping the money and waved goodbye.

"Bye Darnell, I'll see ya later."

Darnell blushed, "Okay, see ya. Thanks again, Tasha."

She drove off, daydreaming. She thought about Darnell's issues with Sherise. She wanted to tell him that Sherise was no good for him, and he should be really glad that it was over. She knew how the woman got down, but she decided it wouldn't be a good idea to put herself in the middle of the whole thing.

What if she had a man like Darnell? He just seemed so loving and caring. The only thing that was in her way was the fact that Darnell had just been in a long, sour relationship with Sherise. She most certainly didn't want to offend Sherise or be a rebound for Darnell.

Back on State Street, Darnell's self-esteem was high and mighty for a change. At that moment, he felt like a million dollars had fallen onto his lap out of the clear, blue sky. Tasha made him feel good. He smiled unconsciously while waiting for the leasing agent to arrive. He thought about Tasha for a minute. Throughout all the harsh realities of his life, she still was able to make him feel a sense of self-pride and worthiness.

In minutes, a newer model Silverado pickup truck pulled up to the curb. Darnell figured that this was the guy he

was waiting for. The driver of the truck parked in front of the other automobiles along the side of the street. The young, white guy stepped out of the truck. He briefly stood there, scanning the insides of all the other cars that were around. He expected the guy that he was meeting to be in a nice vehicle of some type. After realizing all the cars were empty, he turned his attention to Darnell; he had seen him standing there the moment he pulled up. He studied the short, black man's face. "Hey, your name wouldn't happen to be Darnell, would it?"

"Yeah, that's me," Darnell replied as the man stepped up on the sidewalk and shook his hand.

"Hello, I'm Ross," the man said, strutting toward the back driveway. It was shaped like a crescent and twisted into a pathway that led to the rear door of the place.

Ross unlocked the door and let Darnell go in first. He told Darnell that he would be showing him a first floor loft, which was all he had available. Darnell was fine with that, because he would have a small two-step porch that led directly to his door. Darnell stopped in his tracks a few feet after entering and stared in complete awe at the crib's magnificent features. The interior had a highly distinguished look about it. The loft had high, slanted ceilings of cherry wood. The walls and shiny, coated floors matched the ceiling.

"So, Darnell, what do you do for a living?" Ross asked. "Wash dishes," Darnell uttered shamefully.

Ross was taken aback by Darnell's response, but he moved along with the interview. Darnell gazed around in astonishment at the size of the place. He had never seen the inside of a loft before. Judging it from the outside, he thought the place would have been tiny.

The windows were huge and new, and they provided a stunning view of High Falls. Darnell walked further into the place and glanced inside the huge bedroom, which was almost twice the size of his room at his mother's apartment. Ross followed closely behind him as he strolled to the left of the bedroom and spotted the eat-in kitchen. It had a small

island counter space with a built in dishwasher. It was already furnished with an expensive electric stove and refrigerator. It was about the same size as his mother's kitchen.

Ross grabbed Darnell's attention when he suddenly asked a question that he already knew the answer to. "So, do you like what you see so far?"

Darnell nodded his head up and down and replied, "Yeah, its really nice man. I really like it."

The sleepiness that had engulfed him after work retreated at the excitement of seeing the place. Darnell couldn't stop fantasizing when Ross went into details about the rest of the place.

Ross pointed back toward another room. "The bathroom is off of the bedroom. You wanna take a look at it?"

Darnell, impressed with the other areas of the house declined. "I'm not even going to bother."

Ross gave a look of surprise. Darnell continued stuttering at the possibility of getting the place. "I re...re...really like it. Man. I can give you whatever you need to get this place."

Ross smiled at Darnell, admiring his eagerness. "Okay, you and I can get started on the paperwork. If you're credit checks out and your job reference is good, we can get you in here today, my friend."

Darnell smiled widely revealing a small set of ridged teeth. He felt proud at the idea of having his own spot for once. It made him feel like a grown man. Darnell was so happy, he nodded his head in response to most of the man's questions; he barely said a word.

He filled out the application on the counter space in the kitchen and gave it to Ross.

Ross examined the application. "Mr. Wilkinson, I want you to know, if you weren't already aware, that the monthly payment for this place is one thousand dollars and requires a security deposit."

He stopped, waiting to see if he would get any reaction from Darnell. Ross continued, "Can you handle that, Mr. Wilkinson?"

Darnell, without much thought, blurted, "Yeah, I can cover that." As an afterthought, he said, "I can pay security and three months in advance."

Ross's heart fluttered at the announcement. He thought, *with that offer, I'll make sure the kid definitely gets the place, even if I have to spice up his application.* He could pocket two grand from the payment and pay the company later; boy, how he loved his job.

"Okay, Mr. Wilkinson, I'll see you later around four o'clock, if that's okay with you."

"What? Did I get the place already or something?"

"Well let's just say I'll be rooting for you, Mr. Wilkinson."

Darnell stared at the place once more before following Ross toward the door. Ross asked Darnell if he wanted to see the other rooms once more. He turned down the tour of the bathroom and the small office again. It didn't matter to Ross; He was happy. The quicker he got the paperwork rolling, the quicker he could get the cash.

Ross almost forgot to lock up the place because he was trying to get to his truck so fast. He looked over his shoulder and said, "four o'clock, Mr. Wilkinson."

Darnell replied, happily, "Yeah, for sure, I'll be here." The man climbed into his big truck and zoomed off. He couldn't make it back to his office fast enough. Darnell made his way back to the Motel Six on a city bus. Sherise would love the place once she saw it, he thought graciously. She always had told him that her next move would be to a loft.

CHAPTER 16 - YOU GOT THE NERVE!

A week had passed since Darnell had moved into his new place. He moved out of the miserable hotel room the same day Ross gave him the keys to the loft. A couple of days later, on Monday, he wandered into one of the classy furniture spots near his job. Darnell picked out a casual, tan, leather sectional that Sherise had showed him in a sales ad months ago.

He also picked out a glass coffee table with wooden legs. He imagined how the furniture would complement the glossy wood that surrounded the insides of the loft. He walked further into the store and spotted a couple of nice, expensive glass end tables for the lamps he was buying. Darnell didn't need anything for his kitchen. Ross had been so excited about the transaction that he let Darnell have a nice dinette set that he had kept in storage for over a year. The previous tenants had left it behind. It was an extremely heavy duty and expensive.

Ross explained to Darnell that he had no clue why the couple left it behind. Darnell was pleased with the set. Ross joked as they moved it, telling Darnell that it was a housewarming gift from him.

On Tuesday, Darnell went to Wal-Mart when he woke up in the afternoon. He bought a bunch of small items that he needed for his personal use. He picked up everything from air fresheners to laundry detergent; he cheerily examined nearly every aisle in the place. He didn't have to work that evening. He decided that he would give his pad a thorough cleaning, even though the spotless house barely needed it.

By the time Wednesday came, his crib had had really come together. He hung up all the pictures in his living room and bedroom. Most of the portraits were of Sherise; one of them was a picture of his mother.

Thursday and Friday passed by quickly for Darnell. In a forty-eight hour span, he managed to work a total of twenty-eight hours. He was beat when he made it home Saturday morning. He gazed around the place as if it were the first time he had been in it. It still hadn't sunken in that the crib was his.

He thought about how happy Sherise would be once she saw the place. His mother would be happy too, he thought. Then, the harsh reality crawled into his mind that it had been nearly two weeks since he talked to Renae and Sherise. He had tried calling Sherise on several occasions during the past two weeks. She just let the calls go to her voicemail; the message was new. In her message, Sherise stated, in a serious tone, "Hello, this is Reesie. I missed your call for a reason. I must be busy handlin' mine. For all you scrubs that's trying to holler, get your paper right. For all you fronting bitches, kick rocks; leave it."

Darnell ignored the new lingo on her greeting and hung up every time. A few times, he wondered if she was directing any of her foul wordplay toward him. It didn't really matter; he would still pursue the woman relentlessly. He had even gone up to Marketplace Mall before his shift the day before. There was no sign of the woman at the place. He had

checked every clothing store in the mall and asked them if a Sherise Fanari worked there. All he received were blank expressions and negative responses.

Renae stayed on his mind all Friday night while he was at work. Darnell promised himself that he would call his mother that day and finally apologize for the way he talked to her that unforgettable night. However, there was no way that he'd tell Renae she'd been right about Sherise.

Darnell took a shower, got dressed in some basketball shorts and a T-shirt, and laid on his couch less than an hour after getting in. Out of thin air, an idea popped in his sleepy mind about how he would create time with Sherise. He would leave her a message and offer some crazy amount for gas money to take him to Mattress city or somewhere else. That, and the mention of his crib, would surely entice her to call him back. For a change, he went to sleep easily that Saturday morning.

* * * *

Sherise sat at her computer surfing MySpace and Facebook while half-listening to the sounds of Nikki Minaj pump from her small computer speakers. She had fallen asleep early the night before, which caused her to wake up at 5 AM.

She was starting to feel that sense of loneliness again. While clicking on profiles, she thought about how school was starting back soon. Sherise wanted a new look. She looked at her microbraids in the reflection from the nightstand mirror. Then, the idea struck her like lightning; she would take them out. They had been in her hair for a couple of months, but her natural hair was long and beautiful.

Since Fatima and Tasha left early Sunday evening, Sherise was spending most of her time alone. She hadn't put much thought into the whole issue with Darnell. She knew she had the man on deck whenever she needed him. She just

would take her time in dealing with him. She had seen the rage in his eyes the day he came over to her apartment, and she wasn't sure what he was capable of.

She had been ignoring all of Darnell's calls. She woke up that Saturday morning feeling like it was her against the world. Her money was getting tight, which forced her to pick up her phone. She tried to call Lux for some deep-dick sex to calm her worries and make a few dollars. To her surprise, he hadn't gotten back to her yet. The only people that tried to call her during her two weeks of solitude were Darnell, Chauncey, and Ronnie.

Ronnie was some old black man missing half of his teeth who lived a couple of blocks away from Sherise. He would spend at least half of his Social Security check on the young, beautiful woman. This would result in the elderly fool falling behind on his rent. Sherise usually would take him up on his offers. It was four hundred dollars whenever she hung out with Ronnie. The man would climax in a matter of three minutes and be to limp to perform any further.

Whenever this happened, she would take her money and tell the man to call her when he got himself right. Ronnie would call, but Sherise would ignore the old guy's calls until she knew it was time for his next check to come.

Last night she had almost given into weakness and called Fatima, but her stubborn outlook wouldn't allow her to. She wondered what the girl was up to, but she didn't want to give in and call, squashing all the tension.

Sherise closed the MySpace window on her monitor and slid her ghetto booty out of the swivel chair. The time had passed by fast, and the only sure plan she had was to call up her cousin Vinita to help her take out her micros. Then, she could get a new style this week.

As she undressed in the bathroom for a quick shower, she reflected on the things she wanted to buy before her second year of college started in two weeks. For one, she wanted to get a new car before her birthday in November. Plus, she wanted to get some upgraded jewelry and a bunch of new gear before her first day back. At the rate she was

going, the dream of getting new jewelry and a car would remain just a dream. Most of the time, Sherise barely cleared enough money for her bills and expensive habits. After all her spending, she would usually be left with a few odd hundred dollar bills. It definitely wasn't enough to cover the cost of a new Acura RL, let alone a new bracelet. The reality of her situation caused her crafty mind to conjure up ways to strike it rich. Why couldn't she find an old, rich man to marry? As long as the paperwork was done right, she could wait for him to die and get all the money afterwards.

The distant sound of her new ringtone interrupted her daydreaming. The Miss Independent ringtone came to a stop. Sherise ignored the call and continued on with her thoughts of conquering the materialistic world that she lived in. She slipped into the hot, spraying water and ignored the ringtone for a second time. Sherise got excited as the unforgettable faces of her various sexual encounters flashed in her mind. She pleased herself then showered as usual.

* * * *

Fatima hung her phone up with a grin. She had dropped a touchy-feely message on her Reesie's phone with an invitation to go out that night. She also apologized for letting Darnell in the day he came over. Fatima made sure not to leave out the fact that she had seen Tasha, who had excitedly told her how she had seen Darnell and given him a ride. She knew the information would get under Sherise's skin.

Fatima was on her front porch early that morning waiting to see her new Hispanic girlfriend Anna come strolling down the street from her rugged tenement over the corner store on Jefferson and Tremont. From a half block away, she gawked at the dainty, tanned girl exiting through the door of her building. She was as tall as Fatima and just as sexy. Anna's huge, eyes cautiously examined each side of the hustler-filled avenue. She was new to the street and the only person she knew was the Fatima. The few hustlers on

the block glanced at Anna while they scrambled for the possible customers that were out and about.

A young, short, dark-skinned boy with a chunky gold chain yelled at Anna just before she reached Fatima. “Hey, mami! Yo, let me holla atcha real quick!”

The young boy glimpsed further down the street and saw the fine, boyish bitch that always had something smart to say to him or his crew. He would have walked over to Anna, but he knew Fatima was bound to pop shit if he did. Fatima turned a glare on the young boy that told him to get the fuck away. The boy turned around and walked off mumbling.

Fatima and Anna walked inside the two-bedroom house that Fatima shared with her brother. Fatima’s half of the house was barely furnished, but she kept it up the best she could.

Reggie, tall and dark as charcoal, sat on the living room sofa playing a videogame. He glanced from the TV screen to the front door as his sister and her new girlfriend entered. Fatima was surprised to see Reggie; he was usually gone for days at a time. Today, however, he was there, big and bold.

Reggie asked, with a grin, “Hey, what’s your name mami?”

Anna stood there like a mannequin. Fatima snapped, “None of your business, lil’ nigga!”

Reggie responded, “You need to pass her to me and stop cuffin’.”

“Reggie, get a life.”

“I got a life Fatima. You need a boyfriend.” Reggie laughed.

“Shut up son. You just mad ‘cause you ain’t got no girl.”

“That’s what you think. C’mere mami lets go somewhere and get to know each other.”

Fatima shook her head and waved her brother off when he stood up to greet the girl. She was eager to pick the young girl’s brain. She grabbed Anna’s wrist and hurried away

from Reggie. He pointed and laughed loudly while his older sister bolted up the stairs with the girl

Still chuckling, Reggie shouted, "I'll bag her, watch and see!"

Fatima glared back protectively. He examined the shapely chick's booty and headed back toward the sofa. He would damn sure try to hit it, he thought to himself.

Upstairs, Fatima ran down her game plan to the naive girl. Anna sat on the edge of the bed, listening to Fatima like she was five years old. She didn't take her wide eyes off the dark-faced woman while she explained to her how she could make tons of money just by having sex with some dope boy.

Fatima persuasively asked, "Is four hundred enough?"

Anna shot her eyes up and around and focused them back on the Fatima. She whistled excitedly and said, "Hell yeah, you know it girl!"

Then, she followed her answer up with a question. "Are you going to be there, Fatima?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world."

Anna was in high spirits about the cash. She was just a sixteen-year-old kid; four hundred dollars was plenty. Fatima gently stroked the young girl's soft cheek. "Okay, I'm going to try to set this shit up, hopefully tonight. Just be ready. Don't stunt either."

Anna, too excited to even dream of missing out on the action, replied, in a frenzy, "Oh no, I can really use four hundred dollars! I'll be there."

"Make sure you wear something hot. I want you to look good for this nigga."

"Okay, I should have something at my mom's house."

Fatima smirked and said, "Good, now that that's settled, what's up for now? You wanna smoke some piff?"

Anna nodded her head, and Fatima began to break up buds of weed on a CD case that was on top of her stereo. Meeting the hot, young girl a couple weekends ago was a blessing to Fatima. She decided to put the young girl to work and pose as a pimp, collecting the money that Anna would have sex for.

Lux would be her first client. She had stolen his number out of Sherise's phone when they were at the Hyatt. She thought that Sherise was a stone cold fool to have let her get close to a client like Lux.

The way Fatima had it figured, Lux was straight paper. She would make sure to cash in on the dollars the man spent. She smiled inside as she lit up her trees. She knew he was certainly going to love this young bitch.

* * * *

Tasha sung along to Keisha Cole's "Sent from Heaven" while she drove up Hudson Avenue. It was late Saturday morning and she was going to her Aunt Stella's crib across town. She had planned on taking the old lady out. Tasha noticed that it was rare for the elderly woman to make it out the confines of her home. She wanted to get the lady out of the house for some fresh air. Her phone rang shrilly over the music in the truck. She pressed the talk button and adjusted her earpiece. She answered in a southern drawl, "Hello."

The voice exploded on the other end. "Yo bitch, what's really good with you?"

Tasha was confused. She didn't even recognize the voice on the other end. She replied, befuddled, "Huh, who is this?"

Sherise snarled, "Bitch, you know who this is!"

Tasha replied, still unsure, "Girl, you know I don't be playin' like that."

Sherise flipped out. "Bitch, are you stupid or something? I'm not playing with your ass. Why you driving my man around? And where the fuck did y'all even link up at? Are you fuckin' him?"

She started throwing angry questions at Tasha nonstop. Tasha finally got a chance to speak when the crazed chick slowed down. She had plenty of time to prepare her words while Sherise ranted. Controlling her anger, Tasha snarled and replied, "Listen here. First of all, I ain't no bitch.

Secondly, last I heard, Darnell weren't none of yours. So, why you callin' me with all that foolish mess! All I did was give him a damn ride."

Sherise growled angrily, "Bitch, you got the nerve! Foolish mess. Bitch, learn how to talk first..."

Those were the last words she said before the phone went silent in her ear. Sherise became furious when she realized that Tasha had hung up on her. She called Tasha back to continue her verbal onslaught. When she realized that Tasha wasn't going to answer, she left idle threats on the woman's voice mail.

In her first message, she said, "Bitch, when I see your fat ass, it's on."

In her second message, she said, even angrier, "Bitch, why you hang up? You scared? When I see you, it's on. Bitches wanna try and holla at people's dudes and shit. Okay, bitch. Okay!"

In her third message, she ranted, "You slow bitch, you better watch your back!"

Tasha had to pull her ride over on the side of the street before she made it to Stella's house. She listened to the messages the crazy girl left with a little fear. Her nerves were bad from the exchange on the phone and her legs trembled. She knew now that she had made a big mistake by telling Fatima about that day with Darnell.

She really didn't want any drama with Sherise. However, if that was what she wanted, then that's what she would get, Tasha thought nervously. Her chest rose and fell; she was breathing hard from a combination of built up fury and agitation.

She was fed up with the women. She would just have to cut them off. She had come to the conclusion that both Fatima and Sherise were too much of a headache. She had better things to do with her life than playing kid's games. She sat parked in front of the corner store on Hudson Avenue and Dash Street for a few moments. Then, after relaxing a bit, she continued to her aunt's crib.

Sherise arrived at her cousin's apartment shortly after her joust with Tasha. She strutted up to the left side of double apartment on Avenue D and pounded on the door. She heard Vinita's yell through the thin door. "Who the fuck is it?"

Sherise, still infuriated, stayed silent until the woman opened the door. Vinita, light-skinned and thickly built, swung the door open wildly and fixed her eagle eyes on her younger cousin. "Damn, Reesie, you trying to break this man's door? You knocking like the police or some shit."

Sherise disregarded the comment as the woman moved to the side to let her in. Vinita was the type of chick who was mad 24/7. She had a gang of kids, all from different daddies. The three youngest were two, three, and four years old. Vinita's two oldest girls stayed gone most of the time.

Vinita yelled, threatening the three little ones who were zipping up and down the stairs chasing one another, hitting and playing as loud as they could. "Y'all better go sit y'all little asses down somewhere!"

She would put up with the noise until she couldn't stand it. Then, eventually, she would start disciplining with a leather belt that she kept at the ready. The three little wild ones, two boys and a girl, half-ignored the lady and took their party upstairs. Sherise took a seat at the kitchen table where Vinita had been sitting with her friend named Dred. She apologized to Vinita, "My bad about the door, couso this bitch just got me heated."

Vinita asked enthusiastically, "What bitch?"

The volume of Sherise's voice rose. "That little, fat bitch Tasha. You know, the one who was at my crib for the cookout?"

Vinita beamed as Sherise described the drama, "Oh yeah? What's good, little cuz? You wanna bang that bitch out. I never did like that fat bitch. She thinks she's all that with that raggedy ass truck."

Sherise explained the situation to Vinita as if Tasha had done something terrible. The truth, however, was that Sherise just didn't like the girl. Tasha had too much confidence for Sherise, and she wanted to be the strongest bitch among her small group of friends.

"I know I'll see the geechy bitch again. She'll slip up," Sherise said, angrily.

Vinita was ready for action now. She would find a babysitter for the little ones. All Sherise had to do was give her the word.

"Yo, make sure I'm with you or call me and come scoop me when you see that bitch little cuz. I've been wanting to beat a bitch's ass."

Dred stayed silent while the women talked. He dumped a bag of weed onto the glass table and began to break up the buds. He periodically laughed at the women's comments.

There was a loud thump above all their heads from upstairs. Vinita yelled, "Good, you little muthafuckas, I hope you broke your ass bone!"

The three year old came down the stairs crying. He was holding the side of his head. Vinita already knew what happened; it happened every day. She yelled back up the stairs to the four year old, "Malik, Get your big-headed ass down stairs right now!"

The little round-headed boy showed up at his mother's request, looking like he knew the drill. Vinita smacked him in the back of head open-handed. "Now go sit your monkey ass down somewhere, you bad little muthafucka!"

Malik rubbed his head and sat down hard on the floor, glaring wickedly at his mother. Luckily for him, she wasn't looking; she would have smacked his face for the evil eyes that he gave her. Vinita calmed herself down and said, "Okay, let's get started on those braids. It's going to take all day and, probably, some of tomorrow with these little bad ass niggas around here."

Sherise asked, "Where we gonna do this? In the living room or in here?"

Vinita replied irritably, “The kitchen is good, just go grab one of the pillows from the couch. Yo Dred, spark up.” Vinita noticed that Dred had finished rolling the blunt. Suddenly, Vinita got up from her chair and strolled toward her front room. She called out, “Reesie, come here, I gotta ask you something real quick, couso.”

Sherise sat the three-year-old boy down and followed her cousin into the room. She sighed deeply; she already knew what Vinita was going to ask her.

“What’s up V?” She asked wearily.

“Girl, did you take care of that little thing we were talking about last month.”

Sherise replied heatedly, “Yes, I did V. I can’t have a baby right now, especially by Darnell’s ass. I should have never told you that I was pregnant, now you wanna try and be my mama. FYI, I got him to pay for the abortion last month.”

Vinita ignored her little cousin’s attitude. “Did he know what the money was for?”

Sherise answered, flustered, “No. His stupid ass didn’t even know I was pregnant.”

Vinita put a finger to her own mouth. “Shh, are you trying to let Dred know all your business.”

Sherise rolled her eyes. “I’m good, couso, but thanks for looking out. I’m all grown up, in case you didn’t notice. I pretty much got it figured out.”

“I’m glad you’re smart Reesie because a lot of these little girls think that taking care of a child is easy.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not one of those little dumb bitches. I got plans and they don’t include gettin’ knocked up and being on welfare.”

“Well I just don’t want you to end up like me. I hope you follow your plans through,” Vinita replied.

I surely won’t have to worry about ending up like you, Sherise thought bitterly. She smiled at her cousin and said, “Okay, V. Cool, thanks again. Let’s get started on these old ass braids.”

Sherise was trying to keep the abortion off of her mind. Her cousin was the only one she had told about it. To be totally honest, Sherise didn't know whose baby she aborted. It could have been Darnell's, Chauncey's, Tyshawn's, or, possibly, even old man Ronnie's.

As odd as it was, Vinita gave good advice easily, but she never seemed to do the right thing for herself. They got high while taking the micros out and talked about what they would do to Tasha when they saw her. Sherise pumped her cousin up to the fullest that day.

CHAPTER 17 - JEALOUS GIRL

The rain poured down, heavily flooding the city streets on this particular Sunday afternoon. Sherise zipped her Accord through titanic puddles as she wove her way through traffic. She could barely see the road the rain was coming down so fast and hard; the wipers couldn't keep up with the deluge.

As she drove, Sherise was thinking about how Darnell came up with the money for a loft. She didn't believe the ugly fool when he left the message on her phone. She knew it was a desperate ploy to get her to talk to him. In the message, he told her that he would give her one hundred dollars to take him to get a bedroom set. What a fuckin' idiot, she thought coldly.

The mention of money got the wind behind Sherise's back—that and the supposedly hot crib Darnell had just leased. She couldn't wait to see it. Darnell's value to Sherise had increased since she heard about his swank digs and the new, elegant furniture that he'd just copped. She had Darnell wrapped around her little finger, and now she would have

access to one of the newly built pads that sat downtown amongst all the businessmen and women of the city.

