

R. A. ROBINSON

# THUGGIN IN MIAMI



THE FAMILY IS MADE





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# **The Family Is Made**

Part 1

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# **The Family Is Made**

Part 1

A NOVEL BY

**R. A. ROBINSON**

FROM THE SERIES

**THUGGIN IN MIAMI**

**RISTRICK**

PUBLISHING & Co

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*This book is dedicated to my lovely daughter who is my purpose for living, Rin-niya L Robinson, and Mikel "Comcast" Mittal for believing in my dream, and helping to make it a reality.*

*And to those who are dearly departed, my father Adolphus E Gary, my beautiful mother Carol Robinson, and my loving grandmother Bessie Robinson, I love you all, and this one's for you.*

**-R.A. Robinson**



## ***Chapter 1***

“Yes, Adulfus E. Gary was a good man! A giving man!” the preacher called from the pulpit, voice full of righteous vibrato. From the front pew, Richard Gary could see the droplets of sweat beading on the pastor’s brow. Every time the short, pudgy man raised his hands towards the heavens to emphasize a point, the yellow sweat stains in the armpits of his white Oxford shirt became visible. New perspiration now filled the yellow rings.

*Adulfus E. Gary? Can't use street names at funerals, I suppose.*

Had the funeral not been for his father, otherwise known as “Big Wine,” Richard never would have known whom the pastor was speaking of, but he had to admit that the government issued name made things easier. It gave the funeral an impersonal feel. Impersonal kept Richard from crying.

“*Psssst!*” whispered Alicia, Richard’s youngest sister. She leaned forward and waved her tissue in his direction, trying to catch his attention. Black mascara streamed down her face. The black rings around her eyes reminded Richard of a raccoon. “Boy, you a’ight?”

Her question resonated in his mind, took him back to a memory of his father.

*“Rick-Rick! Boy, you a’ight?” Big Wine asked. Little Richard could tell that his father was searching his face, trying to understand what he might be thinking, or maybe feeling.*



*Richard couldn't understand, let alone explain the feelings swarming through his body then. He only knew that he felt sad, empty. Everyone around him cried and sobbed. They all looked so sad. Maybe they missed his Momma too. Where had she gone?*

*"Yeah, Daddy, but why everybody crying?" Richard asked, looking up at his father. Richard's father looked away, his gaze distant. That big face, normally so full of happiness, looked so sad and lonely. Maybe he missed Momma too, Richard had thought. "Daddy, where my momma at?" Big Wine slowly brought his gaze back to Richard's. No words were spoken as father and son sat in that church pew, but Richard understood the look in his father's eyes enough to know his Momma was gone and she wasn't coming back.*

"Rich!" Alicia yelled, seemingly oblivious to her surroundings or the inappropriateness of yelling in the middle of a funeral proceeding; she only cared about grabbing Richard's attention. Still seeing no notable signs that he'd

heard her, she yelled again, “Richard!” Finally, she succeeded at pulling him back to the present. Unfortunately, her outburst had also fully irritated Richard, otherwise known as “Rich Kid.”

He turned and made eye contact with her, glare deadly. But the moment he met her eyes, his features softened. He thought how her eyes must look much like his own had on the day of their mother’s funeral: empty and dysphoric. There was one notable difference, however. Alicia knew their father was dead; Richard had been too young to comprehend death back then.

“What’s up, Sis?” Richard asked, still a little annoyed by his sister’s disrespectful behavior. While he wasn’t what one might call a “regular” attendee, he knew the place demanded a certain level of respect. To make matters worse, their behavior was on display for the rest of the attendees. Being that they were the next of kin, a higher set of expectations rested over the heads of the entire Gary family today. Being mindful of Alicia’s emotional frailty wouldn’t be easy, not when he could

feel the eyes of everyone behind them searing into the back of his head.

“I sa-aid,” Alicia’s, voice thick with sarcasm, “ya a’right boy?”

*What kind of question is that? Naw, I ain’t a’ight.*

The thought sat at the tip of his tongue, echoed in his mind and threatened to release itself into spoken word, but he kept it to himself. His sisters needed him now; one look at Alicia emphasized that fact loud and clear. He needed to be strong, consolatory, kind, just like their father had been.

Richard closed his eyes and took a deep breath, calming his irritation. “Sis, you ‘member when Momma died?” He concentrated on keeping his voice just above a whisper - partly out of respect, but mostly because the grief brought on by the memory of his mother’s death threatened the strength of his voice. One crack would shatter his concrete façade.

“Yea...why?” Alicia asked. Her nose wrinkled and her eyes narrowed as she wondered why Richard would bring up their mother dying right now. *Ain't it bad enough dealing with Daddy dying?*

“Well, ‘Boy, you a’ight’ was what he said to me that day