She hadn't thought that Darnell was capable of such a bold move; he just seemed too damn dumb, she reasoned. She turned the corner fast onto Mt. Hope off the Ford Street Bridge. She was racing to Darnell's job to pick up the money he promised her.

Sherise had lied and told Darnell that she was sorry for everything that had happened. She told him what he wanted to hear by saying she was drunk and that it only happened once with the other man. She also easily convinced him that he needed to get better in bed to keep her satisfied. Darnell foolishly agreed and swore that he would try harder if that's what it took to keep her. He was so happy she returned his call that he promised to give her some extra dough on top of the one hundred for giving him a ride.

He told her that he needed to talk to her about something that was very important. They agreed that they would go to get a bed that Monday morning when they woke up together at "their" new place, and then Sherise promised that they could spend the rest of the day together. He could get one of the other dishwashers to cover for him if missing a day of work came into play.

These developments had taken Darnell by surprise. Sherise seemed to be more into him now than she'd ever been. She had cussed him out briefly over the phone about accepting a ride from Tasha. Darnell just listened to his wifey pop shit to him about what she would do if it happened again. At the other end of the line, he smiled foolishly, just content to hear her voice. Sherise loved to gas him with her drama skills. Arguing with him about Tasha was one way to make Darnell feel like he was important to her.

Sherise waited impatiently in the part of the parking lot closest to the glass doors of Jimmy's diner so Darnell could spot her car if he looked out. She didn't want to have to go in because her gear wasn't matching, and she was wearing a fitted cap over her unfinished hair. After waiting for what seemed, to her, like hours, she jumped from her whip

irritably and slammed the door. She walked into Jimmy's with her eyes locked on Darnell talking to some brown-skinned petite chick. She reacted jealously, asking herself, *Why the fuck is this bitch-ass nigga smiling all in this bitch's face?* The blacks of Sherise's eyes seem to turn stone gray. She somehow still maintained her cool. Darnell looked up, acknowledging her strutting toward him, and he silently shuddered.

"Who is your friend, Darnell? I don't think we've ever met each other."

She looked from Darnell to Kamina and then fixed her stare on the diminutive chocolate beauty. Kamina stared back at the pecan-shaded girl with a hesitant smile. She could tell right away that this was the girl that Darnell had spoken so highly of during the week she had known him. Kamina said a faint hello, thinking to herself how pretty the girl was even with her shabby clothes.

Darnell began to stutter, "Oh, Boo, ahhh, this is Kamina. She just started working here."

Sherise cut him off shortly, "Yeah, yeah, whatever. Come outside for a minute."

Kamina could see the girl was upset. Sherise rolled her eyes at the young lady and wheeled around to leave. Darnell followed closely, looking like a stray dog.

Sherise probed angrily, "Who's that bitch, Darnell?"

Darnell pleaded, "I told you her name is Kamina. She just started working here about a week ago. Boo, she..."

He started to say something else, but she cut him off again. She sneered and snapped, "I don't give a fuck what that bitch's name is. I better not catch you in her fuckin' face again. Fuck that nigga; you supposed to be my man!"

"Do you love me Sherise?"

"Yes, but not right now. I'm kinda mad at you. You better not play me like that, ever again Darnell." She glared through the window of the diner, ice-grilling Kamina while Darnell sat there staring at his feet. Darnell couldn't hold it in any longer; he would tell her what he and Kamina had been talking about. If didn't tell her now, he might lose

Sherise before she found out his surprise. He cracked a small-toothed smile when she finally returned her attention to him. He handed her the money she came for. Then he offered her a deal: “Boo, if you would move in with me and be mine, I can give you the down payment for that car you were talking about.”

Sherise’s expression changed immediately.

“You’re for real, Darnell?”

Sherise sang out in genuine happiness; she couldn’t believe it. Darnell had just thought up the whole idea while he was waiting for her to show up at the diner. He had mentioned it to Kamina just to show off; she had wondered why he didn’t get the car for himself and learn how to drive. It hadn’t escaped her notice that he always rode the city bus to work.

Sherise felt exhilarated as she drove back to the hood. She had to get showered and dressed before she went back to Vinita’s to get the rest of her microbraids taken out. She made it back to Vinita’s place just in time to witness a tumultuous scene.

As Vinita opened the door for Sherise, she was in the midst of wilding out on her daughter. She was screaming at Sierra, the older of her two teenage girls, “Listen here, bitch! I think you got it twisted; I’m the mother, you’re the daughter, so until you get your own place, ain’t gonna be no layin’ up around here, unless it’s me!”

Sierra, a miniature version of her mother, didn’t back down. She replied tersely, “Well hey...that can be arranged.”

Vinita waved Sierra off as if she was backhanding a fly and dryly retorted, “Whatever ho, get a job first.”

Sierra wrinkled her nose and whined, “But Ma, you acting like it’s the middle of the night or something. Besides, he’s just my friend anyways.”

Vinita looked away from her problem child to tell Sherise as calmly as she could, “I’ll be ready in a minute, Reesie. This little broad here make me fuck her all up.”

Sierra retreated from the verbal battle and sat down hard on the couch. Sierra grunted an unintelligible reply and gazed into the dirty rug as if it were hypnotizing her.

Bumping and thumping up stairs stole everyone's attention. Sienna, the younger of the two teenage girls, hollered downstairs. "Ma, get your kids, they're fighting up here!"

Vinita shook her head in disbelief and snatched her belt from the coffee table. She already knew what was going on upstairs. Before she could yell at him, Malik came downstairs, wide-eyed and pleading his case. "Ma, I was in the room and him bothud me first!"

His protestations of innocence didn't do him any good. His mother met him halfway down the stairs and swatted him across the backside with her leather strap. Malik flew back up the stairs in sheer terror.

Sherise watched the wild events at her cousin's house. She reflected that, compared to her mother's brutal punishments, these kids got off pretty easy. Just one belt lashing? Sherise chuckled derisively to herself.

Sherise's phone began bellow the Ne-Yo ringtone. She retrieved the phone from her purse and checked the flashing screen. She saw Brandon's name pulsing in 3-D block letters. The shit that went down with Tasha made her forget to call "Mr. Fine Ass." But good, he called her first. "After all his stuck up shit, he calls me first," she thought aloud. She waited until the third ring and answered coolly as all the noise in the house faded to the background, "What's poppin'?"

Brandon took on a suave tone, "Hey Sherise, how are you doing? I was wondering why you hadn't used the number I gave you?"

Sherise played it breezy and exaggerated, "I've just been busy with mad stuff."

Brandon snickered, "Busy woman, huh? Yeah, I like that."

He continued smoothly, "So are you busy tonight?"

The question caught her off guard. She knew she had already made plans to pick Darnell up from work; he got off at midnight. Sherise figured she would get back at Brandon for how rude he had been when they first met.

“Well, I am a bit busy. I gotta finish getting my hair done and that might take a while, but let’s make a date. What are you doing on Wednesday?”

He replied tightly, “Nothing after nine at night, I guess.”

“That’s what’s up then, let’s get up. I hope you be ready for me.”

“Of course, I’ll be ready. I hope you’re ready,” Brandon replied.

“I see you’re not that mean after all Brandon.”

“Nope. Only when you make me that way,” Brandon stated.

Beaming, she told him she had to go since Vinita was ready to start taking out the remainder of her braids.

Brandon hung up the phone, slightly disappointed that he had nothing to do on his day off work. He really wanted to get up with the girl, just to fill her out. Now he would most likely end up in some boring bar tonight. He had had enough of James for the moment; he enjoyed having sex with the man, but the guy’s attitude and big-headed swag bothered Brandon.

He began to scroll down his call log, but none of the names sparked his interest. He grabbed his keys from the small hook on his kitchen wall and headed toward the door that led to the garage. He was determined not to endure a lackluster Sunday night. He settled himself into the plush seat of his Escalade and started the truck. He coughed harshly—could the fumes from his truck have poisoned the air so quickly? He let up the garage door with the small remote that was attached to his keychain. A cold chill ran through his body and made the hair on his arms and neck stand on end. The chill was immediately followed by a hot flash. He closed his eyes and waited for the wave of illness to subside.

He drove his immaculate truck aimlessly through the west side of the city. It wasn't long before he began to feel the sickly sweat seep from his pores and trickle down his back. He'd gotten caught in the rain earlier when he was grocery shopping; maybe that was it. He coughed hard and decided to pull over at the next corner store to get a pack of Advil. He took the medicine with a gulp of ginger ale. He watched the sky get dark as the rain returned. Feeling exhausted, he cruised back toward his home through the driving rain.

Brandon came in from the garage and grabbed his laptop from inside the black briefcase that sat on the living room table. His eyes roamed past and then back to the stack of mail that had accumulated on his coffee table. Each piece of the mail had Chad Torres's name on it.

He didn't open any of it. It just didn't look that interesting. Had it been a personal letter, then maybe then he would have checked it out. Tomorrow morning, he planned to take all the mail that had come for Chad to Monica's house. Then he would then be able to detect whether Angel was holding out on any info about the man. After he dragged himself up the stairs, he struggled out his clothing and slipped on one of those silky, flowered robes that he stored in the back of his closet. He weakly crawled under the sheets and turned on his laptop.

He logged onto MySpace and navigated to his friends list. He smiled weakly—he was excited to see the words “ONLINE NOW” blinking under Chad's picture. He immediately clicked on the photo and started composing a message:

Hi Chad how are you doing, I know we're not together but you can at least call me, or somebody, and let them know you're alive. I miss you dearly. Oh yeah you have a lot of mail and you should send me your number too.

He clicked “send” and surfed the web, waiting impatiently for a reply. Minutes later, he navigated the screen back to his message board, but he didn’t have any new ones. Chad must have logged off, because “ONLINE NOW” didn’t glow under his photo any longer.

* * * *

Renaë sat in her usual spot on the sofa while she watched *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*. She was feeling a lot better since she had talked with her son. They both apologized to one another and things seemed to be back to normal. Darnell had told her about the nice place he had leased. She was proud of him, but she already missed him being around. She told Darnell that she was on vacation for an extra week, and that she still had plans to go down to Florida. He told her that he would have come along, but he hadn’t taken his vacation time soon enough. She wished he could have come, too; they had never been any place nice together. But at least for the moment, she was just glad to know that Darnell was feeling better.

Before they got off the phone, Renaë made sure to let him know that if he ever needed a place to stay, he would always have a room at her house. He laughed and told his mom that he was already sure of that and that he had the key to prove it. They both assured each other that there was no love lost before the conversation ended.

Renaë had spent most of the day getting her things packed for her flight to Miami on Monday morning. She had talked with her sister Jacquelyn and told her that the plane would arrive around twelve noon. Renaë’s sister was incredibly happy that she was coming to visit; they hadn’t seen each other in nearly ten years. Now that most of her most pressing problems seemed to be resolved, Renaë thought she actually might get to have a relaxing vacation.

* * * *

Darnell peered at the clock from where he stood. His bushy eyebrows met in the middle of his forehead as he squinted to make out the time. It read 11:47 the moment he finished up the last of the dishes. He could hardly wait for Sherise to come scoop him from work. He racked the last of the dishes and made his way toward the shelves where the clean dishes were kept.

Kamina happened to stroll by him with a couple of soup pots. He spoke before she made it to the back of the kitchen, teasing, “hey girl, you trying to keep me in here all morning?”

She looked over her shoulder, smiled earnestly at the odd looking young man, and began washing the soup pots out by hand. As he turned back around, she said wearily, “See, I’m just trying to help, that’s all.”

He chuckled at Kamina and removed his apron. Sherise was running late. Soon, the only people still at the diner were Jimmy, Sharon, and Darnell. Kamina waited in the parking lot in her old Nissan Maxima. When she’d seen Darnel still standing outside, she told him that if his ride didn’t show, she would take him home.

He stayed as far away as he could from Kamina’s car while they talked. Judging by his behavior, Kamina figured his girl must have had told him to stay clear of her. As he waited, Darnell hoped Kamina would just pull off. He didn’t want his wifey to roll up and catch him too close to the girl.

Luckily for him, Sherise didn’t notice the girl as she zoomed into the parking lot with her music blasting. Kamina watched Darnell get into the woman’s car, then pulled out of the opposite side of the lot. She thought, *He sure is a nice guy to have such a fireball for a girl. How did they even meet?* She drove off, tired from her shift.

In Darnell’s eyes, Sherise glowed radiantly. He hadn’t seen her in awhile, and she looked like a new woman. He studied her face as they cruised through the dark night. He gazed at her shimmery hair; she wore it long and black and wavy at the ends. It fell just past her shoulders. The new style made her look older than her eighteen years. Darnell

chatted happily, “Wait until you see our new place. I think you’re gonna like it, Boo!”

Sherise replied smartly, “Dah ... I hope so, the way you’ve been talking about it. I better like it.”

“It’s dope, Boo, I’m telling you.”

“We’ll see.”

“How was your day, baby? I was thinking about you all night.”

“My day was long; I spent the whole night getting my hair done at Vinita’s.”

“How is your cousin? I haven’t seen her since you had the barbecue.”

“She’s the same old Vinita, ain’t nothin’ change with her. She’s still sitting around collecting welfare checks.” As they pulled into the parking lot behind the lofts, her Ne-Yo ring tone sounded. She checked the screen before answering; it was Chauncey. She silenced the glowing phone and lied easily: “That was Fatima. That girl wants me to go out all the time. I told her I was spending time with you, babe.”

The words eased Darnell’s naïve mind just as he started to become suspicious. A smile came over his idiosyncratic features as he admired the beauty of his wifey.

As he happily stared at the pecan-shaded skin, the alluring brown eyes, the long, dark hair, the thick thighs, and bowlegs he thought to himself that she looked like a “Beauty of the Week” from *Jet Magazine*.

The loft was dark; Darnell had all the lights off to save on RG&E. He flipped the switch and the whole place instantly flooded with light. Sherise stared around, mystified and thrilled, and asked confusedly, “Damn, baby, where did you get the money for this place?”

She had never been aware of how much was in his bank account. With a big smile, she asked, “How much is the rent here? Do you get free cable and lights?” She couldn’t hide her excitement over the place.

He answered, “Baby, I’ve been saving for a while. This place costs a G a month.”

Then he added for cool points, “I paid two months in advance.”

Dollar signs flashed before Sherise’s eyes. She never would have believed that “dead-end-job Darnell” had that kind of money saved. She wondered feverishly if there was more where that came from. Gazing conceitedly at the many portraits of her on the walls, she spoke, “I’ll move my things in on Friday. I don’t want my landlord gettin’ no free money from me; this month has one more week in it. I’ll let him know I need my security in the morning. Baby, this crib is nice, and I’m gonna help you hook it up and make it look hot.”

That’s what she said, but all the while she was conjuring devious plans in her head. He replied, overjoyed, “That’s what’s up, Boo! I’m sorry that we gotta sleep on the couch tonight.”

She curled her dark oval lips into a frown and pouted, “I hope you ain’t been fuckin’ no hoes on this shit!”

Darnell thrust out his chest. “Yeah right, Boo. You know that you’re my only girl.”

Her comment made him feel good about himself, and Sherise knew it. Her guilty conscious made her say things like that from time to time.

CHAPTER 18 - MOVING ON UP

On the south side of town, Lux was waiting on a weight customer to come through. He and his get-money nigga J-Money sat there watching an old Floyd Mayweather, Jr. fight. The pair had hustled together since the age of sixteen. Now, at twenty five years old, both men were well established in the world of crime. From bricks to licks and vicks to hits, they could get anything anyone desired.

Lux, rocking a grin, asked his partner, “Yo, J, what you doin’ tonight, my nigga? You busy, man?”

J-Money moved his lips to one side of his face and said, “Oh, I ain’t doing shit dude. Jus gotta go pick up trap money from that jump-off cross town.”

“Oh, you finally got that project up and running, huh?”

J-Money replied, revealing a mouthful of sparkling golden teeth, “Yeah, I’m about to get hood rich over there. Retirement bread, my nigga!”

J-Money slapped his friend’s palm, hyped about his investment. Not really concerned with the talk about money, Lux asked, “Yo, you wanna get up with these lil’ bitches I just hooked up with. These lil’ hos is the truth!”

“I gotta shake my bitch, but for sho’. What time?” Money asked.

“Whenever I call the freaks,” Lux shrugged and continued, “Shit, they on deck, dude.”

J-Money humorously inquired, “Yo, these bitches are fine, right? Because I ain’t feeling those busted bitches you was showing me on the avenue last weekend.”

Lux scrunched his face up. “Yo, I know you ain’t trying to play me, nigga! When have you ever seen your boy with a defunct bitch?”

A loud thud came from the television. “Oooohhh!” both men howled after seeing Mayweather knock his opponent to the canvas with a left hook.

“That nigga’s the best in the game,” spat Lux enthusiastically.

“Okay, I’m wit it,” J-Money announced with a glistening smile. Lux grabbed his cell phone from the case that he kept attached to his belt. He found the pictures of Fatima and Anna on his phone and showed them to J-Money to prove his point. “Yo, check this, nigga.”

J-Money stared with glittery eyes at the pictures of Fatima. She was bent over, showing her ass in a thong. He was thunderstruck. “Yo, let me get this one. Her ass is crazy fat.”

“Shit, for all I care, we can play switch-a-roo with em’. I already scraped her. The price was a bit steeper than usual, but I fucked her and this other thick, bowlegged bitch that she be with. The little rican bitch is bad too.”

“These hoes are straight freaks though,” he added. Both men chuckled before the doorbell rang. Lux got up to answer the door. He shouted as walked toward the front of the room. “Who”?

The man on the other side of the door shouted back bearishly, “It’s Nitro!”

Lux patted the right pocket of his Ed Hardy’s, feeling for what he knew was already there. The baby .380 was cold as he pressed it to his thigh; he always checked for it out of habit. He unlocked the deadbolt locks and let the thin, sharp-

nosed man in. Nitro was taller than Lux by three or four inches, his skin was dark, and his eyes were like two pieces of onyx. Nitro was a triple threat and didn't miss a beat. He hustled, did hits, and robbed people. There were times that Lux didn't trust the man. He didn't worry too much about Nitro when he was getting paid for hits. When the work was slow, however, he wondered when he would be Nitro's next victim.

The man entered without a word. He wore a cold grin. He handed Lux a palm full of G stacks. Nitro threw a fist up in the air toward J-Money, who was sitting on the Italian leather sofa, watching him fixedly. J-Money had the same thoughts about Nitro as Lux. He wished he had his burner. Lux counted the money in front of both of the men, then slipped off to the back of the place. He grabbed a scale and the quarter-brick of coke he had separated for Nitro out of a stash in the kitchen cupboard.

He returned to the living room within seconds placing the digital scale on the small, glass table. He put the compressed slab of coke inside of a sandwich bag on top of the scale. The numbers raced up and stopped at 251 grams. Nitro examined the work, and he was pleased with the product. He shook Lux's hand and threw a right fist up at Money. Silently, he turned around and waited for Lux to let him out. Lux locked the door behind the man and sat back down in the leather swivel chair. Both of the men felt a frosty chill whenever Nitro came around; they both commented on the heavy leather jacket the man wore in the summertime.

J-Money eerily whispered, "That's the type of nigga that will leave you to stink in a dark alley."

Lux stiffly replied, "I don't think he got the nerves to wanna try us, J. I'd fuck em' up in the worse way."

J-Money wasn't fooled by his friend's tough talk. He had strong doubts that Lux even believed his own words, but he sighed in relief, glad that he had a confident partner.

They decided to hook up with Fatima and Anna around ten that night, the time they usually wrapped business up in

the streets. This time, they would meet at the Holiday Inn in the town of Greece.

* * * *

At Fatima's house, she and Anna modeled a few outfits. They were getting ready for the get-together they had with Lux and J-Money later that night. It was only around four o'clock, but Fatima was anxious to see how the new clothing she brought fit on Anna.

Fatima opened a small, wooden box on her dresser. "Yo, this shit get's you wavy as ever."

She went on to ask, "Have you ever tried ecstasy before?"

Anna replied wide-eyed and confused, "I think I heard my brother Poco say something about it, but, no, what's it like?"

Without saying another word, Fatima opened her palm and Anna stared, enchanted, at the colorful pills. She started to hand one to Anna, but Reggie came barging through the door. Fatima cupped the x-pills in her fist and glared up at the tall, dark-skinned boy.

"Nigga, get out of my damn room!" Fatima ordered. With his sister pushing him out of the room, Reggie retorted, "Hold on, hold on, you got some weed you wanna sell me?"

He held out a furrowed ten dollar bill toward her. Fatima removed her hand from his scrawny shoulders and harshly snatched the money. "Yeah, I'll sell you something. Hold on."

Reggie snickered, noticing Anna's huge, round eyes making contact with his. He dropped jewels like a pimp. "Hey, mami, I'm feeling your swag. What's good with me and you for tonight; let's go get lost, mah."

His eyes raced back to his sister nervously, but he still wore a slick grin. Anna smiled flirtatiously at the man's words but remained silent. She liked Reggie, but she didn't want to make Fatima jealous. Anna had witnessed Fatima's

protectiveness when any dude tried to holler at her. Fatima glowered at Reggie with stone-cold eyes and threw the bag of weed she made up for him. He caught it as it bounced off the numbers on his basketball jersey. He left the room, grinning knowingly.

Fatima waited until she heard the front screen door slam shut and broke out the colorful pills. She handed Anna one and kept another for herself. Fatima grabbed the can of orange Sunkist soda from her dresser and chased the pill down. She had gradually become hooked ever since the first pill that Lux had given her. Anna watched the woman curiously then followed suit. She would do almost anything the fox-faced woman would ask of her. Within minutes, the pills began to take their toll on both of the girls.

Fatima sprawled out on the bed. She slid her shorts off and beckoned for Anna to join. She crooned seductively, “Why don’t you lay down with me sexy? I’m getting bored. Lock the door before ass-wipe comes back.” She stared enthusiastically at Anna’s long, shapely legs.

Anna smiled at the devious freak slithering under the sheets. She strolled over to the door and locked it as her master told her to. Then she walked over to Fatima from where she stood at the mirror, trying to gather herself. Her legs were feeling numb. She was walking shakily from the pill. Fatima’s moved her spidery hands up and down the young girl’s body. Anna purred, in an intense accent, “I feel so warm all over. Yo, this shit got me feeling crazy.”

She erratically lay back beside the horny, black fox. The small skirt Anna wore rose above her thigh to reveal her sweet wound. Brusquely, Fatima’s hand found its way to Anna’s garden. The young teenage girl moaned and jerked. Fatima fingered the girl until she came intensely. She lustfully watched Anna’s wetness ooze down her finger. Then she drowned herself in pleasure, eating out Anna’s pussy expertly. She would enjoy a shameless evening, full of gratification, waiting for the call from Lux.

Sherise was in a happy-go-lucky mood. She had a wonderful night at Brandon's house on Wednesday and planned on seeing him again the next Friday. She loved his sex game. She tried to hold out the first night, but her demons got the best of her. She remembered how she and the man watched porn movies and fucked the night away. Everything was great about Brandon, except for the fact that he seemed like a soft type of nigga.

Sherise had noticed his softness when she spent the night with the man. She had overlooked the small warning signs of a bisexual man in the midst of the spontaneous, sex-filled night. His dream house and his stylish truck had her blinded. She had decided to use Darnell as a stepping stone to Brandon. Although Brandon was independent, she figured she could trap him somehow. She could also manipulate Darnell, but she didn't want to trap him.

The music from her phone echoed loudly off the walls of the empty apartment. Sherise answered her phone without reading the caller like she usually did. Assuming it was Vinita calling, she answered firmly, "Yo, what's taking you and Dred so long?"

Chauncey, happy to finally talk to the girl again, asked, "What? Who's Dred?"

Sherise grimaced at his voice. "You crippled motherfucker. You don't get it, do you? It's over with me and you. You're wack and you ain't going to the NBA. Your dumb ass probably won't even finish school."

Chauncey laughed pluckily and said, "Bitch, if you were keeping up with sports, you would know that I'm recovering from my injury. I'm already being scouted by the Knicks and the Nets, so the jokes on you, you little gold-digging pop-off."

"Pop-off! Fuck you, wit ol' pussy-eatin' ass!"

"Fuck yourself, fish-girl," replied Chauncey. Sherise heard a bunch of people cackle in the background before he hung up hard in her ear. She felt like killing someone. She

just had thrown away a fortune. *What if he was lying?* She thought to herself.

She packed up the last of her belongings and added them to the load of things that were on the U-haul truck. Darnell had used his bank card to rent the truck before he went off for a busy night's work. Sherise idly stared at all the old furniture that she would no longer use. Maybe she would just give it to Vinita. Her cousin needed furniture badly; her couches were tattered and dirty from the babies jumping and eating on them.

She turned on her heel and made her way back into her bedroom, which was now empty. She walked over and opened the closet door; a cold draft poured out. She cringed and glanced up at the top of the closet. Her eyes roamed across the collection of things she had tossed up on the shelf over the past few months. It was where she stashed things to forget about them. She beamed as she decided to leave the junk behind for the landlord to clean up. The old bastard had given her the deposit back before she fulfilled her end of the bargain. If he hadn't, she would have surely got some of her money swiped for not making the place as spotless as it was when she moved in.

George Johnson, her elderly landlord, had met the girl a couple of days ago and gave her five hundred and twenty-five dollars. That was the full security deposit for the place. He honestly believed that the young lady would clean the place up before she moved. He was nice enough to let her break her lease five months early. Sherise blew the money the same day. She bought two new pairs of Air Force Ones and dropped the other three hundred on a fly birthstone pinky ring.

Before she could close the closet door, a wad of papers fell off the shelf and hit Sherise on the top of her head. She brushed her hair in shock, squatting down to identify what hit her. She unraveled the papers to discover that they were from her last hospital visit. She looked at one of the papers and noticed that she had a doctor's appointment scheduled for the next Tuesday.

She had forgotten all about the appointment; she hated pap smears. She didn't believe that she needed a six-month checkup. She figured that as long as she kept herself clean, she would be just fine. She never considered her sex life hazardous. She had never had an STD before, so she never realized the importance of checkups. The appointment slips made her think about the last time she visited the clinic for a checkup. The nosey doctor had asked her if she was sexually active. She shook her head in disbelief at what she thought was a stupid question. She simply looked at the Indian doctor's huge nose through narrow eyes and asked, "Sir, what do you think?"

The sharp-minded doctor ignored her sarcasm and told her that she would need a pap smear. She frowned at the sight of the speculum that day.

She closed the closet door, walked over to the U-haul and slid the papers into one of her many bags. She had to make sure she went to the appointment because she needed her shots for her third semester of college.

She peered around the empty place that used to be her home. She had stayed there for nearly a year. She would say goodbye to the one-bedroom apartment forever. She grabbed her cell phone to call Vinita. She angrily shouted, "Damn! What's taking them so long?"

Vinita and Dred had been helping her move things all day, but they seemed to be taking forever to come back with her car. She only let Dred drive because she wanted to smoke, but, now, she had changed her mind. They were only supposed to be going to Dred's house for some green. By the time she hung up the phone, pissed that her cousin didn't answer the call, she spotted the car pulling over to the curb in front of the apartment. Thunderous Reggae tunes were booming from the car; streams of smoke escaped the vehicle as the pair opened their doors slowly.

Sherise stood in the doorway pouting. She rolled her eyes with a hand on her hip. "Took you long enough!"

Vinita smiled as she got out of the car. Dred had a look of worry. He knew the little bitch was capable of copping an

attitude quickly. He tip-toed up the porch and handed Sherise her car keys.

She smiled at Dred, noticing the unsure look he was giving her. She softened her voice and said, “I ain’t tripping on you, Dred. I know this bitch had you some of everywhere.”

Vinita pleaded, “Couso, I just stopped at the house to check on Sienna and them badass kids. You know how they be getting.”

Sherise ignored the excuse and laughed, trying lighten the moment. She didn’t want to piss her free movers off. Vinita spoke tiredly and leaned on the porch rail. “Man, it’s hot out here. I hope we ain’t gotta move nothing else, cause all I’m gonna do is blow my high.”

Sherise shook her head at her cousin. Dred was sitting on the porch quietly puffing on his dutch. He and Vinita had been smoking the whole ride back. Dred was tired from helping Sherise all day. Sherise offered him thirty dollars for the help. He declined the money, but he was happy to help because he had a crush on Vinita.

Dred was an immigrant from Jamaica. He was a cool fellow that sold lots of weed. No one could tell that the slim, dread-headed Rasta was a street-smart thoroughbred that pulled in countless G stacks. Dred was low-key, and he liked it that way. Vinita was the first person he met when he moved to New York.

Sherise took a gulp of ice water that she retrieved from the fridge, not bothering to offer Dred or her cousin any. “Are we going to move this shit or what?” Sherise asked impatiently.

Vinita and Dred just sat there speechless with looks of exhaustion on their faces. The late August sun was doing a number on everyone under it. Both of them sprung up like broken jack-in-the boxes and drug themselves to the doors of the U-haul.

Reesie yelled over her Shoulder while going to her car, “I’m going to Walmart after we drop this stuff off at my new place!”

The mention of Walmart gave a boost of energy to Vinita. She enjoyed going to the superstore; she was always likely to see an old friend, an old enemy or something exciting. The three of them moved the items into the loft on State Street without much struggle, with the exception of the couch set she decided to give to Vinita. They would drop the truck off after they were finished moving the couches to Vinita's. After that, they dropped Dred off. He didn't want to go shopping with the pair. "Thanks for the couch set cuz. I really needed them. That's a nice place. That's you and Darnell's loft, right?"

"Yeah, but you know I'm 'bout to run this shit, couso."

"Just be careful, Reesie, Darnell seems a little possessive." Vinita warned.

"I got this. Watch and learn, V."

CHAPTER 19 - HIT AND RUN

As she pulled in beside a mahogany Benz, Sherise was glad she found a spot that was close to entrance of Wal-Mart. From the looks of the parking lot, the place seemed totally packed. A pretty, shapely woman with beige skin and rich eyes was stepping out of the car next to her. Sherise stared at the woman jealously, then she bumped the woman's car purposely with her door when she got out of her Honda. She and Vinita giggled, then scrambled toward the air-conditioned shopping center.

Sherise followed closely behind Vinita through the automatic doors, snickering again as she passed the woman whose car she'd bumped. The lady just looked at Sherise confusedly. The place was flooded all kinds of folks shopping and milling around.

Sherise walked past the carts and over to the baskets. All she was shopping for was some feminine products and maybe a few other things that caught her eye as she browsed through the store. Both women stalked past the employee in the front of the store. The elderly white woman said hello to them as they passed, but neither of the women acknowledged

her civility. The old lady just went on to greet the next customer, ignoring the rude younger women. Vinita's sharp, piercing eyes scanned the scattered shoppers; it always excited the obnoxious woman to be amongst the crowd.

Sherise also had her eyes peeled, openly checking out the bachelors shopping at the big box store. She put her best hip sway into motion, and her pony-like legs made men strolling with their wives and girlfriends leer excitedly. She enjoyed the attention. Vinita followed closely, staring at women who were minding their own business and hoping one of them would pop just a little shit. She was ready to bust heads. At the age of thirty-eight, the woman still had the behavior of a teenager; it was like Vinita was in a second childhood when she was with her little cousin.

Sherise had pretty much everything she needed inside her small shopping basket. She began to search through her small black purse for the wad of hundred dollar bills. Sherise shuddered; the money was missing. Her mouth dropped and her nostrils flared. She probed frantically through the purse, unable to find the money. She yanked her attention from the worthless purse—the money had to be somewhere. She patted her thin sweatpants pocket—nothing. Then her bra—there she found it. She sighed in relief. She had thought for a minute that maybe she had lost it, or Vinita and Dred might have clipped her for it. She tightly clenched the fold of hundreds in her sweaty palms, fearing the possibility of really losing them.

* * * *

Tasha hurried through the store looking for a comforter set for her aunt. She was in a rush, so she planned to grab the first one that she saw. She didn't mind dealing with her elderly aunt, but she very much minded being late for work.

Not only was this a job, it was an internship at the hospital that might hire her after she was done with her bachelor's degree. She looked up at the thick comforters and

chose a pink one with white and powder blue flower decorations. Tasha wrapped her arm around the huge package and hustled to the front of Walmart.

Approaching the checkout, she searched for the shortest line. She probed her pockets for her debit card, walking toward a short, two-customer line. She found her card as a person said roughly, "Go ahead, I ain't in line."

The voice caught Tasha's attention. She thought she might have known the person. She focused her attention on Vinita, still not making out who the woman was. Vinita gave Tasha a strange glance. She thought the rosy-cheeked girl looked familiar, but she couldn't place her.

The southern girl was staring at her enemy's back by the time she threw her comforter on the conveyer. Sherise whirled around at the smell of Tasha's unmistakable perfume. Shocked to see each other, they exchanged icy stares. Vinita was looking off in another direction, but the teenage cashier could tell something was about to go down. Sherise spat out, "What's really good, you fat bitch?"

Tasha cocked her arm back and slapped Sherise so hard everybody within thirty feet could hear it. The people that were close by laughed ruthlessly. Reesie's knees buckled and the money she held flew from her clutch. The thin, dark-skinned cashier at the next register cut her eyes at the scene. She slickly scooped up the roll of bills and quickly stuffed them into her pocket, glancing around to make sure that no one had seen her take the money.

Before Tasha could throw another haymaker slap, Vinita, alerted to the confrontation, pounced on the slightly shorter woman, grabbing Tasha by her short do. She ferociously punched her in the face. Sherise recovered quickly, trying her best to get at Tasha's face with her long fake nails. She couldn't get a good shot in because her cousin had the girl by the head and her face into the grimy vinyl floor.

The cashier whose line they were in watched in amusement. He would lose his job for not contacting security

promptly, but the excitement of the fight overruled his better judgment.

The girls knocked over the racks of goods as they struggled with no one really getting the best of it. They wrestled across the department store entrance, rolling around like human tumbleweed. An engrossed crowd formed around the wild scene. The onlookers watched as the women tore at each other's clothes, exposing their breasts.

Security burst through the pack of leering observers, and four husky men sporting shades dove into the fray to break up the three enraged women. Just as security pulled her from the tangle, Tasha caught Sherise with a blow to the head.

The security officers hauled them from the ring of spectators; it took two of them had to handle Vinita as she struggled wildly to break free. Sherise was furious, and her head pounded from the concrete blow Tasha had landed. Then all of a sudden she began to scream, "My damn money! I dropped it, my money! I dropped it back there. Please, we gotta go back and get it. I want my fuckin' money!"

Tasha was calm when the man dragged her outside. He asked firmly, "What was all that shit about in there?"

Tasha, suddenly remembering that she had to get to work, said hurriedly, "I really don't know. They just tried to jump on me! I was just protecting myself." Her excitement made her southern drawl even more pronounced.

The short, stocky security guard gaped at the girl skeptically at first. After a moment of consideration, he accepted her story and decided not to get the cops involved. Luckily for Tasha, he was the head of the security team that worked the troublesome Friday day shift at Walmart. Also, it didn't hurt that he always flirted with her when he saw her in the store.

The short, brown-skinned security guard ordered Tasha to leave the premises. "Just go on before the cops show. I'll hold those two girls until you're gone. Just go. Now."

Without a word, she made her way through the huge parking lot without the comforter she had intended to purchase for her aunt. She crossed Hudson Avenue to her apartment just across the street. She made her way through the housing unit to the seventh floor of Seneca Tower apartments. She burst through her bathroom door and nervously examined her face in the mirror. It was nearly flawless aside from a small bruise. Tasha headed out of the door, thinking only about her shift that started in less than half an hour. If she could beat the small 2:30 rush hour traffic, she would make it on time, or so she thought.

* * * *

Sherise, sitting in the passenger seat of her vehicle, exploded angrily, “Yo, just hit this bitch when she comes out to get in that piece of shit truck. I know it’s about time for her fat ass to go to work, and this bitch made me lose my money, too!”

“Damn, Reesie, why don’t you just fight the bitch again?”

“Fuck that! I ain’t fighting that big bitch. She got retard strength! All my nails are broken! Fuck fighting! It’s beyond fighting!”

Vinita maneuvered the Honda in the direction Sherise pointed. She backed the car into a nearby parking space. The two awaited their victim with revenge glowing in their eyes. As soon as the security officers were certain Tasha had left they carelessly let the other two women go without any police officers getting involved. They really didn’t want to go through the whole bit with the reports, and considering there wasn’t any real damage done, they let both of the women go with warning not to come back.

Vinita asked worriedly, “You think them security guards might come over here? We should just jump her.”

Sherise rolled her eyes and gave her a cousin a look that told the woman to toughen up. “Yo, V, this bitch just made

me lose like eight hundred. You don't want to do it, fuck it, I'll do it. Move, let me get the driver's seat!"

Vinita wondered how her little cousin always made her feel like she was the younger partner. She replied, as if controlled by a puppeteer, "Naw, I got this cuz."

Vinita suddenly began to panic as she realized that she was taking the risk and her cousin would just be an accessory to whatever happened. Her mind raced feverishly to find a way out, but when she saw Tasha walk around the back of her truck on her way to the driver's side door, it was too late.

Vinita slammed her foot on the gas and Sherise's front bumper crashed into Tasha's leg and knocked her off her feet. She crumpled to the ground like a wounded animal as Vinita threw the small Honda in reverse and seemed poised for a second shot. Instead, the car sped off into traffic without too many people witnessing what had happened.

Tasha, paralyzed with shock, lay on the cracked asphalt. Her leg was dislocated at the hip, and she had a bloody scrape across her cheek. She had been lucky it was only the edge of the car that hit her. She was too badly injured to stand, and she tried not to panic as she struggled across the pavement for her cell phone. She knew she needed medical attention.

Vinita thought she was in a heap of shit as she flew up Hudson Avenue, hectically putting as much distance as she could between them and the scene of the hit and run. Sherise didn't care about what just happened.

She scoffed frostily, "Good for the bitch. I hope her fuckin' legs are broken."

Vinita asked anxiously, "You think that bitch is going to call the Jake?"

She lit up a Newport and took long, slow pulls. Sherise cut her eyes at Vinita. "Fuck that dumb bitch. She's lucky I wasn't behind the wheel."

She really didn't care how badly Tasha was hurt. It was payback.

CHAPTER 20 - MISSING IN ACTION

Brandon closed down Cory's Jewelry Shop and made his way out of the doors that led to the mall's parking lot. He thought about the poor sales at the store recently. Sometimes, he worried that his uncle Cory would realize he had been skimming at least two percent of the profits on every sale for the last year. Today was the day he had to get the quarterly gross sales report to his uncle. It was Friday, September 5, 2008.

He had tallied up all the numbers during the last part of his shift in the jewelry store that evening. Now, he was on his way to drop off the paperwork at his uncle's office. He grinned to himself knowingly. He was able to steal around five grand from the actual 47,000 that was grossed that quarter. It wasn't much, but he needed every penny to maintain his lifestyle.

He navigated his gleaming Escalade through the parking lot on Jefferson Road in Henrietta. He found a parking spot near the door of his uncle's small office. He slid from behind the wheel of his machine and strode over to the doors that he hoped would be locked. There was a drop box

near the bottom half of the door. He dropped the manila envelope that contained the sales records in the slot and headed back toward his truck. He hadn't thought about it before he arrived, but he was glad that the office closed at 4:00 PM. He got off at nine, but he didn't want to face Cory with the records in hand. His uncle would want to sit down and go over them. He just didn't want to deal with the tedious man.

Driving slowly, in a trance, he thought he should stop home briefly and then head over to Monica's house. Last weekend, when he talked to Chad's sister about stopping by to visit, she said it was cool. He would be just visiting her and the girls; Angel worked the B shift from 3:00 PM to 11:30 PM. That was fine with Brandon, he still couldn't grasp the fact that the man went both ways secretly.

He stopped at home, not bothering to pull the truck into the garage. He was just stopping home for quick bite. He was starving and had left his wallet at home that morning. Brandon was never the forgetful type, but, for the past few months, he had trouble remembering the smallest things.

The ride to Monica's place was swift because his mind was consumed with thoughts of talking to Chad. He didn't plan on staying long, so he parked on the side of the street in front of Monica's huge, gray house on South Avenue.

He rang the bell and waited for Monica to answer. The chubby-cheeked woman opened the door expectantly, wearing a wide smile. She hugged him tightly before he could enter the house and said, "It's been awhile. You're still looking good. How's life been treating you?"

His handsome face glowed under the porch light. He released her from his embrace and replied, "Just fine, it's been the same old deal. How about you?"

She answered, turning on her heel, "I've been fine. Thanks for asking."

He walked into the living room and handed Monica the stack of mail belonging to Chad. She looked at it briefly and sat it on the entertainment shelf. He was expecting to hear the little girls playing. Then, he realized that it was past 9:30

PM, and the girls may have been sleep. He asked, “Where are the girls?”

She replied, in a tone conveying exhaustion, “I just put Gabriel to sleep. Marianna is probably still awake. I gave up on trying to get her to sleep. She thinks that just because she’s older than her sister she can stay up later.”

Monica shook her head tiredly, thinking of her oldest daughter that seemed to have grown up over night. Brandon smiled at her words; he hadn’t seen the little ones since he and their uncle Chad popped in on Easter Sunday earlier that year. He wanted to ask to go upstairs to say hello to the oldest but decided not to.

Monica took a seat on the small sofa near the fish tank and continued talking about her daughter. Brandon sat on a long settee that sat along the stairwell. He stared at the many portraits hanging on the walls in the place. His expression saddened when his eyes spotted a portrait of Chad. The picture was from high school, eight years ago, but the light-skinned ex-football player’s features hadn’t changed much.

He saw Chad’s dark, sharp eyebrows and large eyes. Chad’s eyes always looked worried. At least, that’s what Brandon always thought. Monica hadn’t noticed him staring at the picture. She kept talking about Marianna; Brandon hadn’t heard a word she said.

Noticing his disinterest in her topic of choice, she changed the subject and said, “Angel told me that he saw you at the bar the other night.”

Brandon was surprised that Angel would even mention being at the bar. He answered uneasily, “Yeah, I saw him out there. I talked to him for a while, and we had a few drinks.”

He broke out in an invisible sweat. Monica replied, almost knowingly, “Out where? He said he was at the bar down the street from here.”

He found himself covering for the man. “Uh yeah, that’s where I saw him. I apologize. My mind is somewhere else tonight.”

He mixed the lie with truth. Monica didn’t see his near meltdown. She walked over to him, squinted her eyes, and

poked him in the side of his torso. Then, in a matter-of-fact tone, said, “You’re getting skinny. Have you been eating right?”

Brandon didn’t know how to answer. He had always been skinny. Also, he thought angrily, how would a fat chick like Monica know if he was losing weight. Brandon thought, *I’m not getting skinnier. She’s just getting fatter.*

“Has anyone in your family talked to your brother?” Brandon inquired.

Monica was glad that he brought up the topic; she wanted to but didn’t know how to. She replied, “No, not to my knowledge, but to be totally honest with you, I think my mother is hiding something from me.”

Their conversation created a moment of silence between the two of them. She wanted to know about Chad just as bad as him. She saw the distant look on the man’s face and asked, reluctantly, “What’s the real deal with you and my brother? What happened between you two?”

“I don’t know what happened. He just up and left one day, basically.”

Monica looked at Brandon awkwardly and said, “I know my brother, and he wouldn’t just pack up and leave for no apparent reason. Not just like that.”

She went on, accusingly, “You’re sure you didn’t do anything?”

Brandon’s lips quivered. “Hell no. I never once disrespected Chad. I can’t believe you would say something like that, Monica.”

“Brandon, I’m just as confused as you. I’m so sorry.” Monica replied, realizing that she may have just crossed the line. Brandon appeared closed to tears; he was swallowing hard, trying to get rid of the knot in his throat. The time seemed to take shortcuts; it was nearly eleven when he glanced at his cell phone.

He wanted to leave before Angel came home from work. He lied and told Monica that he had business to take care of early the next morning. The pair hugged and Brandon went on his way. He had to go to Sherise’s for the quickie

they had promised one another. *Pounding a bitch will probably ease some stress*, he thought.

Monica wondered about her brother and the man that just exited her home. They seemed to get along so well before Chad's sudden move. She made a mental note to try and pry some information about her brother from her mother.

CHAPTER 21 - DINNER AND THE PROPOSAL

Tonight was going to be a blast for Sherise, especially since Darnell was at work. She had plans to have company in the new loft that she now shared with the Darnell. She had spent the first half of the day in school; now, the weekend was hers. She would have just gone out, but she hadn't been driving her car much since Vinita assaulted Tasha with the vehicle. Only a week had passed since that day, and Sherise was expecting to hear something from Fatima at the very least. Apparently, nothing had gotten back to her about the situation. Her instincts told her not to drive the car. She wasn't sure if Tasha had called the police. She called her cousin and found out that the woman was quite stressed out about the incident. Even since the crime, Vinita had stayed in the house and smoked double the weed that she usually smoked.

Sherise finished dressing in an undersized pink top. She looked at her thickly built legs in the long body mirror. She gave a dashing smile at the sight of them. Her small skirt

hugged the top of her thighs. The slightest movement would reveal her panties, if she was wearing any. Tonight, she wasn't wearing any. *It will just give Brandon easier access*, she thought, while waiting anxiously for the man to arrive. He told her he would come by after he left his sister's house, but he told her he couldn't stay long because he had business.

Before she could get comfortable on the long sectional, the doorbell sounded and made her pussy wet. She knew, without a doubt, that it had to be Brandon. She already had the lights dimmed; candles were burning in the dark loft.

Sherise got up to answer the door. She watched her shadow move across the wall, making sure the scene was just right. She pulled back the small curtain on the window next to the door. Brandon smiled when he saw her shimmery face. Sherise let him in, grinning. She locked the door and hugged him tightly.

"Did you miss me?" She held on firmly to the man's thin waist.

"Yes," he replied, hugging her back.

Brandon smiled and gazed around the house. He was surprised; Sherise's house was much more stylish than he imagined, even in the dark. He said, "Nice pad. How much is your monthly lease?"

"Thanks. I pay around a grand a month," she said, knowing that she was taking unjust credit.

She strode over to the light switch and robbed the room of its darkness. Brandon noticed all the pictures of Sherise on the wall, but he wasn't showing any interest in them. He didn't even notice Darnell in any of the three pictures that he was in. His plastic smile concealed the emptiness brought on by all the problems consuming his mind.

Sherise crooned, "You look mad sweetie, what's wrong? I can fix that for you right now."

He didn't respond, but Sherise thought the mention of sex would ease his tension. Brandon started to turn down the invitation. *That damn Chad*, he thought coldly. His thoughts were so twisted that he couldn't even act interested in this

bitch right now. Brandon stuttered, “Oh yeah, sorry, just thinking about something that happened at work.”

“What happened?” Sherise asked.

“It ain’t that serious.”

“I got a surprise for you.”

“What is it?”

Sherise lifted her small skirt and showed him the gift. He tried not to show his worries on his face while he unlatched his belt. Sherise’s eyes grew wide with lust. Brandon lowered his head and kissed her passionately while she clawed at his buttons. Brandon slipped her shirt over her head. He picked her up by her thighs and pinned her to the closest wall. Sherise squirmed, adjusting herself anxiously, waiting to be mounted. They both breathed heavily and kissed while Brandon fumbled for the condom that he kept in the back pocket of his Dockers.

Sherise, noticing the Lifestyle in Brandon’s hand, pulled the condom free of his grip. She worked her way down his neck and shoulders with fanatical kisses. Sherise opened the condom with her teeth and placed it on his partially erect penis using her mouth. She gave him a short, teasing headjob. Then, they made their way to the sectional sofa where Brandon sat down.

Sherise perched herself on top of the man’s throbbing organ. Her hips grinded in a circular motion until her thrusts of pleasure made them both climax.

Brandon left moments after he released his built-up pressure. He told Sherise that he would see her Sunday, if she had the time. He told her that they could hang out at his place again. Sherise was enthused by the idea. She bathed and made sure the living room was spotless after the man left.

She sprayed a bunch of air freshener and let the scented candles burn. Then, she lay down in the bedroom and watched television while enjoying the tingling sensations left over from sex with Brandon. Her mind was still consumed with sex though. One orgasm just wasn’t enough; she felt backed up. She laid there tossing and turning until she finally

scooped up her phone and began calling a couple guys she knew would be a good fuck. Lux was the first person she called; his phone rang once, and he answered swiftly. She was happy as hell to hear his voice. “What’s good, Lux? Damn, you don’t fuck with me no more?”

He replied, stingingly, “Naw, homegirl, your bitch told me that you said you had a man and I shouldn’t call you no more. She told me that you wasn’t fuckin with me no more. So, I was like, fuck it!”

He laughed carelessly and hung up on her. She was going to call him back, but her pride wouldn’t let her. She was pissed at what he told her; she knew the only bitch he could be talking about was Fatima. She thought about it briefly then decided that getting one off was more important than calling Fatima to argue about a stuck-up-ass hustler. So, she hooked up with Tyshawn.

He came by in his father’s Buick Regal. He was excited by the invitation. They fucked until she was satisfied, then she sent him on his way. Tyshawn complained, “Damn, you gonna do it like that, Reesie? Just fuck a nigga and kick him out.”

Reesie laughed and said, “Ty, grow some balls or start coughing up some money. Then, I might start taking you seriously.”

She slammed the door on him, cruelly. She laughed herself to sleep that night.

* * * *

When Renae made it back from Florida last weekend, she returned to work with a restored energy. She had a wonderful time with Jacquelyn and her husband, Tony. The trio had spent fun-filled nights out on the town, clubbing, and doing things that people their age enjoyed. She blocked the harsh realities of home from and problems with Darnell from her mind.

For now, things were okay. Soon, however, life was about to become stressful again. She just had finished up the huge pan of macaroni and cheese that she would serve that evening. She invited Darnell over for one of her delicious, home cooked meals. Darnell agreed to come over after he woke up that evening. This would be the first time that he visited her since the day he left nearly a month ago.

When he told Renae that he was bringing Sherise, she almost told him not to. Then, she decided that seeing her son was worth putting up with an hour or two of the girl.

* * * *

Inside the home at 116 State Street, Sherise and Darnell hustled and bustled to get dressed for dinner at Renae's. It was almost 6:00 PM. Darnell had told his mother that they would be there around seven o'clock. Sherise was ready before Darnell.

She wore a turquoise, open-back top and some jeans that were so tight it looked like her ass would come oozing out at any moment. There were big slits in the legs and back of the jeans that revealed her ass cheeks.

She waited in the parking lot inside her car; she was getting nervous. It was the first time she had brought the car out of hiding since her cousin ran Tasha down in it. Sherise hadn't told Darnell about the incident. She told him that she couldn't drive him to work because the car was acting up. Sherise could tell by the look in Darnell's eyes that he was suspicious. She figured that the short trip to Renae's house wouldn't be much of a problem. She practically lived down the street from them.

Darnell locked the door to their loft then stepped out into the warm September evening.

He stared at Sherise as she rolled down her window and asked, "I thought the car was acting up, Boo?"

Sherise sucked her teeth and came back with a crafty respond, “Your moms place is right down the street, boy. I’m going to test it out a little.”

He shrugged his muscular shoulders and walked around the car to the passenger side and got in. He touched his woman’s arm to get her attention. “Well, what’s wrong with it? I can pay for it to get fixed.”

Sherise recoiled from his contact and looked at him unkindly. “How am I supposed to know? Do I look like a fucking mechanic? Besides, I thought you were giving me the down payment for the new Acura I wanted?”

Darnell was used to the girl’s smart mouth. He stayed silent for the short trip to his mother’s house. He wondered why Sherise behaved so irregularly, and wondered if he should give her the gift he had for her. Sherise made a quick U turn before she parked several apartments in front of Renae’s place.

Darnell looked at his girlfriend puzzled, because he noticed there were several spots she could have parked in that were closer. He remained quiet as they walked side by side toward Renae’s apartment. Sherise wasn’t pleased at all with the whole idea of the dinner, but she figured she would play along until she jumped ship. She gritted her teeth, knowing there were a million other things she could be doing right now. She had prepared mentally for the occasion ever since Darnell called from work with the stupid idea.

Darnell knocked on the door and the two waited for Renae to answer. Darnell was craving a home cooked meal. Sherise stood in her signature, bowlegged stance with a hand on her hip. Renae answered the door and welcomed them in with loving eyes for her son and a look of reluctance toward his girlfriend. Renae was happy to see Darnell. He looked sharp, and he was smiling. The two hugged each other tightly. Darnell missed his mother. Renae glanced up at Sherise briefly and said, “Hello Sherise, nice jeans.”

Sherise put on a fake smile and managed to squeeze out a reply. “Hello, Ms. Wilkinson, and thanks. How are you doing?”

Renae virtually ignored the girl and led the way to the dining room. The two followed, with Darnell in front of Sherise. Darnell was so enthused with the surprise he had for the girl that he hadn't even noticed the icy looks the two women were giving one another. Sherise marched behind Darnell, wishing she hadn't come. The two both took a seat at the small dining room table, which was nicely decorated with dishes and silverware.

Sherise sat there misty-eyed and uncomfortable. She could tell Renae didn't like her. *Hell*, she thought to herself, *I don't like the ugly bitch either*. Darnell, noticing the look on his wifey's face, rose from the small wooden chair and made his way up the stairs into his old room.

Everything was still the same, it was just emptier than when he lived there. He briefly thought about moving his weight set to the new place. Then, remembering the clock radio, he whirled around and spotted the old thing in the corner of the room on the floor. He looked at it and a chill of worry ran through his skull. He stood there, momentarily, in the privacy of the room. Then, he pulled a small black box from his denim shorts pocket.

Wedged between the white cushions, the engagement ring sparkled. It put a huge smile on Darnell's face. He cleaned out his bank account between the spending five thousand dollars on the ring and setting aside the down payment on Sherise's Acura RL. Now, living up to her standards would be a test. Maybe this ring would seal the deal, he thought with little hope.

His dark, beady eyes examined the ring obsessively while making his way out of his room and back down stairs. He clutched the small black box in his sweaty palms before reentering the dining room and taking the seat directly in front of Sherise. She sat there with a grumpy expression. He smiled and put the black box on the table in front of her. She bounced back from her stupor and noticed the box.

Confused, she asked, "What's this?"

Darnell chuckled lightly. "Open it and see."

Renae walked into the dining room, breaking the mood. Sherise looked up sharply and forced a smile, still not looking inside of the box. Darnell blushed and looked up at his mother sheepishly as she began to portion slabs of steamy meat loaf from the tray she carried. Renae glowered at Reesie. “You do eat meat loaf, right?”

Sherise replied dryly, “Yes, Ms. Wilkinson.” Renae went back to the kitchen and came back with a pan of homemade macaroni and cheese. Darnell’s mouth watered for the cooking that he had missed out on for the past month.

Sherise’s mind was consumed with the box she held in her hands. Her keen mind told her that it was a ring or some earrings. It never crossed her mind that it was an engagement ring, let alone a ring that cost Darnell over five grand.

After all their plates were filled with food, Renae figured she would try to spark the conversation. Cheerfully, she said, “Hey, Darnell, your aunty says she wants to see you. She’ll be up here this Christmas to see us. She wants to see the snow, because it never snows down there in Florida. It sure was hot the week I spent down there; it didn’t even rain once.”

She grinned at the both of them and took a bite of macaroni.

Sherise spoke before Darnell could respond, taking Renae by surprise. “Florida is nice. Darnell, you didn’t tell me your mother was going to Florida.”

Sherise looked at Darnell, with her mouth twisted, as if he was a child. Then, the thought crossed his mind, it wasn’t his fault that they had missed out on the trip. However, he wouldn’t dare say what he was thinking aloud.

He replied, ignoring his feelings. “Yeah, I bet it is nice. I have never been there before, but I can’t wait to see Aunt Jacquelyn. I haven’t seen her in forever.”

Darnell took a bite of meatloaf and smiled rigidly. He looked at the small box that Sherise had pushed to the side of her plate. He figured that he would pop the question after dinner.

Their plates were empty now; they sat there talking while the tension in the room rose. Darnell finally got the nerve to ask Sherise the question that was consuming his mind. He couldn't wait; he broke the silence. "Why don't you open the box, Boo? It's something special for you."

She blushed and pulled out the box. Renae watched curiously while Sherise removed the gleaming stone from the box; she was hypnotized. Before Darnell knew what was happening, the words escaped his mouth. His heart raced furiously; the butterflies in his stomach danced wildly.

"Sherise, will you marry me?"

He stared at her face and hoped she would say yes. Renae was shocked. She sat back in her chair, wondering how Sherise's would respond.

Reesie's acting skills kicked in. She delivered a lie that would have passed for the truth a million times while looking him square in the eyes. "Yes, baby. Yes, I will."

A simulated tear fought to escape the corner of her eye. Surprisingly, the proposal did feel like the real thing to Sherise, but, in the dark recesses of her mind, she already had plans. It just couldn't work. She reminded herself that Darnell was just a stepping stone as he placed the beautiful ornament on her left ring finger.

Renae somehow stifled a potential outburst. Doubts came to her immediately. She knew it wouldn't work, but she would never tell her son how she really felt again, it was too risky. She smiled weakly at Darnell while he floated on cloud nine. Renae got up and hugged Sherise. As they stood there, embracing each other, they both knew they were concealing a lie.

Darnell and Sherise didn't stay much longer. Renae was glad; her temper was flaring, and she was trying not to show it. She knew the engagement would turn into a disaster sooner or later. The vibes were stronger than ever, but she remembered the promise she had made to herself. They both hugged Renae and told her goodbye before they left. Darnell started making plans for a small celebration that evening. He

didn't have much money, but he thought a bottle of champagne and some dessert would be nice.

CHAPTER 22 - I'M LEAVING

Fatima blew a haze of weed smoke from her grill and laughed callously after hanging up with Tasha. She couldn't believe how long the juicy information had taken to get back to her. She hadn't really thought the voicemail would piss Sherise off as badly as it did—but it had.

Fatima knew that Tasha was serious when she told her that she was moving back down south. Tasha had kept their conversation short and to the point. When Fatima said she would stop by her crib to see her, Tasha didn't respond. Nevertheless, the foxed-faced woman had made up her mind to stop by anyhow. She wouldn't want to miss out on seeing a good friend suffer.

Fatima glanced over at Anna, who was lying curled up nearly in a fetal position on the queen-size bed. She was exhausted from a night of sex with some weird white guy who obviously popped some type of sex stamina pill. Anna was sexed out for the week, and her vagina ached. Thanks to Anna's services, Fatima was able to obtain an automobile. It was just an old black Toyota Camry, but it drove well.

Fatima realized she'd left her car keys on the dresser. As she strode across the room to get them, she passed the sleeping girl. She lifted the teenager's skirt up, bent over, and got a good sniff of Anna's stuff. Her nose wrinkled at the sour smell. She thought to herself in disgust that the little bitch hadn't smelled like this the other day when she ate her. She would have to stop by the Walmart across from Tasha's; Anna really needed some douche. Fatima's recent shortage of money made her mind turned back to that night with Lux and his friend J-money; eastside niggas are so gully, she thought, pegging them as suckers. Fatima was always scheming ways to get money, and she was working on a plot to rob the wobbly twosome. She had witnessed how competitive they were with each other, and she had seen the big knots of blood money the men had arrogantly flashed at their last get up. She greedily thought that between them, the men easily had close to thirty grand that night. She fantasized about the power moves she could make with that kind of cash. The money she was making right now spent fast as it came.

Fatima remembered the night clearly. Both Lux and J-money were drunk as skunks, talking about how they ran the city and all. She had been drunk too, but she was on point, and she made sure she threw enough dirt on Sherise to keep the men from regaining any interest in the girl. But the sight of their cash is what really made her wheels turn. The more she thought about the cash, the more her plan crystallized in her mind. She spent two weeks plotting and tomorrow night it was going down.

Fatima was making decent money since she had got a hold of Anna. Along with the few licks she hit, she could pay her bills and keep money for pills, clothes, smoke, and whatever else. She had previously blown most of the money she made. She bought a Cuban link that ran her seven hundred and fifty bucks. The medallion made it an even G. It was white and yellow gold with two naked chicks tousling. She rocked it proudly. Her whip cost twenty-five hundred

and her shopping spree was half of that. She had overspent and now her funds were almost zilch.

She stalked out of the room, locking it behind her and leaving Anna in dream land. At the bottom of the steep staircase she briefly stopped and peered around the corner. She was looking for any signs of that annoying brother of hers, but he wasn't there. For once she actually hoped to see him; she needed him and his partner to come by soon so they could go over the plan again. Something told her to take the two trigger-happy kids off the job, but her greed got the best of her.

Reggie and his boy Bagz only wanted fifteen hundred a piece. Any real crooks with sense would charge five G's each, and she knew that even that much was considered cheap. She strutted out her front door and locked it behind her.

Fatima let her shifty eyes roam the crime-ridden avenue that she had become part of. Small-time weed and dope boys plagued the storefronts, rocking big T-shirts and NY fitted caps. Lookouts perched behind cracked windows above the stores swept the streets with their eyes, calling out, "Onetime!" when the beast rode through. She cruised through the traffic, relighting a dutch of piff.

She watched the happenings of the cool, sunny day. Fatima was in tune with the ghetto streets, which were a second away from glory and a minute away from bloody murder. She never listened to her church-going mother's good advice. She took spaced-out drags of her weed smiling inwardly at her own wit. She had managed to recruit a new bitch, and now the whole scheme was going to play out just right. Fatima had recently got up with Bianca, a girl she knew from back in her days as a twelve-year-old locked up in juvenile. Remembering how cool they were for those six months they were in together, she had exchanged numbers with the light-skinned, Amazon beauty when she ran into her at the mall last weekend.

They were hype to see each other again. Fatima had blown hundreds of dollars that day on her chain and some

outfits, trying to show off in front of the girl. Fatima knew the girl was devious from the things they used to do back in the day. She also knew that Bianca was in desperate need of money; the woman's busted hair-do and rugged nails were a dead giveaway.

She gave the woman the run down on how Lux liked to pay, and Bianca urgently let Fatima know that she was down hard body. Fatima wouldn't let the woman know that a robbery was going down; if she did, it would just be another mouth to feed. Greed had replaced the blood flowing through Fatima's veins.

She parked her whip a few spaces over from Tasha's truck. A mischievous smile played across her face as she imagined how Tasha would look. She reached the double glass doors that led into the inside of the building. She had to use the buzzer to get in. Tasha answered on the second buzz, yelling through the intercom with traces of irritation in her tone: "Who is it?"

"It's me, Fatima, girl." The door buzzed, allowing her to open it.

She walked past the short, dark-skinned security guard who worked on the premises during the weekends. He openly and enthusiastically watched Fatima's truckload of ass glide by him until she was out of sight.

Tasha got up and hobbled over to the door on crutches. Her hip dislocation had caused a lot of swelling. The doctor told her to stay off her feet as much as possible for the next three weeks. Then she would have to start physical therapy. She heard Fatima's sharp knocks and opened the door. Fatima came in smiling until she got a better look at the woman that she called her friend. Fatima's high spirits dipped at the sight of the deep scrapes on Tasha's face that the doctor said would leave permanent scars.

"How are you feeling, girl? Is everything all good?"

Tasha replied wryly, "I guess I'm fine except for this leg that's been botherin' me."

She slowly turned away from Fatima. The scar on her face was a dirty maroon scab. After speaking, Tasha idly

stared out her window. There was a short, awkward silence before Fatima apologized.

“I’m sorry for what happened.”

Tasha looked back at Fatima and remained silent, knowing that her friend instigated the whole episode. She refused to accept the woman’s insincere apology.

Fatima asked ruefully, “So when does the brace come off?”

Tasha looked down at her leg, shook her head in disgust, and uttered, “In a few weeks, I guess.”

The fox-faced woman pushed, “So the crazy bitch tried to hit you, huh?”

Tasha cried out, “Tried?” She continued in an excited southern drawl, “These people here in Rochester are crazy! I’m goin’ back down home. I ain’t never had this kinda problem there.”

Fatima stood quietly, listening with some bitterness to the indirect insult. She really couldn’t blame Tasha for wanting to move back where she had come from. She actually wished she could leave, but for now it was only a dream.

“So when are you going to bounce?” Fatima asked with concern. Tasha looked up from her damaged leg to face her fake friend. “After this first semester’s up, me and my aunty are movin’ outta this place.”

She lied to Fatima; she didn’t trust that woman. She actually planned to leave as soon as possible, maybe in the next two weeks if she could swing it. For all she knew, Fatima was probably here trying to set her up or something.

Fatima finally sat down in a small, cushioned wooden chair, which she pulled from a tiny desk with a laptop on it. She smiled softly at the rosy-cheeked woman. Inwardly, Fatima felt bad about getting the bullshit started. She really had no clue that Sherise would take shit to the next level.

Fatima sighed sympathetically. “I’m sorry again, Tash. I really am.”

Tasha didn’t have a response. Her kind, soft eyes showed little emotion at Fatima’s words. This was the last

time that they would see one another. Fatima's schemes committed her to the crime and violence of the ghetto, whereas Tasha had plans to work her way out and become a success story.

After Fatima left her crib, Tasha recalled all of the people she had met during her short stay in Rochester, New York. Thinking about Sherise, Fatima, and Darnell, she realized that they were all young and that this was a time in their lives when they would experience hardships and difficult situations. Their reactions to these experiences would shape their futures. As she reflected, it seemed to her as if the two women that she had called her friends were bringing trouble upon themselves. She worried herself all evening trying to figure them out. In the end she decided not to bother; she would probably never see them again anyhow.

* * * *

Once Fatima left Walmart she sat in her car and dialed the numbers to Lux's phone. He answered easily, "Hey, what up wit cha' bubble booty?" Fatima chortled. "What up with you? Are we still on for tonight?"

Lux replied in a matter-of-fact tone, "Oh yeah, no doubt, but only if you bring that new bitch you were telling me about."

"Of course, Bianca. She'll be there, that's my bitch," Fatima said confidently.

"See you tonight with two more, then," he confirmed.

"Alright, then see you later big-baller," Fatima replied. Lux laughed at her compliment and hung up. He had no idea what he would be in for that night.

CHAPTER 23 - FRIEND OR FOE

The streetlight aglow in the darkness of the night reflected off the two lovers as they horsed around in Cobbs Hill Park. Sherise laughed, wrestling with Darnell's belt clasp. She jeered mischievously, "Come on, nigga, you shook, quit acting like a damn punk."

Darnell laughed as he picked Sherise up by her thighs and ran around with her in circles. Her hair blew in the last week of summer's light wind.

He uttered softly, "Girl, we can't do it in the park."

Sherise retorted, "Come on, that champagne got me fucked up. You know it will be quick."

She laughed, looking at Darnell's half-drunk, sheepish face. Then she glanced at the new treasure on her ring finger. She played with his meager mind, sputtering, "A real nigga will give his bitch some dick, wherever and whenever she wants it, or you know what, Darnell?"

She paused and grinned nastily. "Or they might get it elsewhere," she said.

His heart dropped into his stomach; he felt the need to prove a point now. He agreed, "Okay, fuck it. Let's do it."

“Much better Darnell, be aggressive sometimes,” Sherise replied.

“But, what if someone sees us?”

“Then they’ll just get a free show. C’mon boy.”

She grabbed him by the hand and literally dragged him over to one of the benches.

“Okay, just sit down. I can do the rest.”

Darnell followed her order promptly. Sherise removed her sneakers, along with her tight jeans, and slid her panties down. She stuffed them into the pocket of Darnell’s shorts. She unzipped his shorts and searched for his penis. She found what she was looking for and laughed hysterically.

Darnell was ashamed. He knew why she was laughing. Even erect, Sherise considered his manhood to be undersized. She always taunted him about it and, then, followed her honesty with a lie. She would say that it didn’t matter to her; Darnell knew her real preference.

After observing his small, limp penis, she wrapped her warm mouth around it and began to deep throat his dick until it grew its limit. She sat on his stiff penis with her back turned toward him and teased him by grinding on his tip. Her hair tickled his nose; he breathed unevenly from excitement. His arms trembled while tried to support himself. Then, Sherise took Darnell’s full length inside her. It slipped in easy. She began to pump drunkenly until he quickly came inside of her. She laughed and stood up. “You bust too quick, nigga. You still got work to do.”

She grabbed a small pack of wipes from her small, black purse to wipe herself. “Damn, you don’t tell a bitch anything either. You just come all in me, huh?”

“Sorry baby,” Darnell managed to utter. He was hypnotized, still sitting on the park bench in a relaxed daze with his mouth gaping. She had been holding out on him since sometime in June; it was now September. Plus, Sherise had been the one to take his virginity. She was the only sex partner he’d ever had, and that’s the way he wanted to keep it. He snapped out of his state of bliss and groveled, remembering her warning the day they got back together,

“Boo, it won’t happen again, I promise. It’s just been a while, and I got excited.”

She looked at him with her lips pursed and said dryly, “Yeah, whatever nigga. C’mon, let’s go.”

Darnell stood up and zipped his shorts; his knees were shaking. Sherise shook her head full of jet black hair and snorted, “Give me my panties, mini-me.”

She snatched them and laughed so hard at the face he made that champagne came out her nose.

* * * *

Fatima dialed the number to Sherise’s phone. She wanted to let her friend know that she had talked to Tasha, and she knew about everything that happened. A sly look came across her face when she heard Sherise’s voice on the phone. “Hey, bitch, what’s good?”

Fatima, brewing her plot, replied with her usual greeting, “What’s good with you, bitch?”

Both women laughed, but not like they usually did. After the fake laughter ended, Fatima said, “Damn, why you do that bitch like that?”

Sherise responded, pretending to know nothing, “What? What you talking about?”

Fatima went on, chaotically, “Yo, you got that hoe on crutches and everything. Her grill is all scraped up and shit. Why don’t you ever return my calls?”

Reesie simply replied, “Oh well. That’s how shit is sometimes. I just do me, ya heard?”

“So what now, you done started school with all those little know-it-all square bitches, and you forgot how to pick up the phone and call a bitch, Sherise? What, you too good now?”

“Fatima, what are you saying? I can’t spend all my days with you. I plan to graduate college and make something out of my life.”

“Pss..., you think school is gonna help ya ass get ahead in this world. I know people who graduate at the top of their class and still ain’t worth shit,” Fatima replied.

“Well, that’s them and I’m me, so Like I said; I’m doing me.” She didn’t want Darnell to know what they were discussing, so she switched topics. “So anyways, what’s poppin’ tonight? Some real shit? I wanna go out tonight. It’s been a while, Fatima.”

Fatima came with more news, and replied. “Oh, I’m hitting up the spotlight, and then I’m getting up with Lux.”

Sherise began dumbfounded, trying to hide her anger over Lux, “Oh yeah. Oh, um, that’s what’s up.”

She tried hurriedly to get off the phone, “Alright, I’ll see you later then.”

She hung up the phone without hearing Fatima’s reply. *The phony bitch is throwing salt*, she thought madly. Darnell gazed at his woman’s expression and asked, “What’s wrong, Boo?”

She just rolled her dark, bedroom eyes and remained silent.

* * * *

Fatima was satisfied when she hung up with the bubble-headed bitch. She had known Sherise since they were thirteen years old, and she knew she had struck a nerve by mentioning Lux. Everything was going just the way she wanted it to go. Now, all she needed was for the robbery to go smoothly. She planned to get the money and hop on the first thing out of Rochester.

Fatima glanced at the time on her cell phone. It was approaching 9:30 PM. Bianca would be there any minute. She couldn’t wait until Sherise saw her with her new homegirls. She’d bet her last buck that the bitch would hate the two new women.

Around ten o’clock, Bianca made it to Fatima’s pad. Bianca and Anna sat on the long sofa downstairs in Fatima’s

living room, both dressed impressively. Neither one of them noticed that all of Fatima's belongings were packed in suitcases along the walls in the living room. Bianca wore walnut-colored, leather high heels that complimented her walnut-colored dress. The gold sparkles she applied to her skin gave her bright features a radiant finish. Bianca, tall and busty, wore her relaxed, medium-length hair just above her shoulders; it was freshly done, highlighted with tricolor dyes.

Anna, petite and shapely, wore an olive green slip dress that you could nearly see her flesh through. Her three inch heels made her nearly six feet tall. Anna wore her long, wavy, dark brown hair about halfway down her back. It was highlighted with gold dye. Both women's outfits were more expensive than something they would normally wear.

Bianca peered at the young, rican girl and raised a brow. Cautiously, she asked, "How old are you?"

Anna looked at her with excited, wide eyes and answered in a childish voice, "I'm sixteen. I'll be seventeen next July."

Bianca boldly continued to be nosey and asked, "Yo, you're fuckin' already, mah?" Anna nodded yes. Before Bianca could ask another question, Fatima was coming down the stairs; her hair was hanging much longer than it had been earlier that day. She used a wig for her new look, and it made her look years older than twenty. Both girls stared at Fatima like she was the second coming.

Her dark face and jewelry glowed. Her skin-tight dress accentuated her backside. The elegant threading made the arch in her back look like an illustration.

She was rocking her gold, Cuban link with the provocative medallion. She posed like a model when she reached the bottom of the stairs.

Gesturing in Anna's direction, Bianca asked, "Yo, is she gonna be able to get in the Spotlight? Don't you gotta be eighteen?"

Fatima replied, nonchalantly, "So? I got the hook up. I'll get her up in that bitch."

She winked her eye and gave a sneaky grin. “I got this. Feel me, Bi?”

Anna smiled with reassurance at her master’s words. All three girls took a shot of Remy from a bottle that Fatima retrieved from her kitchen cabinet. On their way to the club, they all talked about what song they wanted to dance to and how all the other bitches were going to be hatin’ on them.

The youngest of the trio, Anna, was walking on sunshine; it was her first time ever going to the club. She usually would just spend nights making money for Fatima, but now she would be able to have a little fun. Bianca was just glad to be getting out of her mother’s house for a change. Fatima had much deeper reasons and desires for going to the club. First, she would shit on Sherise for being the big-headed bitch she was. Then, she would follow through with her power move.

It was a rowdy crowd at the Spotlight that night. It was Saturday, known as reggae night at the club. The doorman’s eyes undressed the three attractive vixens as they entered the night club through the VIP entrance. For the past couple of weeks, Fatima had been building a relationship with the owner of the place. She told Frank, the older, wrinkle-faced Italian, that she would let him get a taste of Anna if he’d agree to let the younger girl in the club. The man was excited by the offer; he and Fatima struck a deal.

At the bar, Fatima stood with the other two girls that she came there with. She hollered over the booming bass, “I’m going to mingle. Y’all can do your own thing. Just meet me back at the bar at one o’ clock!” She slapped Anna on her young, soft ass and sneered. “Hey, bitch. Listen up. Don’t run off with none of these lames.”

Anna responded, nervously, “Okay, Fatima, I won’t.”

Bianca snickered at the couple. After icing Anna for few seconds, Fatima roughly pushed her way to the back of the place. She pushed open the huge door that led outside. She glanced around and saw Bags and her brother Reggie in a dark green minivan with tinted windows that Bagz said he would rent from a crack fiend.

She strolled over to the van and got into the back seat. The two men passed an L back and forth as they waited for Fatima to give her final orders.

“Now, once y’all rent the hotel room, make sure to keep one copy of the cards so y’all can just come right up in there. I left my car door unlocked. Put the other one inside of the glove box.”

Confused, Reggie asked, “How are we supposed to know when to come in?”

Fatima snapped, “Listen here, dumbass. This is real business. I told you the answer to that a million times. Just come in that bitch with your guns out when you get my text. You feel me?”

Reggie looked stoned as he took a long drag from the Dutch Master. He passed it to the short, dark-skinned man. Bagz had eyes like a hawk, and his scrawny frame was built like a twelve year olds. Bagz finally spoke as he blew out a cloud of smoke. “There’s gonna be just two niggas up in there, right Fatima?”

Fatima looked at the small raspy-voiced boy and said, “Yep, that’s all. Just two. Make sure y’all get to the hotel before me. Chill in the parking lot until its time.”

Reggie and Bagz agreed. Fatima took one last look at the two boys, trying to determine if their demeanors hid any fear. Bagz’s face was calm, but Reggie had an indistinguishable twinkle in his eyes. Reggie had done a lot of crimes, but none of them were serious as the one he was about to attempt. Fatima ignored the warning and stepped out of the van. In full stride, she walked back toward the rear entrance of the club.

* * * *

Sherise went home and took a shower. She got dressed in a snug slip dress and a pair of matching stilettos. Darnell was pissed that she had just dropped him off and continued to the club in an outfit that revealed everything. However,

she had sweet-talked him, and he gave in. “Baby, why you gotta go out on the night I proposed to you?” Darnell had asked like a child.

Sherise had flared her nostrils and said, “You be wilding baby. I’m still young, and I got friends. You can’t have all of my time. I’ll see you later. Goodnight.”

He sunk down on the sectional and watched her parade out of the house without even kissing him goodbye. He had numerous thoughts running through his skull that night.

Sherise arrived at Spotlight around 12:45 AM. She was anxious to see Fatima and, hopefully, Lux too. Since the first time they had met at Spotlight, he had answered only one of her calls; then, he had the nerve to hang up on her. She angrily thought to herself how Fatima had been the reason behind it all.

Sherise stood near the entrance until her eyes adjusted to the darkness of the place. She carefully scanned the club for familiar faces. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw Fatima leaning coolly against the bar, chatting with two other chicks she had never seen before. As she approached, she could see that Fatima had stepped up her gear game, and her hair looked a lot better than it did before.

The place was packed, and it felt over one hundred degrees in the club. Sherise blotted sweat from her temple as she reached the bar where the three girls were chatting merrily. Sherise yelled loudly, going unnoticed by the trio at first. “What up, Fatima?”

The foxed-faced girl looked Sherise up and down; she looked hot, as usual. Startled slightly, she yelled out over the bass. “Hey, girl, I ain’t seen you in a minute. How are you feeling? I see your ring finger is shining these days.”

Sherise answered with an uncharacteristic smile, “I’m good, how about you?”

Fatima put on her plastic New York City twang. “I’m good, better than ever. Oh damn, please forgive my rudeness.”

Fatima gestured toward the two girls she was standing with. “This is my bitch, Anna, and my bitch, Bianca.”

Anna waved bashfully. Bianca just bobbed her head in Sherise's direction and took a sip from her drink. Sherise rolled her eyes at the big-chested woman, turned back to Fatima, and said, "So, you are getting up with Lux, huh? All of a sudden, Lux is your lick, right? Is that what's going down?"

Fatima smirked and replied, "Well, yeah, around one-thirty. You wanna roll?"

She laughed inside at the pitiful look on Sherise's face. She continued to rub it in, "Yeah, that nigga basically bought me a whip. He's been looking out. You feel me? Oh, do you want a drink? That's the least I could do for you hookin' me up wit' Lux."

She cackled wildly, acting drunker than she really was. Sherise's anger began rising. "How you two get up? I don't remember giving you his number."

Fatima replied, "You can't remember shit when you get drunk..."

Sherise cut her off sharply, "Yo, I don't even know why I fuck with your shady ass! Ya sittin' up here tryin' to play me like I'm some kinda lame bitch! I thought I was supposed to be ya girl from way back? But, you know what? I just figured out that you just a hater, and you know what else, bitch? You're gonna get yours!"

Fatima sucked air through her teeth. Anna stared, shocked at how fast the two ladies flipped the script. Bianca didn't like Sherise at first sight, so, obviously, she was ready to throw blows. Sherise stormed off toward the dance floor, not giving Fatima a chance to lash back. Her feelings were hurt. She could hear Fatima over her shoulder yelling loudly, "You're the last bitch who should be calling someone a hater. Betta' take another look in the mirror, you bobble-headed bitch!"

Sherise kept walking, ready to explode. She was fed up with Fatima. Sherise made a promise to herself. She would have nothing to do with that two-faced bitch ever again. But she wouldn't have to keep her promise; fate would keep it for her.

CHAPTER 24 - BLOOD MONEY

Lux and J-Money had rounded up the last of their cash for the night. They had a gram spot that they shared profits from on the lower east side of the city. They had been riding together all that day. Both of them had picked up the cash from four other crack houses in which both of them had cash invested. Now, they foolishly rode around with a grand total of sixty thousand dollars on them.

In a serious tone, Lux asked, “Yo, J, you gotta go to your pad or make any other stops before we go drop this cake off?”

“Drop the money off?” J-Money asked in disbelief. “Damn, we about to go all the way out to Lockport tonight. That’s an hour both ways, and then we gotta sit there and count the shit the cats from Buffalo dropped off. We gonna miss the date wit the bitches and miss Nitro.”

Lux furrowed his brow and held back a sarcastic response. His phone rang over the “Rocboys” anthem by Jay-Z that was bumping in monotone in his Chevy Caprice. It was a text message, but he didn’t check it. He figured it might have been Nitro. They had issues to discuss that night.

Once he parked, he would make sure to call him back. Lux finally agreed with J-Money after thinking it over. It was a lot to do, and they did have to hit Nitro with some dough anyway. So, having the money on deck was probably their best bet. The night before, he had asked Nitro to hang out with him and Money so they could go over the details on some hit Lux had in mind. Some rival dealer Big Chucky was getting out of hand. Word on the street was that he had been robbing all of Lux's and J-Money's street soldiers over the past two weeks. He was putting a nice dent in their pockets too. Lux knew this would end soon. Nitro would quickly put him to sleep for twenty stacks. After he gathered his thoughts, Lux began dictating the situation as usual.

“Okay, my nigga, we can just drop the cash off tomorrow. I'd rather us just keep it with us instead of going to my house. I don't wanna have to face Tara tonight. She gonna try to keep a nigga in the house and shit.”

J-Money laughed, because he had the same problem. Lux went on sarcastically, “Damn, I hope we don't run into Big Chucky on our way to Nitro's pad.”

J-Money chuckled nervously. Lux ignored his friend's vibes and went on cheerfully, “Yeah, I plan on putting Nitro on with Fatima tonight. That will be a little bonus for the job, my nigga.”

Both men laughed. Lux took a left off Kingston onto East Main Street and navigated his custom, two-toned Caprice over to the west side to pick up Nitro.

* * * *

Later that night, the Hotel's parking lot on West Ridge Road was nearly packed, which was a relief to the two men that waited in the green minivan in a shadowy corner of the lot. Reggie and Bagz sat there with their simple minds fixed on their small share of the take. With a tremble in his voice, Reggie quietly said, “Man, I hope this shit goes well.”

Bagz barely glanced over at his friend. He knew Reggie wasn't built for the job.

Bagz reassured him, "Shit will go fine, my dude. Just don't panic if shit gets real in there. You gotta be ready my nigga. I got your back."

Bagz gave Reggie a hard pat on the shoulder and continued in a confident tone, "C'mon, man, put on your game face on, get your mind right."

Before Reggie could get his confidence up, a text message popped up on his phone. It was Fatima. The text read, Come on, it's time.

Reggie's shaky palms grabbed the two .38 specials out of the glove compartment. He handed one to Bagz, who knew what the text meant without even asking. The small black man pumped himself up; his eyes were fixed on the back entrance of the hotel. Bagz said, "Don't forget, I got your back."

He pulled out a Newport, lit it, and took a few drags. Then, he passed the bust down to Reggie before they departed the van. Inside a hotel room in the Holiday Inn, Anna and Bianca were as high as ever. Lux had rolled up five dutches of Sour Diesel to set the mood.

Fatima didn't drink or smoke too much that night, she wanted to be on point for the robbery. There was one thing that was really bothering her. She hadn't planned on Lux bringing Nitro along. She observed the quiet, dark-skinned man with gleaming, black eyes. She didn't think much of him, maybe because he didn't say much. He had kept a vigilant eye on her ever since they'd been in the room.

The young crowd in the room exploded in laughter. Lux was pointing at Anna; her eyes bulging crazily from the ecstasy pills. The teenage girl had nearly become hooked just like Fatima, even though they mostly used it as a sex stimulant. Lux joked, "J, I'm glad you got a second room for that crazy-eyed bitch tonight. She looks like she might try to kill you!"

Bianca, laughing uncontrollably at the girl, said, "Y'all ain't right talking about that little ass girl."

She shook her head and continued, “So, when are we going to get this party started? The room is big enough for all of us. Shit! I ain’t shamed of my body.”

Nobody responded to Bianca’s words. Lux pulled a large knot of cash from his bulky jeans pocket. From where she sat, Fatima tried to count the money as he flipped through hundred dollar bills. Then, for some reason, she glanced up at Nitro, who was sitting near the window, off in his own world, sipping on a fifth of Hennessy. She hoped that her brother and his friend would get whatever he had too. Lux revealed his priceless smile. He peeled off a thousand dollars from the stack of money. He gestured toward Bianca, handing her the money from the other bed where he was sitting.

“Here you go, Shorty. Since you wanna get this shit crackin’ right away, go take a shower.”

Bianca grabbed the bills and responded, “Shit, a shower? I took one before we met y’all niggas at the club. I ain’t a dirty bitch, son.”

Lux twisted his mouth. “Yeah, I saw you dancing the night away when I came in. Your pussy is probably a sweat box now. So, go hop your ass in the shower.”

The whole room laughed at Bianca; she even laughed at herself, because she knew the man wasn’t lying. Without another word, she stuffed the money in her D cup bra and started for the bathroom. Nitro spoke up before she could go in and start her shower. “Hold on, mah. I gotta piss first, let me go right quick.”

He sat his bottle of Henny down and walked toward the bathroom anxiously. Bianca sat back down and pulled the money from her bra. She looked at it like it was the last money on earth.

Just when J-Money was getting ready to tell Anna to follow him to the other room, the door suddenly swung open. Two kids sporting black shades stormed through the door. Their guns were pointed directly at Lux and J-Money, who were sitting on the bed closer to the door. Anna and Bianca had no knowledge of Fatima’s scheme. Fear crept into their

eyes; they were scared nearly breathless and frozen to their seats.

Fatima amused herself watching the fearful faces of both Lux and J-Money. Reggie shouted, “Everybody, lay down, y’all know what the fuck this is!”

Lux dropped down to his knees, remembering that he and J-Money had left their burners in his car. J-Money fell down, stomach first, onto the carpet. Bagz ran up on J-Money and rummaged through his pockets; he came up with two huge wads of one hundred dollar bills.

Reggie shoved the barrel of his toast into the back of Lux’s head and forced him all the way to the floor. He nearly ripped out the man’s pockets and revealed a huge stack of hundreds. He held the gun shakily, almost dropping it. He was mesmerized by the money in his hands.

Lux, frustrated, banged his fist into the rug and cursed, “Y’all is some dead muthafuckas!”

Reggie snarled, “Move again! I’ll Swiss-cheese your ass!” He continued with anxiety in his voice, “Yo, let’s get the fuck out of here!”

Nitro heard the ruckus outside of the bathroom. All night, he had been thinking that something didn’t feel right. He removed the chrome .45 from the lining of his leather jacket and cracked the door effortlessly. He could see the three women lying on the floor.

His eyes glittered dangerously as he silently counted to three and slipped from the inside of the bathroom with the grace of a cheetah. Fatima glanced up from the carpet at Nitro holding the gun. She cursed herself silently for not warning Bagz and Reggie about the third man.

Bagz had the drop. He fired a shot from his .38. It missed Nitro by inches and zinged through the wall behind him. Bagz ran out of the room when he realized he missed his target. Reggie was too late. From less than fifteen feet away, Nitro put two bullets into Reggie’s shoulder and torso. The money Reggie was holding flew up in the air and came down like confetti. The boy collapsed on the rug, shrieking in pain.

The room transformed into a mad house. Fatima stared, frightened, at her brother lying on the floor squirming around in a pool of blood. Anna was confused and screaming, she couldn't move. Nitro pointed his gun and said, "Everybody, shut the fuck up, before I shut you up!"

All Anna could do was stare at the man on the floor. She noticed it was Reggie once the shades slid from his pain-filled face. The trigger man sneered. "Shut up damn it! Before I make more puddles in this bitch!"

Bianca tried to run for the door. Nitro pointed his gun at the girl and made her go back to where she was. Lux and J-Money got up from the floor, listening to the injured kid call out his sister's name for help the whole while. Reggie was in too much pain to realize that he would get her killed if her plot was revealed.

His yells quickly became weak whimpers. He rolled on the floor wildly with blood leaking from between his fingers. He murmured in desperation to his sister, gazing at her face from the floor in terror. He gurgled deliriously and whispered, "Get an ambulance for me. I don't wanna die, Fatima. Please, Fatima, mamma's gonna be mad at us."

Blood streamed from the corners of his thin lips. She tried to ignore her dying brother, but the whole room had heard Reggie. Fatima lied; her life depended on it. "I don't know that muthafucka. How does he know my name?"

Nitro kicked Reggie in his head as he lumbered over to Fatima and the other two girls. He looked at them with his violent eyes. "So, you stupid bitches were trying to set my niggas up?"

Anna and Bianca were too scared to plead their innocence at the time. Their terrified eyes stayed fixed on the man's weapon. The girls' anger toward Fatima couldn't outweigh their fear at the moment. He raised his chrome, ready to do more damage. J-Money spoke up, "Yo, yo. Don't do it!"

Nitro protested adamantly, "Man, these bitches just tried to get you robbed. Now you're sticking up for them?"

Lux spoke up with authority, “Naw, not here. Take them to the spot. Let’s get out of here. Somebody might have called the cops.”

Lux and Money led the way. Nitro began to force the three women out of the door with his gun. Upset that he couldn’t kill them there and then, he kicked Bianca in her back. She tumbled to the rug defenselessly. Fatima was able to sneak one last look at Reggie, who was still sprawled out on the hotel room floor. The money scattered around his body soaked up the blood like a sponge. He lied there still and drained of life.

Lux and J-money scanned the hallways for any cameras. They didn’t see any, so they proceeded to exit the room with revenge burning in their eyes. Nitro smashed the butt of his handgun into the back of Fatima’s skull. She almost fell down as a trickle of blood ran down the back of her neck from the blow. When they neared the first flight of stairs that led to the back doors of the hotel, he ordered her to give him her car keys. He growled at the women, “Move, you dirty bitches, ‘cause I’ll shoot y’all asses right now!”

He kept his gun low but still had it drawn. He looked up at the other two men and said, urgently, “Y’all go ahead and get the fuck outta here. I’ll take care of them.”

Lux and J-Money slipped off around the building, heading for Lux’s two-toned Chevy. They took the fastest route away from the murder scene.

Fatima was thinking frantically about how to save herself. This was her only chance, she thought. Maybe, if she rushed him, the other two girls would help. She and the other two women were in front of Nitro when they approached her old Toyota Camry. The girls hesitated when Nitro ordered them into the car.

Fatima suddenly rushed at the man and began trying to wrestle the pistol from him. Before the other two girls could assist her, Nitro pushed her off easily. He was simply too strong for her. He pumped three bullets into Fatima. One went into her chest the other two split her face in half,

causing brain fragments to splatter on the ground. Her body hit the ground like a slab of meat.

Nitro snatched the keys from Fatima's dead grasp and turned the gun on the horror-struck girls and forced them into the car. Bianca drove fast with Nitro in her ear ranting wildly, "Drive, stupid bitch, drive!"

He heard the sirens coming from a distance. Anna was sitting in the passenger seat, bawling uncontrollable. She knew her fate. She was young, but she understood that they had witnessed two murders and there was no way this animal was going to let them free. They neared the 104 expressway. He would lead the girls to the private land that he and his team maintained for bodies. The only thing that bothered him was having to bury them by himself. Murdering them would be simple.

CHAPTER 25 - A CHANCE TO CHANGE

Sherise dressed with care. The black dress looked like it had been painted onto her shapely body. She had cried uncontrollably about her friend's death. It had been a week since Fatima and Reggie had been murdered; their mother, Deborah, had called Sherise and told her the horrifying news. Sherise regretted the fight she'd had with Fatima that fateful night. She desperately wished she could be with her dear friend at least one more time. But in reality, she knew that she would never see her friend's face again—it would be a closed-casket ceremony for Fatima.

As Sherise wept at the shocking news, Deborah had talked to her about learning from Fatima's mistakes. Sherise remembered the woman saying that Fatima's death should be a wakeup call for young people from the hood, especially young women. She stressed the fact that people their age should take more pride in themselves and should become more responsible young adults. Sherise considered Deborah's words and actually gave them deep thought as she

and Darnell made their way to the Metropolitan Funeral Home on West Avenue.

They rode in silence, still shocked by the catastrophic loss made even more real by the wake. Sherise pulled her black Acura RL into the jam-packed parking lot of the funeral home. They got out of the car and slowly walked past other mourners who were leaving the place. Most of the women there cried while holding the hands of little ones who had no clue as to what was going on. This would be the first time Darnell had ever seen a dead body, and he began to sweat as he entered the funeral home. They made their way through the crowded main aisle toward the front. The tie Darnell wore felt like it choked him harder with every step he took. As they moved forward, they could see two caskets: the open one was Reggie's and behind the closed one stood huge portrait of Fatima. As Sherise studied the two-year-old high school picture of her friend, her eyes began to play tricks on her. For just a moment, Fatima's portrait morphed into a portrait of Sherise. Tears freely rolled down her butter pecan cheeks. She just couldn't grasp the reality that her friend was gone. Darnell hugged his woman tightly, and shortly they began to move on. Darnell could feel her pain; he knew she missed her friend dearly.

As they started toward Reggie's casket, a small crowd of mourners broke out into a minor dispute that was settled quickly. Sherise spotted Deborah sitting in one of the chairs close to the front of the funeral home. She walked up and greeted the lady sympathetically, "Hello, Ms. Reeves."

Deborah looked up from her trance and recognized Sherise. She stood slowly and embraced the sobbing teenager. "I haven't seen you in such a long time Sherise. Sherise replied mournfully, "I'm sorry we have to see each other like this."

Deborah, her facial features so like her daughter's, replied sadly, "I know, sweetie, I know. I tried to tell those two to leave them streets alone, but they just didn't want to listen to me. Now look at them. Both of my babies are gone, Sherise. I don't have no more kids."

She shook her head despondently at the awful reality and then sunk down into her seat with a doleful sigh. She began to weep quietly. Sherise and Darnell comforted the lady for a moment before getting in line to view Reggie's body.

After speaking to a few familiar faces, they left the funeral home still feeling the numbing effects of the horrible wake. Both of them agreed that the wake was enough and that they wouldn't go to the funeral.

The weekend dragged by for Sherise. She had stayed home for most of it, which was rare, but the thought of her friend's death kept her inside and away from any danger the streets held.

Darnell worked on Friday as usual. On Saturday, Sherise and Darnell did something different for a change. Rather than going to the mall to spend Darnell's money, they went to the Regal Theater in Irondequoit. The new Tyler Perry movie had just come out: *The Family That Preys*. Sherise loved every bit of the movie. After it was over, on their way out of the theater, she said excitedly, "Damn I didn't know that bitch could play a role like that! She got hers at the end though."

After they got home that night, they talked about Fatima. Sherise had no one she could really talk to. But like always, Darnell was there for her, listening to her vent for hours until they both fell asleep.

On Sunday evening, the rain fell heavily outside, and Sherise was bored inside. She flipped through the channels with the remote control, practically staring through the screen. She flipped to the DVR recordings list and loaded up an episode of *106 and Park* on BET.

Rocsi and Terrance were interviewing some hip-hop artist. Terrance, wearing a big grin, asked the artist, "So what can your fans expect to get out of your new album?"

The animated rapper paused to let the question sink in and then started vibrantly, "Well, basically I came with a whole new approach on this project, so I would expect my fans to get my best work this time around."

Then, almost as an afterthought, the rapper added seriously, “I hope all the young women and men get the true message of my lead single “Love yourself.”

Rocsi asked promptly, “Can you give us the true meaning behind that song?”

The MC cleared his throat and began softly, “Well, that song was inspired by a high school friend of mine that took her own life a few years back, so it’s a dedication to her.”

Terrance and Rocsi both told the rapper they were sorry for his loss and then moved along with the show. Rocsi called out the next video on the countdown and both hosts announced a commercial break. The commercial that blasted through the speakers of the television startled Sherise. The loud voice on the commercial commanded, “Wrap it up. Practice safe sex. Get tested.”

It was one of those HIV awareness ads. Sherise turned from the recording to the Lifetime channel that usually had some dramatic movie airing. Jaded by the television, she needed something to get her head right. She dug her cell phone out of the cushion of the sectional behind her. She scrolled down her call log and found Jamma’s number, her piff connect.

As she listened to the ring tone, she idly thought about how long it had been since the last time she smoked weed. At one point she thought she would quit, but then she realized that her sex drive skyrocketed after just a few puffs of marijuana. The carefree feeling it gave her made intercourse incredibly pleasurable and relaxing for her. Before she could decide whether she wanted to smoke, the monotone voice answered the phone leisurely, “Yo, what’s good, Reesie?”

Sherise answered cheerily—she’d always had a crush on Jamma, “Trying to get at you, nigga. What up, Jamma?”

He smiled at the fact that she seemed happy to speak to him. He’d always had a crush on her, too, but they had known each other all their lives. They had fucked a few times, but he decided to keep it on that level with the

promiscuous girl. “Damn, baby girl, it’s been a minute. I thought you quit or some shit.”

He continued curiously, “You moved, huh? I see your landlord got some new people up in there already.”

Sherise giggled, “Yeah, I live downtown now.”

She went on showing off. “You know, I’m up in one of those new loft joints.”

Jamma’s low voice rose slightly. “That’s what I’m talking ’bout, I wish I had it like that, baby girl.”

Sherise ignored the comment and asked a question she already knew the answer to: “Yo, Jamma, can you hook your girl up and bring one of those ten pieces through?”

The man paused briefly, then replied with coolness. “Okay, but I usually don’t deliver just a ten spot. But your cool, Reesie, so I got you. Be there in fifteen minutes. I’ll call you when I get close.”

Before he could hang up Sherise shouted through the phone. “Hey, Jamma, can you bring me a Chocolate Philly?”

He replied easily before he ended the call, “Yeah, I got you.”

She hung up the phone, glad that she was going to see a man other than the beast she entertained daily.

Sherise and Jamma sat in his grey Jetta parked in the lot behind the lofts. Jamma spoke quietly, passing an L he had been smoking to Sherise. “I heard what happened to your girl. I’m really sorry ’bout that.”

Sherise dramatically began almost tearing up as she inhaled the smoke. “Damn, I can’t believe it’s over just like that. I saw her at the club that night, and the next thing I know, she’s gone.”

Jamma replied knowingly, “Yeah, I know how that type of thing goes. Shit is messed up.”

He pulled down the brim of his New York fitted and continued calmly with his shining hazel eyes fixed on Sherise. “Have you been watching the news lately?”

Sherise answered, giving him her full attention, “Nope, why do you ask?”

He tugged at the beak of his cap again and rubbed his high face with the same palm. After shaking his head, baffled at her ignorance, he answered in monotone, “They arrested two niggas for that shit a few nights ago. They said there was hotel surveillance, and there were four others involved. They said they’re looking for one other dude and two chicks whose parents reported them missing.”

Sherise stayed silent as she released smoke from her beak of a nose. She knew this involved Lux and the two girls she had seen with her best friend that night. Now she felt good about not being able to get up with the dope boy. She felt like she just had dodged a bullet and silently reminded herself to go online and keep track of the story. Sherise passed the man his half of L back. “Yo, thanks for looking out, Jamma. I’m ’bout to let you slide.”

He nodded and watched Sherise slip out the passenger side of his ride. Her smooth, pecan-colored ass cheeks were visible through her skin-tight booty shorts. That load of ass always dazed Jamma whenever he saw the woman. Reflecting on her loose ways he pulled the car from the back lot smiling.

Sherise went back to her boring evening in the house. She wanted to ask Jamma to chill, but he always made up a reason to go, so she cut their conversation short on purpose. She rolled up her weed and smoked it, watching some old rerun on TV Land.

Sherise was out cold in front of the tube. In a deep sleep, she dreamed vividly. She could feel the cold steel Lux planted on her forehead while she pleaded for her life. She woke up in a cold sweat, the booming sound of a firearm ringing in her ears. Sherise shook the terror from her brain and snatched her phone up from the coffee table. Noticing it was past twelve thirty she grimaced cantankerously. She didn’t feel like picking Darnell up, plus she was running late.

It took all her savvy navigational skills to make it out to Jimmy’s diner before 1:00. Pissed off that she had to be there in the middle of the night, she narrowed her dark eyes and flared her nostrils. Then she spotted Darnell talking through

the window of a car. She knew that he was talking to that little dark-skinned skinny bitch she had warned him to stay away from.

Darnell was so excited telling Kamina about the wedding that he was planning for next summer that he didn't see his wifey pull into the lot. It was the only thing he talked about since he had proposed to the girl.

Sherise turned her high beams on and slowly steered the car in Darnell's direction. Darnell realized that it was Sherise after he caught a glimpse of the car and jumped away. She pulled up beside him, laughing uproariously at his evasion maneuver. She glared over at Kamina, her dark lips twisted into a taunting sneer. "Darnell, get your ass in the car and get out of that bitch's face!"

Kamina heard the threat clearly. She revved up her engine, her pulse pounding as she pulled away quickly, not wanting to feed into the drama. She felt sorry for Darnell; she didn't mean to get him in trouble.

Before the man could get both legs in the car, Sherise snapped, "Boy, I know you weren't talking to that bitch again." She continued, "Every time I come up here to get you, you're all up in that hoe's face. You must like that bitch, huh? Muthafucka, two can play that game."

Darnell didn't bother to reply. Sherise's fury boiled at Darnell's silence. She raised her right hand and smacked the back of the man's head in a swift motion. It was as if the blow had bought him back to life. He began tripping over his tongue. "I was gonna say..." She cut him off. "Nobody wants to hear your retarded ass say anything, just shut up!"

Darnell gritted his tiny set of teeth. Her ongoing verbal thrashings were wearing on his patience. He started to change the subject, but Sherise cut him short and rolled her alluring eyes. "You just don't get it, do you?"

Desperately wanting to know what the girl meant, he tried to make eye contact. "What do you mean, Boo?"

Without another word, the crazy girl blasted her car radio as loud as it would go. Darnell didn't attempt to speak again. His angered flared; he felt that she owed him more

respect, especially since he and Kamina had discussed the importance of mutual respect in a relationship. Once he'd analyzed his situation, he realized that he wanted more from her, but he didn't know how to go about getting it. He thought that he had tried everything.

The couple made the rest of trip home in silence. Sherise sped the Acura through the dark, crisp autumn morning, her mind consumed with Brandon. Once home, she locked herself up in the bathroom. She giggled and talked on the phone most of that morning. Darnell listened off and on with his ear pinned to the door. He knew that she was talking to a man for sure. He could tell by the raunchy tone the girl used. After feeling like enough was enough, he knocked on the bathroom door.

Sherise hollered, "Leave me the fuck alone, nigga. Go talk to that little crispy black bitch."

Darnell just trudged back to the bed without a word. In spite of his exhaustion, he couldn't sleep. His mind wouldn't turn off, and he just laid there feeling like he couldn't win for losing.

CHAPTER 26 - SILENT MURDER

Cory Augustine stole Brandon's attention, asking, "Hey, nephew, do you know what day the twenty-sixth falls on?"

Brandon, sitting on the other side of the small desk, answered nonchalantly, "I'm not sure."

He grabbed his cell phone, slid it open, and checked the date. Cory looked up from the paper he was reading and laughed absurdly at that the fact that his plush office had everything he needed except for a simple calendar. Brandon stared up nervously at his uncle, who was still chuckling. Noticing the man's jocular mood, he hoped that his uncle would give him the go ahead to start doing inventory for the jewelry store. Brandon announced the answer to his uncle's question with a grin, "It falls on a Monday."

Without a reply, Cory creased his forehead and thought about the plans he had for that week. He had planned to do inventory, but he planned on doing it alone. Maybe this would reveal why his profits weren't adding up. Brandon sat up in the small office chair and tried to predict what his busy-minded uncle was going to say next.

Cory refocused his attention back on Brandon and said, "Okay, take that day off. I know I usually let you do inventory that week, but I'll take care of it chief. Enjoy a day off."

Brandon produced a puny smile, but, on the inside, he was burning up. His uncle just had put a stop to his theft. He tried playing his true feelings off, but replied rigidly, "Thanks."

"Oh, yeah, Brandon I talked to your mom yesterday. She want's you to give her a call."

"Alright Unc', I'll give her a call tonight. I guess I'll be leaving now."

"Okay, take it easy, chief." Cory watched his nephew leave his office with questions stirring in his mind. He knew Brandon was up to something, and he was close to putting a finger on it.

Brandon raced his truck out of the parking lot, upset that he wouldn't be able to steal the few grand he desperately needed. His truck payment was two months behind. He needed a way to get the money. Feeling unusually tired, he drove to his immaculate suburban ranch. Once he slipped on one of his silky, red robes and a magenta terrycloth robe, he felt a bit better. He found his fluffy house slippers and copped a squat on his suede sofa. Once again, he began to read through the mail that had been accumulating for Chad.

He had found out that the yellow envelopes that kept pouring in for Chad were from the department of health, but they didn't really tell him anything noteworthy. He boiled a pot of chicken noodle soup and tried to relax. Before he could finish the bowl of soup, he could feel the diarrhea ready to make a swift exit. He shot up the stairs and made it to the bathroom before he shit himself. While sitting on the stool, it seemed to him like the temperature in the house had risen past one hundred degrees. Moments later, the hot flash left him in a cold sweat. He cleaned himself before exiting the bathroom and staggered wearily into his bedroom. He crawled under the covers feeling sickly and weak. Before he

fell asleep that early evening, he made a mental note to make a doctor's appointment soon.

* * * *

That morning, Sherise made her way out of the loft quietly and fast; she was careful not to wake the sleeping beast. Pulling up to her usual parking meter downtown, she spotted Shalonda moving with the crowd of city transportation riders. She watched the short, well proportioned girl make her way to the front entrance of the school. She was hustling, not stopping for anything. Sherise produced a joker's smile, knowing she could get the girl to get all the assignments she would miss from their Human Services class.

Sherise knew the girls routine. Every morning, before class started, Shalonda would be at the little Vietnamese woman's breakfast stand on the first floor of the Sibly's building. Sherise crept up on the tiny girl and startled her. "What's good, Londa? How was your weekend?"

Shalonda stared up, red-faced from the pounding wind outside, and sniffled before she replied, "Oh, hello Reesie, my weekend was good besides the weather. It's getting really cold really early."

"Yeah, I know," Sherise replied casually.

Stepping toward the stand, Shalonda asked Reesie, "So, how are classes going this semester?"

Sherise lied quickly, "I got A's in all my classes." Sherise did all her assignments at the last minute and turned them in late. She had really received C's.

Shalonda excitedly replied, "That's what it is girl. We'll be getting out of here in six months and doing something with ourselves."

The short Vietnamese lady behind the register at the stand asked Shalonda in broken English, "What can I get for you?"

Shalonda replied automatically, “Give me an orange juice and a sausage, egg, and cheese croissant.”

Sherise cut in, “Hey, Londa can you do me a favor, please?”

Shalonda handed a five dollar bill to the Vietnamese lady. “Sure I can, but, what is it first?”

Sherise replied with a grin, “Oh, I just wanted to know if you can get my assignments from class this afternoon, because I’m leaving early today.”

“Yeah, I can do that,” Shalonda assured her.

The lady handed the girl her bag and glass container of OJ, thanking her for her business. The girls sat at one of the small tables on the first floor dining area, talking about their high school days together at East High. They really hadn’t been friends, but they knew each other.

Shalonda began quietly, “I heard about Fatima. I’m really sorry to hear that. I wonder what went down at that hotel.”

Londa hadn’t seen Sherise since she heard about the girl on the news. She knew the two were best friends. She thought that Sherise would probably have some more details about the tragic night.

After a long silence, Sherise replied, “I don’t know girl. I saw her that night and that was all.”

Sherise was no fool, and she knew not to mention any names. She didn’t want to end up in a dirt bed.

“Did you go to her funeral?” Londa asked.

“No, I only went to the wake.”

“Shoot. I don’t like going to see dead bodies. I like to remember people as they were. It’s scary when someone that close dies. It makes me wanna change my ways.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean Londa. I try to change, but it’s so hard.

“Amen to that, girl!” Londa replied.

“What up, Reesie!” A choir of male voices yelled from across the way. Sherise looked up and saw a group of neighborhood dudes who attended MCC. She stood up

quickly, forgetting about the conversation regarding her dead friend. “Yo, Londa, you got me girl?”

Londa replied with a sigh, “Yeah, Reesie, I got you.”

I always got you, she thought dryly to herself. She watched the promiscuous girl strut over to the happy group of men. She’d picked up the girl’s work a few times last semester. She already knew Sherise’s track record. Shalonda was just one of those girls who knew how to be cool with the girl but keep her distance at the same time.

* * * *

Brandon woke up feeling a lot better than the day before. He had to be at the jewelry shop by 10 AM. He was glad that the silly, young girl had called him about a bank card she found. It would be a blessing if he could pull off something with it. Brandon dressed himself to professional perfection and made it to the mall on time. It was a slow day for Cory’s Jewelry. Once 1:30 hit, he decided to have lunch in the food court section of mall.

During his walk over to the food court, his throat began to feel itchy. Suddenly, he lost his appetite, but he decided to still head down to the food court. He was getting sleepy just standing in the jewelry store and needed a change of scenery. Before he made it to his destination, he spotted Monica and Angel strolling in his direction. The couple spotted him right away. Brandon didn’t notice how both of their faces saddened at the sight of him. Monica spoke first, hugging the man’s thin frame. “Hi Brandon, how are you doing?”

She put on a pathetic smile after greeting him. Angel shook Brandon’s hand with an uneasy look. He didn’t know whether the man told his wife about being in that gay bar or what, but that was a small thing compared to what his wife had told him earlier that morning.

After clearing his irritated throat, Brandon replied, “Hey, how are you guys doing? I see your doing a little bit of shopping. Come to buy some jewelry by chance?”

Monica answered lightly, “No, we’re just here to grab a few things for the girls.”

Brandon smiled and said, “That’s nice to hear, where are the girls? I haven’t seen them in a while.”

Monica replied, “Marianna is in school, and Gabriel is with my mother.”

Monica concluded that Brandon must not have talked to Chad, because he didn’t seem like he was upset. Recently, her mother had broke down and told her why her brother just up and ran off. She was heartbroken by the news.

After brief small talk, Monica, with her eyes locked on Brandon’s face, asked, “Have you spoke with Chad, Brandon?”

Before he could answer, a streak of anger ran through him. He answered the question with a question, “Have you talked to Chad?”

Monica and Angel didn’t miss the anger in his words. Brandon, with his forehead wrinkled, glared madly at the chubby woman. The couple looked at one another as if they were waiting for the other to answer the Brandon’s question. Brandon wondered why the couple was playing on his feeble emotions. “No, I haven’t talked to him or seen him, and I think you two know that!”

He continued with venom in his voice, “I really wouldn’t care if I ever see his ass again!”

Both of them looked at Brandon with beseeching eyes before he whirled around on his heel and stormed off in the opposite direction. Monica was mystified; she didn’t know what to do. She wished her brother would just step up and be a man.

* * * *

In classroom 5145 at the city campus downtown, Sherise twirled her wavy black hair around one finger. She reassured Brandon that the Chase Lincoln bank card was secure in the side pocket of her small purse. She had found

the card in the kitchen by the sink that morning. She knew that Darnell never left the card out in the open, so it was the chance of a lifetime that she stumbled across it.

She had told Brandon about the card early that morning during a phone conversation. She told him that she found it near her crib on the sidewalk. He told her to bring the card up to his job so they could see if it worked. He didn't care if it was hers or not, he had some plans of his own. He guaranteed her that if it all worked out, she would be able to get some jewelry or money out of the deal.

Sherise let her twinkling dark, eyes roam around the classroom. A month had passed since school started and most of the kids had learned the professor's name. If they didn't know, they wouldn't bother letting other students witness how poor their attention spans were.

Sherise didn't care though. While Professor Hewitt gave a lecture on social human behaviors, Sherise interrupted rudely, "Ms. Whatever-your-name-is, I gotta go. I got business to take care of!"

The middle-aged, brown-skinned teacher peered over her rectangular shaped glasses at the disruptive girl and replied, cynically, "First of all Ms. Sherise Fanari, my name is Mrs. Hewitt. See, it's on the board behind me."

She pointed to the black board where her name was printed in huge letters across the board. A few snickers came from the students, but they all faded as Mrs. Hewitt continued in a authoritative tone, "Yes, Ms. Fanari, you're excused. The door is that way."

Sherise rolled her eyes and mumbled something angrily as she slid from her desk and grabbed her books. She exited the classroom, swaying her shapely hips with attitude.

After making it down the escalators and out of the building, she walked across the street to her car that was sitting by the parking meter on Pleasant Street. Sherise hopped into her polished Acura and made her way out to Henrietta to meet Brandon at the jewelry store.

Her phone rang as she entered the gigantic parking lot. It was Darnell on the phone. Sherise was slightly nervous, wondering if he realized that his bank card was missing.

She tried to sound casual. "Hello babe, what's up?"
"Just calling to see how your day was going, Boo."

She replied with a lie, "It's been okay. Hey, Darnell, I gotta go. I'm running late for class!"

Before he could say another word, she had hung the phone up in his ear. She exited her car and strutted her way through the lot toward the mall entrance. She pushed through the tinted glass doors and allowed her eyes to adjust. Her scheme would get her a sparkling bracelet to go along with the diamond cluster ring that she gazed at every chance she got. She tucked it in her purse so Brandon wouldn't see it.

She had even found the receipt to the engagement ring under her and Darnell's mattress. She was shocked at the price. It made her assume that Darnell have least a few G's in the bank. She stashed the receipt in another spot so she could take it with her when she jumped ship on Darnell.

When she made it to Cory's jewelry, the security gate was pulled down with a sign on it indicating that Brandon would be back shortly. She thought about waiting there, but she decided to browse for bit and then come back. She didn't want to feel like a stalker. She strode off in the direction of a hip-hop clothing boutique. She thought idly about what Brandon would be wearing when she saw him. He always seemed to be fresh to death, matching from head to toe and dressed like some kind of big shot.

She happened to look in the direction of the food court while passing by and spotted Brandon smiling and yapping with some guy at one of the small tables. She approached the two men. When she neared them, Brandon glanced up, startled. He hadn't realized how much time he had spent chatting to James. Sherise revealed her sparkling smile and greeted Brandon, "Yo, I thought you would be at the shop. Why didn't you invite me to lunch?"

She laughed lightly. Brandon replied, his eyes shifting from James to Sherise. He wondered if either of them suspected that he played both sides of the fence.

“Yeah, I was planning to be there, but I lost track of time.”

Brandon stood up from the small table and gave the man an unusual pound with his fist that James thought was very strange. Then it all hit him, the girl must be blind to the truth. He laughed inside and went along with Brandon’s act. Brandon told the man, “Alright, see you around.”

Brandon and Sherise walked off and left James at the table alone. He wore a knowing smile as he watched Brandon and the attractive caramel vixen leave the area. Sherise glanced back at James as Brandon poured on more lies about why he didn’t meet her at the shop.

Confused, she cut Brandon off asking, “Who was that back there?”

Brandon replied with a hint of nervousness, “Oh, James? I used to go to school with that kid. He works at the boutique that sells that cheap gold.”

He went on, waving his hand in confused manner, “I think that cat is a homo.”

Sherise laughed, “Oh, oh yeah. That’s what I thought, too.”

She snickered about James while they approached the jewelry store and asked sarcastically, “Do you like men?”

Brandon quivered inside. That was the one question he never wanted to hear. He was extremely embarrassed at the fact that he liked men.

He lied, “Hell no.”

Sherise smirked with one brow lifted. Brandon’s eyes twinkled with fear. There was a brief moment of silence. Then, Sherise burst out in laughter. She apologized for making the man feel uncomfortable, “Damn, I’m sorry, Brandon. You should have just seen your face, my bad. A lot of dudes get mad when I play with them like that.”

She threw a bold compliment to ease the tension, “Besides, you fuck too well to be a faggot.”

Brandon relaxed and laughed at the young girls ignorance.

In the jewelry shop, Sherise's mind was spinning like a well-oiled machine. The glimmer in the display cases put her mind into overdrive. She pulled out the Chase Lincoln bank card from her favorite hand bag while Brandon made his way over to the cashier's booth. He pulled out a small box with a stack of receipts inside. He glanced up, noticing that Sherise was in a daze. Brandon asked greedily, "So, how much is on the card?"

Sherise came back to reality and replied, "I'm not sure. I didn't check. I don't have the pin number."

Brandon grinned, his thin, dirty-penny-colored face seemed to glow when he heard those words. She was dumber than he thought. He strutted over and held his hand out for the card. She drew closer to him away from the display case that had hypnotized her. He pointed to the section of the display case that contained the bracelets. "Do you see anything you like?"

She blushed and handed the man the card. "Yeah. So, what do we have to do to make it work?"

Brandon, full of confidence, knowing that it was going to be easier than he thought to get what he wanted, said, "Well, what you have to do is make a purchase with the card, and I'll do the rest."

Sherise replied with eagerness, smiling. "That's all? Okay."

She continued, still in shock, "For sure then. Damn. I'm with it."

She made her way back to the display case and shifted all her weight to one heel with a hand on her hip. Her eyes turned to the piece that she had been staring at just moments ago. Before he could say anything, Sherise asked, "How much is that?"

He told her the price in a breezy salesman tone, "That's around a grand, I think."

He furrowed his brow and leaned forward to examine the piece of jewelry closer. Then, deciding that the price

didn't matter as long as the card had a few dollars on it, he slipped a key chain full of keys from his pocket. After finding the key for the display case, he opened it and retrieved the sparkling, diamond-decorated bracelet. He unlatched the clasp and told her to hold out an arm. Then, he clamped the precious bracelet around her wrist. She smiled deeply at the man and looked back at her wrist to see how beautiful it looked against her butter-pecan skin. He permitted her to make the transaction on the off chance that the scandal took a turn for the worse.

He walked back to the register quickly and took a discount key tag with a barcode on it from the slide drawer in the counter and scanned it into the register. Sherise was so wrapped up in her own world that she didn't take notice of what the slick man was doing. A smile spread tightly across his handsome face. Brandon slid the piece of paper over the counter and told Sherise to sign. "Sign any name you want. You don't have to use yours."

Sherise signed the receipt with the name Paulette Anderson, a name she came up with off the top of her head. She slid the receipt back to Brandon, and he put the receipt back in the small box with all the other credit card receipts.

Now, both of them were content with their dirty deeds. Sherise didn't care that she had just put Darnell in the hole, and Brandon had no worries about the fact that his uncle's store was on the verge of closing down. Sherise and Brandon hung out the rest of the evening. They found themselves in a fancy restaurant on the outskirts of Henrietta.

They laughed and probed each other for answers to unanswered questions that they both wanted to know.

"Brandon, what do your parents do for a living?"

"Well, my mom is an accountant, and my dad is a foreman for a construction company."

"Why haven't I met them yet?" Sherise asked.

"Because, I don't get along with them."

"Why?"

"I really don't want to talk about it now. Why don't you tell me about your parents?"

“My mother died when I was ten, and I never knew my daddy.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Brandon apologized.

“No, it’s alright.”

“So who took care of you?”

“I took care of myself. I had to,” Sherise replied.

She sat at the table eating a dish of spaghetti and a fresh garden salad. She teased Brandon about the exotic dish he had ordered. She couldn’t even remember the name of it.

She asked mockingly, “What’s that stuff you’re eating?”

Brandon answered, “Oh, this is barley salmon casserole.”

She replied, “Oh, well it looks like slop.”

After eating, they sat at the table joking and verbally working their way toward Brandon’s bedroom. Sherise never notice that she enjoyed talking to Brandon as if he was one of the girls. She didn’t even notice how excited he got when they talked about fashion.

She remembered the weed she bought from Jamma that morning before school. She had it tucked away in her purse. She had a chocolate blunt in the small, black bag too. While walking through the parking lot to her car, she casually asked, “Yo, Brandon, you smoke?”

Brandon peered at the woman with a worried look, “Smoke what?”

She laughed at his befuddled look. “What the fuck you think, nigga. Weed!”

Brandon’s face relaxed into a smirk and he answered sarcastically, “Naw, that’s for dummies. Turns your brains into slop.”

Sherise was offended but didn’t let it show on her face. Instead, she defended her purpose for smoking weed, “Well, it makes me relaxed and it allows me let go of all my inhibitions.”

They stopped at her car. Before she got inside, he tried to poke more holes in her theory, “Yeah, only temporarily

though. Sooner or later, you'll start reacting slow to shit, like a retard or something."

"I don't react slowly to shit. I don't know who told you that.

Brandon shook his head. "Say what you want, but I don't want any. You can smoke by yourself." He chuckled at his own words.

Sherise got in her car feeling edgy. She didn't think much of it at that moment, but it felt like she was debating with a female friend. She thought, *what a bitch-ass-nigga. Whatever!*

She slipped inside her black RL. Brandon backed up a step, knowing what to expect next. He watched Sherise slam her door, her temper was blaring.

He walked off carelessly to his blood-red Navigator and drove off into the night, feeling victorious. He knew she had an attitude, and he didn't care if she came to his house or not. He had already got the naïve girl to fuck over someone's bank account in order to accommodate himself. She got something out of the deal too, but not nearly as much as him.

Sherise rolled up her purple haze in the restaurant's parking lot. She imagined all the things she wanted as the smoke fogged her mind's eye. She saw herself on top of the world. She saw herself escaping the everyday, doing whatever she wanted. Although she was irritated by the man at the moment, Brandon was the best thing in her life right now. He was established, he had his own house and his own car. He was more than Darnell had ever been to her.

Now that she was high and relaxed, she decided she would just follow the man home. He wouldn't mind, she figured that was the original plan before the small disagreement anyway. Plus, she needed some good dick.

Later that night, she wound up at Brandon's pad. She turned her cell phone completely off because of the string of non-stop phone calls from Darnell. He must of figured out that his card was missing or was wondering where she was. She checked to see if her engagement ring was safe inside of the side pocket of her bag. Brandon didn't have a clue that

she was supposedly in the process of getting married, and she had no intentions of him finding out. She hadn't really come up with a lie if he ever found out yet either. She would just say it was her mother's or something like that.

After she rung the bell a few times, Brandon showed up at the front door. He let her in with a leer and handed her a glass of vodka with cranberry juice and ice. She grabbed the drink, smiled, placed her bag down on the red, suede sofa. They both declined to speak about the small argument they had earlier, both of their minds were elsewhere. Now, the weed mixed with the liquor began to work its magic.

They ended up in Brandon's king size bed, both feeling hot and horny. Sherise felt like she was a queen when she was with Brandon, but he didn't really seem smitten when it came to her. She was sure she could change his mind.

Brandon moved from the position that he'd been laying in and got up to pour them another drink of vodka. He staggered drunkenly out of the room. He knew the girl wanted to fuck, it was written all over her face. He did too, but not her. Tonight he wanted a man, but he would just have to settle. She was entertaining to him, he reasoned while on his way to the kitchen for ice cubes and juice.

The glass slipped out his hand when he went to open the fridge. Sherise could hear the glass shatter followed by loud cursing from Brandon. A grin spread across her face when she realizing that she had just got a chance to be nosey. She started toward the man's closet on her tippy-toes. She had always wondered what was in there. She changed her mind when she saw the nightstand across the room.

Rummaging through the nightstand drawer, she found nothing but socks and undergarments. There were some women panties deep in the bottom. *Another bitch's drawers*, she thought as she tried to snoop and listen for Brandon at the same time. She closed the drawer quickly and opened the one directly under it. In this one, she found a few more pieces of underwear and a three pack of condoms. Then an idea she had been toying around with popped into her head. She opened the box of condoms to discover there was only

one inside. She paused and listened hard to hear if Brandon was done cleaning the glass up. She tip-toed across the fluffy bedroom carpet after hearing the man still sweeping the glass.

She dug a safety pin from her bag and began to poke holes through the condom package. She hoped he didn't have any other ones stashed somewhere else. She quickly placed the damaged rubber back into its box and back inside the drawer that it came from. She would lock him down one way or another, she thought to herself selfishly. He would have to be with her or his ass, or he would pay child support.

She crept away from the nightstand while listening to Brandon climb up the stairs clumsily from the vodka they'd been drinking. She strolled toward the light switch as Brandon reached the top of the stairs. He could see Sherise switching the light switch to an off position, and he watched her flop back down on his bed.

He sat two drinks on the small end table with a lamp on it. Sherise grabbed two of the four coasters she saw on the other end table. She put them on the table Brandon had sat the drinks on and placed the two drinks on them. Brandon smiled earnestly for a second. He imagined him and the pretty woman being a real couple. Just as quickly, he erased the thought. He couldn't be with a woman, the thought was ridiculous. She had come in handy this time around, but he had no real feelings for her. He didn't feel a need to get involved. Sleeping with her as a substitute lover was already more involved than he wanted. He could tell Sherise really liked him, but he couldn't just turn in the cards that were dealt to him.

He positioned his in a comfortable position on the plush, king-size pillow top. Sherise smiled and lovingly caressed his back. She crooned sensually, beginning to massage the man's shoulders. "So, what's up with me and you? Are we together or what?"

Brandon ignored the question. He turned around and French-kissed her while looking deeply into her eyes. She tried to say something, but he quieted her with more kisses,

slipping her skin tight top over her wavy, black hair. Removing her bra, he gnawed on her immense, dark nipples. He licked her from her breast down to her belly button, making her body quiver in pleasure.

He stood up shakily and headed for the nightstand. Sherise smiled in the shadows of the dark room. She knew he was going for the damaged condom. He unlatched his belt, allowing his dress pants to fall around his ankles. She watched the man anxiously put the ragged condom on his erect penis. He didn't notice the damage she had done to it.

Within minutes, the two lovers merged as one. He had to think of Chad the whole time to manage a steady erection. Once he was hard, he kissed her all over while she lay naked and vulnerable. He threw her legs on his shoulders and rammed himself inside of her. He just wanted to get it over with. His thrusts grew more intense with as he imagined his ex-lover.

She moaned in ecstasy, "Oh Brandon. Harder, baby, harder. Ooh, baby, make me cum."

The next morning, Brandon paced the floor, vexed. The hangover from the vodka had his head pounding. The sight of his overflowing wastebasket caught his attention. He was about to dump it when he saw that the rubber he disposed of last night was headless and empty. He knew that he had ejaculated. "Oh shit," he cursed out loud

When Sherise woke up, he would see to it that she got the morning-after pill. If she was already on birth control, that would be good too. The last thing he needed was a child, especially not with the girl lying sprawled out across his bed. Even if he was into women, Sherise just wasn't on his level.

CHAPTER 27 - WHEN SEASONS CHANGE

Sherise had been gone for over a month now. Darnell just sat there bundled up and staring blankly through the dead screen of the television set. The loft was cold and quiet. It held a stale odor from the lack of cleaning.

He reflected ruefully that even after all he did for the woman, she still up and left him so coldly. Sherise's shifty ways had pushed him toward building a friendship with his coworker Kamina. Even though Sherise resented the idea, she couldn't stop him from developing this friendship, especially when she wasn't around.

As he stood up and started for his bathroom, he cursed out loud remembering that he had to take a cold shower. His gas and electricity had been off for a few weeks now. He was a couple weeks late on the rent, and he had been promising Ross the money since the beginning of the month.

His cell phone ring stole his attention briefly; it was his mother. He stonily ignored the call. He didn't even have

enough cash to get his mother a Christmas gift, and Christmas was right around the bend.

He shook the disturbing thought from his mind and idly thought about the black president who had just been elected. Darnell couldn't even remember his name, he was so wrapped up in his own stress. Election day had been the last time he'd watched the tube. Since then, his house had become a gloom-filled box.

He had to be on the job in three hours. He began to get ready early, knowing that he had to catch the bus. He gritted his tiny teeth angrily at the thought that he had spent all that money on a car for Sherise and now here he was catching the bus again. His bad luck seem get worse after his bank card showed up missing a couple of months ago. Or maybe it was after he met the girl, something whispered in the back of his mind. He didn't want to believe that, and anyway, his failures began long before that.

Flipping through the options on his cell phone, he realized he had a doctor's appointment coming. He remembered the doctor telling him that he should be very thankful for Renae paying for his medical insurance, because the price of health coverage was exorbitant these days. He remembered that him and Reesie were supposed to go get checkups together.

During the past several weeks he had been fighting the temptation to call Sherise as he always did whenever she got the urge to shit on him. He had tried to make a promise to himself not to call yesterday evening as he sat in the depressing loft gazing out of his window until the night came along.

Darnell couldn't wait to go back to work. It was the same as usual, except the seasons had changed. The business at Jimmy's diner began to slow down, so lately his long shifts were being cut in half. Today he was praying that wasn't the case because he needed the money awfully bad.

At work, Kamina crept up behind him as he ran dishes through the washer. She took her two pointer fingers and poked him on each side of his torso. He jumped half shocked

and wheeled around to find Kamina in his face, smiling. She reminded him of a black Barbie doll. Smiling unevenly, he said, “You play too much, Black Barbie.”

Kamina laughed and began excitedly, “Hey Darnell, guess what?”

He replied trying to sound more interested than he was, “What is it? Something good I hope.”

She answered quickly, fluttering her pretty, long eyelashes, “I’m moving to Chicago with my dad. He got a real nice job there.”

She smiled widely after she spoke and patted his broad shoulder. “Aren’t you gonna say something, Darnell?”

He was saddened by the news and almost at a loss for words, but he played it off coolly. “That’s good, maybe I’ll come and visit you one day.”

She smiled, suddenly unsure of herself. “Yeah, that would be nice.”

“I wish I could move. It would be great to get away from this place.”

“I know how you feel. I’ve been living here all my life. I think I’m gonna love Chicago Darnell.”

“I really hope you do,” Darnell replied.

“Yeah, me too,” she replied she walked off, feeling the man’s vibes. The night dragged along slowly after Kamina shared her news with him. He knew that besides her, there were only a couple of other people that he could talk to or depend on, and he knew now better than he ever had before that Sherise wasn’t one of them. Once Kamina dropped him off at his mother’s house, he made sure to get her cell number. She told him her last day working at Jimmy’s diner would be this coming Sunday. He was grateful that he would at least get to spend some time with her during their last shift together. The two stared into each other’s eyes for an instant before he hopped out of her small, beater car.

Kamina wished she had a boyfriend as gentle and ardent as Darnell, but she never had the nerve to ask him out. She was even hoping that when she mentioned leaving, he would object to the idea, but he hadn’t, and that led her to

believe that he wasn't interested in her, at least not in that way.

She thought that maybe he had a lot on his mind. Perhaps the thought of her leaving didn't consume his mind as much as the problems that complicated his life. She gloomily watched him make his way up his mother's porch. After he went in, she still sat there wondering if she should go up to the door and share her feelings with him. Instead, Kamina drove home in a daze. She would miss Darnell dearly after she moved.

After Darnell finished pumping iron that early morning down in his mother's basement, he stood at the small window watching the feathery looking snowflakes bury the concrete. He turned away from the window and spotted his old jump rope in a dusty corner. He strolled over and picked it up, shaking it free of the layer of dust that it collected over the months. Feeling more beat than usual from lifting weights, he dismissed the idea of jumping rope and dropped it back on the cold, dusty floor. He hadn't worked out in nearly four months, which could have been the reason he was so fatigued. He found a seat on the edge of his weight bench and thought about where his life would go from this point on.

He thought that maybe he should just tell his mother about him and Sherise. Then he could just move back home and start getting his finances together again. He thought about all the plans he had made that seemed to be ruined, he soon became discouraged. He began to nod off while sitting on the bench and nearly fell off before he caught his balance and staggered up the basement stairs. His body felt too weak to make it all the way up to his room, so he crashed on his mother's living room sofa.

* * * *

The next day, while Darnell waited in the patients' room at Jordan Health Center, he listened to Doctor Rivera

stress the seriousness of annual checkups. The short, neatly dressed doctor rubbed his large nose with the back of his latex-gloved hand.

“Well, Darnell, as far as all your shots and your examinations go you’re all set, but as I’m looking at your chart it shows that you should take an HIV test. Your last test results came back negative, but that was over a year ago.”

The doctor paused to take a breath and then continued just as rapidly as before, “All sexually active adults should take an HIV test every six months.”

The doctor carried on, sounding more like a father than a professional. “Some people even take one every three months, especially if they have multiple sex partners.”

Darnell stared at the doctor dumbfounded, wondering if this lecture meant the doctor thought he was at risk. He asked the doctor confusedly, “What if they only had sex with one person?”

Doctor Rivera let the question sink in before he answered, looking Darnell squarely in his eyes. “It doesn’t matter if you were having unprotected sex with only one person, because what if that person is having sex with other partners?”

Darnell didn’t respond. Feeling sheepish, he had a flashback of the nasty pictures he had found in Sherise’s phone over the summer. He wondered if the dude in that picture had unprotected sex with Sherise. Darnell flinched unconsciously as that very real possibility sunk in.

The doctor startled Darnell when he suddenly asked, “So do you want to take a test? It’s completely optional and confidential.”

Darnell reluctantly nodded in agreement. Doctor Rivera briskly left the room in pursuit of a nurse who had time to draw some blood samples from Darnell. Within minutes, Doctor Rivera was back. He knocked on the door before he and the short, stubby, blond nurse entered. The doctor handed him a confidentiality contract and told him to fill out the form. Before he could even begin writing, Doctor Rivera

was talking over his shoulder on his way out the door, “Sherry’s a great nurse. She’ll take care of you, Darnell!”

The blond nurse began with a pleasant smile, “Hello, sir, how are you doing this morning?”

He replied wearily, “I’m fine, how about you?”

Sherry answered happily, “Fine, sir. Thank you for asking.”

He handed her the completed form and she sat it down on a counter. Sherry pulled the syringe free of its casing and eyed the tip carefully. Darnell shuddered at the sight of the needle. The nurse acted as if she was talking to a young child. “Which arm, right or left?”

Darnell picked his left arm and began to tighten up his fist. Sherry had no problem finding a vein. She drew two tubes of blood and explained afterward that one tube was for a syphilis test and that the other was for a HIV test.

After he left the clinic, he couldn’t keep his mind off Sherise and Kamina, or the test he had just taken. On his wintry bus ride home to an even colder loft he could no longer afford, his mind drifted into a lonely place. He was running out of options, and the unstable living conditions were beginning to take a toll on him.

CHAPTER 28 - BE MAD AT HIM

Cory Augustine's Christmas party was held at the Diplomats party house. It was Saturday night. The party was filled with wealthy, distinguished people. Men were dressed in suits and ties, and women wore elegant evening gowns. Sherise's jewelry glimmered under the bright lights of the ballroom. She wore a platinum and white slip dress that revealed every curve of her voluptuous body.

She sat in a lounge area alone, sipping a glass of Remy that the bartender had given her a hard time about. He thought she looked too young and was going to ask her for ID, but Brandon spoke up for her and the suspicious bartender backed off. Had Brandon been aware of the fact that she was under twenty-one, he would not have let her accompany him to the party. She watched the men and women smile and joke with each other. She impersonally reflected on how different she was from the rest of the women in the place. She'd bet her last dollar that none of them faced a struggle like hers coming up. The other ladies in the room didn't have to make a living by selling their bodies.

As a child she had always wished she came from a traditional family with a mother and a father. But she knew that she was stuck with the hand she was dealt. *It is what it is*, she thought frigidly. She focused her attention on her finger and the beautiful, diamond encrusted ring on it. Every time life was becoming more than she could handle, the ring took her mind elsewhere. A month had passed since she'd left the man who bought her the ring.

She remembered the cold, crisp morning of her birthday clearly. It was November the third, and she had most of her things packed in the trunk of her dew-covered car. She made sure to take all her jewels and important things with her, but she had forgotten the receipt to the ring. She had planned to pawn it eventually to get a few extra dollars. But the real fact of the matter was that she didn't want to have to explain it to Brandon if he ever asked about it.

A man interrupted Sherise's thoughts when he came up behind her and asked pleasantly, "Hello, how are you doing? I'm Cory. I saw you come in with my nephew Brandon. Have you seen him around?"

Sherise peered up at the man, her face glowing. She replied, blushing at the middle-aged man who favored Brandon, "Well, he said that he was going to talk to someone over there."

She pointed in direction of the long banquet tables with the variety of finger foods that were set out for the guests. Cory smiled at the beautiful girl and shrugged his shoulders, saying, "Well, he'll surface in a bit, I guess."

He continued, with a grin to match Sherise's, "Well, Ms. Lady, I never got your name."

Sherise sat there with her bowlegs crossed, sparkling under the lights. She extended her hand to meet Cory's as she introduced herself. Cory glanced at Sherise's wrist. "That's a nice bracelet, Sherise. Where did you get it?"

Remembering the scam she and Brandon ran, she lied, "My ex-boyfriend bought it for me."

Brandon appeared out of thin air and grimaced when saw his date and his uncle smiling pleasantly at one another.

When Sherise realized Brandon was watching them, she thought they might have been caught flirting.

Cory wasn't fooled, though; he knew that his nephew had to have the girl around for other reasons. He knew about Chad even though Brandon never came out of the closet. Cory quickly cut his eyes at his nephew and continued flirting with Sherise. She didn't let up, either.

Brandon spoke up, "Hey Unc, I got your message. I was gonna call you, but..." His sentence trailed off.

Cory interrupted boldly, "It's all good, chief, you're here now. Why don't you come take a walk with me?"

The older man's face seemed to contort and the smile he entertained Sherise with disappeared swiftly. The two men walked away, leaving Sherise sitting in the lounge area. Brandon glanced back at the girl he'd come with. The two locked eyes briefly, then he turned back around and began to talk with his uncle. There was a strange silence as the uncle and nephew walked through the glass doors that led out of the Diplomat.

Cory began sternly, "This will only take a few moments."

He reached inside his blazer and came out with a roll of papers. The papers were all of the figures that his nephew had dropped off at his office back in September. Brandon's eyes shot toward the documents; he knew what his uncle was going to say next. Before Brandon could defend himself, the older man began disgustedly, "Brandon you didn't have to steal from me, man. I would have given you anything."

Brandon stood frozen, shocked at Cory's discovery. His only reaction was to jump on the defensive. He snarled coldly, "Steal from you? Motherfucker please, how the fuck could I steal from a broke man?"

Cory furrowed his brow and began to protest, but Brandon continued unleashing verbal venom. "Besides, if I was stealing, I wasn't stealing from your ass. That's granddad's store, anyways!"

Cory lashed back, "Oh please, boy, get over it. You're childish and you're acting like you have a problem with my

father leaving me a store. Listen, your father is my older brother. My pops wanted to leave the place to his oldest son, but your dad declined for whatever reason, and I was next in line. So if you wanna be mad at somebody, shit, be mad at your dad.”

Cory caught himself before he said something that he might regret. Brandon pushed the issue further out of pent up anger. “Fuck you, Cory, those papers in your hand don’t prove shit.”

Cory had had enough of the back and forth bickering. He would settle this dispute once and for all. “You’re fired!” he exclaimed, as Brandon turned his back to go inside.

His nephew stopped dead in his tracks and wheeled around with fire burning in his eyes. He started to say something, but no words came out. He turned back around, pulled the glass door open, and furiously stomped back inside the party house. His eyes scanned the room for Sherise. He spotted her and told her that it was time to go.

She could tell by his shrill tone that the man was upset. He angrily beckoned her from a short distance. She gulped down the rest of her drink and jumped up hurriedly to catch up with Brandon. He was marching out of the place at top speed. Before he reached the exit, he saw Corey coming toward him. Brandon bumped his uncle roughly with his shoulder as they passed one another. Sherise didn’t understand what was going on and looked at the two men confusedly.

Cory ignored his nephew’s childish act. A sardonic thought crossed his mind as he watched the two leave the Diplomat party house. *Yeah, be mad at your dad*, he thought. *He was the one letting you get violated by the preacher.* He shook his head in disbelief at his punk-ass nephew and began to mingle again as if nothing ever happened.

* * * *

Later that night at Brandon's ranch, the two of them soaked in his Jacuzzi tub with vanilla-scented bubbles. Once Sherise found out that Brandon lost his job, a flash of worry ran through her mind. But when Brandon started to talk to her about his plans to recover from his financial slump, she began to relax and think of ways of her own to make money.

After getting out of the tub and drying off, Sherise eyed Brandon closely as he slipped into his polo boxers. His thin, cut frame and his soft, baby face got her in the mood straight from the jump. Brandon's physical beauty put her mind in a frenzy.

In the bedroom, they sipped vodka with cranberry juice and smoked cigarettes, still talking about ways to stay afloat and maintain their lifestyle. After a few drags, Brandon put his smoke out. His throat began to feel extremely irritated. Minutes later, Sherise began to drift off; she had thought so hard about the money situation that it had worn her out. Brandon sat up through the night with more on his mind than he could handle.

He stared at the beautiful young girl sprawled out on his bed. His anger gradually began to build. He didn't have any real feelings for her. He didn't even know why he had invited the little ghetto bitch to his crib. She had seemed to just slip in one day and never left. He began to see that all she was to him was a piece of ass when he was in the mood for a woman. And right now he didn't want one around. He glared at her in frustration, scowling. In anger, he drunkenly pulled Sherise's champagne-colored nightgown above her thickly built thighs and removed her panties. Not caring or even thinking of using a condom, he began to rub her clit roughly until her wetness was apparent. She began giggling sleepily as she became aware of what was going on. He had to hold an image of Chad in his mind to get hard as he began to position himself to mount her. His anger rose with every thrust while he rammed in and out of her, unleashing his hot fury.

Sherise laid there drunk, enduring the pounding joyfully. Brandon was furious that he'd lost his job, and most

of all he was frustrated and scared by the exhaustion and sickness that seemed to get worse every day. He used the girl like an old rag doll. Even after he released his pressure he lay there staring at the ceiling, restlessly looking for the answers to his questions. Feeling blinded by fear and shadowed by doubts, he came up blank.

CHAPTER 29 - THE LETTER

Trudging slowly through the frigid weather, Darnell listened to the snow crunching under his Timberlands. He was so exhausted before he even started shoveling that he thought he might have a slight temperature. He made his way up Renae's snowy steps and grabbed the shovel from the corner of the porch. He shoveled the stairs and the walkway for his mother. After he finished, he stuck his key in the door and opened it, knowing Renae would be there. He needed to talk with her.

He stuck his head in the door and glanced over at the sofa where his mother usually sat. There was no sign of her. He gently closed the door behind him and slipped upstairs. He tiptoed across the hall and peeped inside his mother's room, but to his surprise she wasn't there either.

Deciding to make himself comfortable before she showed, he began to ramble through the fridge until he came up on some leftover spaghetti. Made himself a plate, ate it quickly, and then went back for seconds. After he finished eating, he got cozy in his mother's spot on the sofa in the living room. Darnell realized his feet were freezing, usually

it was just the opposite. What made it even stranger was the fact that his mom's house was warm and so was the rest of his body. Unable to sleep, he stood over the heat vent before grabbing the remote and turning on the television. The set flickered to life, and the screen displayed a pleasantly plump, dark-skinned reverend sweating heavily as he spoke. He seemed to be speaking directly to Darnell as he preached the word of God. His voice projected stridently when he shouted, "Can you adapt to a tight situation? I'm talkin' to somebody in God's house this morning who can identify a tight situation."

The congregation murmured in agreement. The preacher went on preaching, patting his face with a handkerchief. "Anybody ... there's a few of us in here who can identify when money was tight.... You're dying and the doctor tells you, you got a tumor in your brain. That's a tight situation. When you got the news that your child just died, that's a tight situation."

The preacher narrowed his eyes and emphasized his next couple of lines: "Let's pray, all of God's children. *Please pray, never give in to Satan!*" Some time had gone by, Darnell had dozed off by the end of the preacher's segment. He heard the door when Renae got home from work, and he sat up on the couch. The sight of her son momentarily shocked Renae.

She took a few steps toward Darnell and realized he looked exhausted to say the least. She noticed his hair grew back into a kinky, dusty brown afro and his face looked clammy. He looked worse than he had a few weeks ago on Thanksgiving Day. It must be the little bitch, she thought to herself. Now she remembered that Sherise hadn't been with him that day. He had said she was at her mother's, which Renae knew wasn't true because she could remember him telling her that the girl's mother was dead. She had ignored the lie and just enjoyed the holiday with her son.

He greeted Renae, mustering up the best smile that he could. "Hey, Mom, how are you?"

She sighed unconsciously, “I’m doing just fine, Darnell. How about yourself?”

“I’m good, just tired from work and everything.”

Renae looked at her son’s face. She could see that he was hiding something, but she knew from past experiences not to pry. Finally, her mothering instincts got the best of her.

Darnell wasn’t surprised by her next question; he wanted her to ask. Renae took a seat on the couch next to him and inquired knowingly, “So how is Sherise doing? I haven’t seen her in awhile.”

Darnell stammered slowly, his voice trembling, “Sh...she’s gone, Ma, sh...she left me.”

Renae watched her son’s beady eyes well with tears. She’d always known this day would come. She reached out and hugged Darnell tightly and whispered to him gently, “Everything’s gonna be just fine, baby. Don’t worry about a thing.”

Darnell began to break down, mostly because of how poorly he had treated his mother before, and now she was the one comforting him. Renae felt her son’s pain, and a silent tear rolled down her face as anguish mixed with guilt. *But at least he realizes now*, she thought thankfully.

“I knew I shoulda’ listened to you, ma.”

“It’s fine. Just be thankful you found out before you got married. Marriages are easy to get in, but hard to get out of. It doesn’t work for all of us. And some people do it for the wrong reasons.”

“Yeah I’m glad I didn’t marry her, I guess.”

“Oh, Jesus Christ, I was praying you wouldn’t,” Renae laughed. Darnell joined in with his mother’s laughter, feeling better now. By the time he and Renae finished talking that morning, he had somewhat of a new outlook on life. He managed to finally get it through his skull that Sherise never did care about him. He told his mother about the incident with his bank card, and how he had been struggling for the past couple of months. She told him that everybody goes through rough times and that he could come home anytime

he was ready. She didn't want to put too much pressure on him about it, but apparently she didn't have to. Darnell was all in for the idea.

The morning slipped away as the afternoon marched in. It was sunny outside, but the weather was frigid. Darnell bundled up in his black North Face coat and scarf before leaving his mother's house.

Renae stopped her son at the door before he could leave. "Darnell, you're leaving already baby? You don't have to work until three, why are you leaving so early?"

He replied with a smile, "I'm just going to do a few things before my shift starts."

Renae stood up from the couch and asked for a hug from her son. Darnell met his mother halfway and the two shared a warm embrace.

The snow began to fall hard and heavy. Darnell wrapped his scarf around his neck and shielded most of his face from the driving snow. Once he made it to his loft, he spotted Ross's ice-covered truck in front of the residence. He kept on walking past and just decided to go into work early. He didn't want to face the man without his rent in hand.

Darnell and Kamina had wonderful conversations the whole evening. It was special to both of them, and the thought of never seeing each other again never crossed either of their minds.

Jimmy had to remind them they were at work time and time again, but Kamina didn't care because it was her last day anyhow. Darnell sat at a window booth during his break. He stared out into the wintery night, watching the lake-effect snow fall steadily from above.

Kamina slightly startled him when she appeared in the seat across from him. She spoke warmly, with her kind, bright eyes locked on him. "Darnell, I'm really gonna miss you."

Darnell smiled widely and replied whole-heartedly, "I'm gonna miss you, too."

The two admired one another. All at once, they knew that they had feelings for each other. Kamina stood up from

the booth slowly. She suggested, with her eyes twinkling, "Come with me outside for a minute."

She walked off before he could respond. Darnell got up from the booth and trailed the girl inquisitively. She made her way to the back of the diner and pushed open the door to the back exit. She stepped out into the freezing cold and looked back at Darnell, who stood puzzled in the doorway. He asked perplexedly, "What?"

Kamina blushed and bit down softly on her bottom lip. "Come on out; let the door close. It's just snow, Darnell. We'll go back in through the front."

Darnell let the door slam shut and stepped out into the chilly night air. Kamina took his hand and began softly, "I know you've been going through a lot lately, and I know you and Sherise are having problems. I hope everything works out for ya'll, but I just had to let you know that I really care about you, Darnell."

Darnell couldn't hold back the wide smile that took over his unattractive features. He blushed at the chocolate beauty; he really liked her, but he wasn't prepared for what was about to happen.

Before he knew it, Kamina threw herself into him, hugging him tightly. He warmly embraced her back, and soon they were kissing under a dark sky of falling snowflakes. Darnell felt like he was in Heaven.

Before Kamina dropped him off that night, she made it clear that she wanted him to come to Chicago with her, but Darnell said that he had to take care of a few things before he could leave. They agreed that he would come to Chicago a month from Christmas. They were both overjoyed with idea. Kamina had told her dad about Darnell weeks ago, as if the whole thing was already settled. Darnell's confidence was rejuvenated, and he lay in bed all early morning thinking about his new plans. He had to find a job in Chicago and save a few dollars to take along with him. The hardest part would be explaining the move to his dear mother. After all was said and done, he would move to the windy city and

continue the quest for what he rightfully deserved, someone who loved him for who he was.

* * * *

That Monday morning, Brandon woke up in a cold sweat. He looked to his left, quickly noticing Sherise was gone. Then he remembered she told him that she was leaving for class that morning, and he was glad of it. He rose out of bed weakly and staggered to the bathroom.

The sharp, twisting pain in his gut told him he needed medical attention for whatever was eating at his anatomy. He strained on the toilet, trying to take a shit, but nothing but urine came out. He brushed his teeth and took a hot, steamy shower.

After he got dressed, he decided to check his mailbox. He reached his hand in and came out with four pieces of mail. He looked at the envelope on the top of the stack, it was a bank statement. He quickly tucked it under the bottom of the stack and looked at the second one, which was a bill. The third piece was a bill, too.

The fourth piece of mail brought a smile to Brandon's face. It was what he had been waiting on for more than six months—finally, a letter from Chad. Grinning in amazement, he carefully opened the envelope and removed and unfolded a three-page letter. He began to read with tears of joy welling up in his eyes.

Dear Brandon,

First of all, I want to say that I'm truly sorry for leaving the way that I did. Baby, you got to understand, I'm just not myself. I've been down here in Atlanta for the last 6 and a half months thinking about you every day and regretting that I didn't stay true to you. I know from the depths of my heart that you love me.

And baby, I want you to know from the bottom of my heart that I love you, too. Even though we haven't seen each other in a few months, I still can remember your beautiful face as if I just saw you yesterday. Your touch is one of a kind, and I need you back in my life. Baby, I'm hoping you still feel the same way about me, and trust me when I tell you everything down here in Georgia hasn't been peaches and cream. I've been struggling just like you and everybody else. Gas prices are up and job openings are down. My mom and Monica told me that you were asking about me, and at first they were even looking for me until I reached out to my mother. It was hard to let everybody know why I just ran off. Then solitude got the best of me. Loneliness drove me up the wall of my studio home. Brandon, please bear with me a moment. Baby, I have to keep it 100 percent real with you. Back on New Years after me, you, my sister and Angel watched the ball drop, we went home and I went out later that night. I told you that I would be with a few friends, but I lied. I was with Sheena, my ex-girlfriend and one thing led to another that night. I ended up going to the STD clinic for Chlamydia. I had taken a HIV test that day, too, and it came out negative. I was glad of that, but the nurse told me that the results go back 3 months prior to the actual test. So I waited until late March and then tested again. 3 days later some social worker at the department of health called me up to his office to talk with me. I couldn't believe what he told me once I made it

there, baby. Even now to this day I still can't believe it. During the time this was going on, I was hiding it all from you. And the only thing that kept popping up in my head was to get away. I don't know any other way to put this, but I have to let you know that I'm HIV positive, Brandon, and I was just too ashamed to stay around after finding out the news. Please, I'm begging you if you can find it in your heart, please forgive me if I have infected you. I never meant to hurt you baby, I swear. I don't have a phone, so I don't have a number to give you, but my address is on the front of the envelope. Please write me back.

Love always, Chad Torres.

After he finished reading the letter, his body became numb. Brandon felt like his head was going to explode. He dropped the sheets of paper. Tears began to roll down his face, and he wailed like a child as he thought seriously about whether he was infected or not. He never considered that the symptoms he was could be HIV, but now it all was making horrible sense. He cursed out loud, and a vein protruded from his temple as he screamed, "That motherfucking Chad! You really fucked up this time."

He threw his glass coffee table into his living room wall and kicked the television set off its stand. He spun around weakly and fell to his knees. He cried a puddle onto his red suede sofa. The situation was too devastating for Brandon to cope with at the moment.

After crying until he was hoarse, he pulled himself together and slowly got up from the rug. He went back up the stairs and began to immediately pack all his clothing. He had decided to leave for Atlanta that afternoon. He wanted to see Chad face-to-face, but more than anything, he still

wanted the man. Even after the crushing news, he still held loved for Chad. He would be on the plane heading south by the time Sherise returned. He wouldn't even warn her.

CHAPTER 30 - TWO-WAY TRICKERY

Sherise strutted out of old man Ronnie's shabby apartment that Monday morning. Being back in her old neighborhood gave her a queasy feeling in her stomach. It was cold outside, and the scattered snowflakes lightly covered the gritty, urban pavement. She disarmed her car alarm, made her way to the car, and slipped in.

The old man had just given her nearly half of his monthly check. She didn't want to do it, but Brandon had been stressing about money since the night that his uncle had fired him. It was a quick four hundred, but she knew that it wouldn't even put a dent in the cost of their lifestyles.

Then, suddenly, another idea came to her. She could sell her ring. That would be enough to hold them over until he found some kind of employment. Then, she remembered the receipt.

She cursed angrily when she remembered that she had left it at Darnell's house. She would just try to sell the ring without the receipt. *Someone will buy it*, she thought as she

pulled the ring from her purse where it had been since Sunday night. It glimmered between her two fingers as the morning sun shone upon it. She wanted to keep the ring, but it was too risky to keep trying to hide it from Brandon. She didn't want to lose him. In addition to that the ring, she had a car payment and a cell phone bill to pay. So, getting rid of the ring was probably a good idea. After minutes of debating, she finally pulled from the curb and headed to a breakfast spot on Upper falls Boulevard to kill some time.

The pawnshops didn't open until ten that morning. She ate her steak, egg, and cheese bagel in the dining room of the restaurant. Afterwards, she drove herself to the pawn shop on Clinton Avenue. She casually walked into the place. She spotted the overweight pawnshop owner behind the bulletproof glass.

He greeted Sherise sternly through the glass, "Hey, what can I do for you?"

Sherise pulled the ring from her purse and slid it under the bulletproof glass. "How much will you give me for that?"

The fat, Hispanic man snatched the ring up from the counter and examined it closely. He checked to see if it was real. Once he was done with his appraisal, he looked at Sherise with dead eyes and said, dispassionately, "I can give you like eight hundred for it right now."

Sherise turned her nose up at the man's offer. "Naw, I'm good. Give me my shit back."

The man simply slid the ring back under the glass. She grabbed it, turned on her heel, and left the pawn shop. There was another place she could go to on the west side that might give her a better offer on the ring. She stopped at the old A-Plus on West Main that was now owned by Arabs. She tossed fifteen dollars on the counter. "Yo, Fifteen on pump four please."

She jogged out of the convenient store, slightly agitated. She had to piss badly, it seemed to sneak up on her out of nowhere. Before heading to the next pawn shop, she found the nearest establishment with a restroom and relieved herself. After leaving the restroom of the small diner, she

grew concerned about the smell that had escaped her panties when she used the bathroom. It smelled the same as when she had a yeast infection the month before. She ignored the problem and continued to the west side pawn shop.

She ended up leaving the place still in possession of the ring. She was upset. The owner of the pawn shop demanded a receipt to do any kind of business at all, but they promised her two grand for the ring if she could retrieve the receipt. The pawn shop owner didn't want to take a chance on possibly buying stolen goods. He lost money the last time that happened.

She drove aimlessly in deep thought, trying to come up with a way to get inside of Darnell's house for the receipt. In that instant, one of her various ringtones shattered the silence of the car. She scooped her phone up from the passenger seat and saw the familiar phone number glowing. She answered curiously, "Hello?"

The voice on the other end spoke calmly, "Hey, Sherise, how are you doing?"

She had erased his number from her phone, but she recognized the mechanical voice of Darnell.

She replied selfishly sweet, "I'm doin' okay, I guess. I know how I left was wrong, but I just need to get my mind right. I don't need a relationship right now. You can understand that, right? Anyway, how are you doing?"

Darnell replied unfazed, "I'm doing okay."

She laughed, confused. She was expecting him to whine about how he wanted her back, but nothing like that came from Darnell's mouth.

She sarcastically asked, "Darnell, are you calling for your ring? Do you want it back? I understand if you do, but I'm not really feeling any of that Indian giving shit."

Darnell cut in sharply, "No, Sherise, I don't want the ring back."

He continued to sound distant and unusual. "I was just worried about you, so I put aside some of the money my mother loaned me in case you needed some. I know money might be tight now that you're in your own place."

There was a moment of stillness before Sherise laughed and responded greedily, “Oh, well yeah, it has been kind of rough, and I could use the extra money.”

She continued, anxiously asking, “Darnell, do you still have the receipt to the ring?”

He didn’t answer right away. Seconds later, he replied dryly, “It’s at the house, under my mattress.”

Knowing that she had moved it high on top of the kitchen cabinet of the loft, she quickly agreed to come by and pick it up along with the money. Darnell spoke like he was in trance, “Sherise, can you give me like thirty minutes? I’m on the bus on my way home. Why do you want the receipt to the ring?”

“For proof that it’s mine, Darnell,” She answered. Noticing the man’s behavior, Sherise attempted to break the eerie vibe of their conversation, “Where are you coming from, work or something? You...”

The phone died in her ear. A spark of anger shot through her, but she still ignored Darnell’s unusual actions. She started to call him back and curse him out for hanging up so abruptly, but the possibility of not getting the money or the receipt caused her to think better of it.

* * * *

Brandon heard his phone ring as he loaded his truck furiously with all the things that he was taking with him to Georgia. He dropped the duffel bag that he was carrying and turned around, picking his phone up from his bed. Seeing Sherise’s number, he allowed the call to go to the voicemail. Suddenly, his Blackberry rang again before he could get out of his room. He coldly answered the phone on the first ring, “What?”

Sherise was shocked by the way Brandon exploded. She didn’t quite know what to say. With a quake in her voice, she said, “What’s wrong, Brandon?”

“Everything! First of all, you and me are not an item!”

He lowered his voice slightly. “Listen, I don’t really like you like that, Sherise.”

Those words deflated her. With her voice beginning to crack, she responded angrily, “Man, where is all this coming from, Brandon? What the fuck you mean you don’t like me like that, nigga? You was fucking me like we had something special. It’s been over two months now!”

“Sherise, all your things are on my porch. I’m leaving town in a few hours, so you need to come get it all. Oh yeah, you’re gonna have to leave my house key too.”

Sherise felt a lump grow in her throat. No man had ever rejected her so unemotionally before. She tried to think of something evil to say, but her mind drew up a blank. Broken down, with no come back, she sadly hung up the phone.

She was angry, hurt, and confused. Her head spun in a whirlwind of mixed feelings. Her first thought was, *where in the hell will I go?* She had given all her stuff to Vinita. There was no way that she was going to live in an unfurnished place. It wasn’t long before her go-to-boy popped up in her foggy mind.

She sat, parked in her car, thinking that it would be cake to manipulate Darnell again. She wiped her teary face with a napkin she kept from breakfast and pulled herself together before driving to Brandon’s house to get her things.

* * * *

While Brandon packed some of his private items, he imagined how Chad would look. He hadn’t seen the man in a while. He loved the wide-eyed, muscular man dearly, and now he knew there was nothing that could get in the way of their love. He would come back and get his other things later. Now, he just wanted to get to his real love.

The solution to most of his problems would be to simply get out of town. He didn’t have a relationship with his mother, and his father disowned him for various reasons. His older sister was an Army veteran who was stationed in

London, and he hadn't spoken to her in over a year. The only family that he was somewhat close to had just caught him stealing. So, there were no reasons to stay. The sound of his door bell disrupted Brandon from his escape plan. He peered out of his bedroom window. He could see Sherise's black Acura parked on the side of the road.

He thought about just letting stand out there. *None of her things are in the house*, he reasoned uncaringly. He grabbed one of the duffle bags that he was taking with him and carried his thin frame down the stairs to answer the door. Once he opened his front screen, he could see that she had already put her bags in the car. She stood there with her nostrils flared in a cocky, bowlegged stance. She tried to push her way past him into the house. He pushed her back on the porch, roughly. "You don't have anything in here, Sherise."

She sucked air through her teeth. "Damn, could you just let me in, Brandon? What the fuck!"

"No, I don't want any problems with you. You got your shit, now bounce."

She responded, miffed, "How you just gonna kick me out like a dog and shit?"

"I should have never had you here in the first place, you know? I got a lot of things going on right now. What I'm trying to say is that I don't really need a relationship. Listen, I gotta be honest with you Sherise, I'm gay. I like men."

Sherise's eyes almost popped out her head. "Yeah, you do act like a bitch! You fuckin' faggot. Man, you're crazy. I don't need your ass."

She strutted down the porch steps with Brandon's laugh ricocheting in her head. She didn't know if he was telling the truth or not, but the shit just had made her stomach turn. She had to get away from him as fast as she could. Her thoughts were turning violent. She slid behind the wheel of her machine and lit up a loose Newport on her way to Darnell's place.

She just knew that Darnell would be overjoyed about her coming back to stay with him. She had developed a

belief that she could walk in and out of the man's life whenever she wanted. Now that she had a taste of denial, she started to come back down to earth. She reflected on how badly she had been treating Darnell. She remembered a show that aired on television one day about karma; she wondered if that was why things were going so bad for her.

FINAL CHAPTER - AN EYE FOR AN EYE

Sherise pulled to the rear of the lofts into the parking lot. She didn't bother to call and see if Darnell was home, she knew he would be waiting on her. It was dark outside, but the winter evening was young as Sherise made her way up to the back door of the place.

Darnell stood at the small window to the left of the door. She saw his silhouette through the foggy window coming toward the door. Before she could get her second foot on the steps, he swung the door open for her. Darnell's face was expressionless. He stood face-to-face with the girl who had shitted on him time and time again. She was still beautiful to him, but that didn't matter anymore. He had lost all his love for her that morning.

Once he had received the devastating news from the department of health that morning, wicked thoughts began to plague his mind. He was too ashamed of his condition to talk to Kamina. He didn't think she would feel the same about him, now that he had H.I.V. He cried tears of hate that

morning. He planned to fix the woman he knew without a doubt infected him with the horrible disease.

Sherise stepped in with a forced smile. “Hey, Darnell, I am so glad to see you. You don’t understand how hard life has gotten without you.”

She looked away from his hard face and saw how trashy the place looked. A small voice in the back of her mind told her that she should just leave, but she didn’t listen. He replied dryly with a robotic demeanor, “Sherise, I... I’m sick. Really sick.”

“I can take care of you tonight. I’m tired of the way I’ve been living. I’ve been doin’ a lot of thinking Darnell. I really want to make this work out between you and me.”

“Make this work?” Darnell asked as he shook his head and shoved Sherise. He exploded, “Bitch! That shit you’re talkin’ ain’t possible. You’re in the streets fuckin’ all types of niggas. You messed everything up now!”

She stumbled back, almost falling, shocked by the man’s words. His face was twisted into a brutal scowl. She backed up into the door, and it slammed shut.

She could see the man’s beady eyes blazing with hate. She lied, trying to distract him, “What the fuck, Darnell, I wasn’t with any other niggas!”

Darnell roared, “Bitch, I don’t give a fuck who you were with! The shit doesn’t matter now! It’s over!”

There was stench of death in the air. Before she could respond, Darnell nearly caved her face in with his first punch. Sherise crashed into the wall from the impact. As she was trying to gain consciousness from the blow, he landed another across her head causing blood to spray from her face. As the blow landed, he screamed, “You nasty bitch, you gave me HIV!”

She was so dizzy, she couldn’t make sense of the words he was ranting. She held her arms up to protect herself from further punishment. The crazed man rained punches down on the girl until she was dizzily pleading with him as blood poured from her broken face.

She spotted her small purse on the floor near the man’s foot. In a quick motion, she grabbed the three-inch blade that

she always carried inside of her bag. He grabbed her by the hair and tried to lift her from the floor. She poked him with the knife but it didn't get the man off of her. Noticing the knife, he knocked it free from her grasp.

Sherise managed to break free from Darnell's grasp and tried to run for the door. The blood in her eyes made it difficult to find the doorknob. She broke the window near the door with intentions of getting someone's attention.

He dragged her away from the broken window by her hair. She fought feverishly, but it was no use. Her mouth was cut and her eyes were blackened and bloody. For a moment, he was going to just leave her there wounded. Then, he thought about his predicament and snatched the small blade off of the floor with murder dancing in his eyes.

Sherise saw his intentions and grabbed his wrist. She pleaded with him not to kill her, "Please, Darnell, what did I do? I love you baby. I love you..."

She felt the knife plunge painfully inside of her. She let go of his wrist and clawed frantically at his face. Her fighting only infuriated him more. He rammed the knife into her abdomen a second time with vengeance.

She dropped to the floor, but managed to bring him down on top of her. Then, Darnell blacked out. He rammed the knife in and out of the girl until she covered in gore.

Momentarily, Sherise lay shaking on the hardwood floor like she was having a seizure. She was losing pints of blood. Suddenly, she stopped moving and took her last breath.

Darnell threw the bloody knife on the floor and stared blankly at the mess he had just made. When it happened, he felt as if he was standing outside of himself watching the whole thing. He sat on the floor next to Sherise's body, begging God for her to come back to life.

"Baby, I'm sorry. I'm really sorry, baby. Please, help me God. I'll be good. I swear, please. Please God, bring her back."

He stood and looked at his blood-covered hands once he snapped back to reality. His clothing was covered in

Sherise's blood. He glanced back at her devastated body. It was too much to handle. He ran into his room and snatched the comforter off of the bed. He went back into the living room and threw the cover over Sherise's lifeless, crimson-soaked body. Filled with dread, he ran out the front door.

The snow was coming down hard, and the traffic was thick as he frantically ran to his mother's house. It took him less than ten minutes to run there. That's the only place he wanted to be. He knew that his situation was out of control. Praying that Renae was home, he shakily retrieved his key and opened the door.

There were no signs of his mother in the house. He lumbered down the basement stairs and sat down on the edge of his weight bench. He sobbed uncontrollably about his dilemma, feeling the weight of a demon on his back.

"Why did I do that? I'm so stupid! Why me? I just wanted her to love me. I loved her, I really did," he muttered to himself over and over. His mother's warnings about the girl played over and over in his skull like a broken record.

* * * *

Renae was nodding off on the sofa when a knock at the door startled her. She had just got off of work that Monday night. She sat there long enough to shake the sleep from her mind. She stood up and sighed deeply, strolling toward the door. She wondered who the unexpected visitor might be.

She moved the curtain to the side and saw a white-uniformed cop and a white guy dressed in regular street clothing. Renae opened the door said, "Yes, what can I do for you, officer?"

The officer stayed silent and the detective began to speak. "Hello Miss, I'm detective Roberts and this is Officer Ziegler. I'm sorry to inform you that a young lady was murdered earlier this evening. Your son's rental agent found her inside of your son's place stabbed a number of times."

With fear in her voice, Renae asked, “Well sir, who was the girl?”

Officer Ziegler finally spoke up. He showed no sympathy or emotion for the situation, answering stiffly while reading from a small note pad, “Her name was Sherise Fanari, do you know her?”

Renae’s heart dropped to the pit of her stomach after the officer told her the shocking news. She placed a hand over her heart and stood there with her mouth open. The tall detective asked, concerned, “Miss, may we come in for a minute, please?”

Renae stepped back and let them in. The thin, eagle-eyed detective scanned the room while asking, “Have you seen your son Darnell today?”

Both of the men locked their eyes on the woman to see if there was any deception in her answer. Renae replied honestly, still in shock, “No, I haven’t seen him today. I just got off work around seven o’clock.”

Zeigler cut in quickly looking at his time piece. “So, he’s not here then.”

Renae answered honestly again, “No, if you want, you can check the place. I don’t mind. Besides, it must be some kind of mistake; my son wouldn’t do a thing like that.”

Neither one of the officers replied. They both began to search the house. Zeigler called for backup while Roberts began to climb the stairs. He came down quickly, satisfied with his search. Officer Zeigler was persistent. He searched the down stairs twice. He was going for a third search when the detective called him off, “No, we’re done here. We’ve searched this lady’s entire house already. We have to check elsewhere.”

The officer glared at Roberts and rushed toward the front door, aggravated that Darnell didn’t show up at his mother’s place. Roberts said, “Well, Ms. Wilkinson, I’m not sure what the case is here, but as you know, we found Ms. Fanari stabbed to death in Darnell’s place on State Street. That raises a few questions. Right now, we just need to talk with him. I hope we can get to the bottom of this thing quickly.”

The detective dug into his pocket and came out with one of his cards. He handed it to Renae. "If you hear anything, or if you see your son, give me a call. Better yet, if Darnell is innocent, as you say he is, can you have him give me a call."

After he was sure Renae had heard him, he turned on his heel to catch up with Zeigler. Zeigler stood there with his eyes locked on the basement door. Before the detective could finish his goodbye greeting, he cut him off abruptly. "Wait a minute, Roberts. We didn't check in there."

Roberts glared at the uniformed cop. Renae replied weakly, she was exhausted, "What? The basement?"

She waved her hand at the door in a careless manner. "Go ahead, you can check it, sir."

Zeigler jumped right to it. He marched pass Roberts and Renae. Nearing the door, he listened briefly then opened the door and crept down each stair carefully. He yelled back up the stairs with his flashlight pointing down the stairs. "Miss, do you have a light down here?"

Renae, standing at the top of the stairs with detective Roberts, pointed to a string that hung from the ceiling. The officer shouldn't have missed it with his flash light beaming through the darkness of the cellar. The cop flooded the basement with light once he pulled the string and continued down the remainder of the stairs. He thought he heard something, so he placed his hand on the .38 that was in his holster.

What he saw when he turned the short corner was enough to scare anyone out of their skin. Zeigler stood there staring in utter shock. He yelled to the top of the stairs frantically. "Detective! Miss! He's down here! Hurry up!"

Renae and Roberts made their way down the basement stairs in single file. The detective stopped in his tracks beside the officer. The scene was horrifying. Renae paused in shock and whimpered hoarsely with tears busting from her eyes. "Darnell, my baby! No, no, no! Darnell, baby, please say it ain't so."

She staggered over to the corner where Darnell's body dangled from the ceiling. He had stood on his weight bench and hanged himself with a jump rope. His skin was pale and

cold and all his clothing was still saturated in the girl's blood. Renae sobbed deeply, wishing with all her might that he would come back to life.

Roberts had worked on the force for thirteen years. No matter how many times he witnessed death or the grief of a parent who lost their child, he still could never get use to the empty feeling that would follow. Now, he and Ziegler knew the Sherise Fanari case was closed.

The help that showed up tried to pull Renae back, but she just recoiled each time and ran back to her son's dead body that a few coroners had loaded on the van. After his body was removed, she sat at the bottom of the stairs contemplating her own suicide. She shook the horrible idea from her brain. She would never find out that Darnell had H.I.V. She would always believe that she was part of the reason Darnell had killed himself. She thought to herself, *some things are just better left untold*. "I wish I never woulda said nothing to him," she cried in grief. She remembered the small piece of paper that Roberts handed her before he and Zeigler left the scene.

She dug into her pocket of her scrubs and unfolded the piece of paper. It was a short suicide note from Darnell. Tears rolled from her eyes as she began to read.

Mom,

I'm really sorry for letting you down. I've done something very bad. I hope you and God will forgive me. Please don't cry, because I do love you. I was just sick and tired of my life. You were right, mom, she really didn't love me. She just wanted to hurt me. Now, no one can ever hurt me again. No one will ever hurt me or Sherise again.

*Love,
Darnell*

THE END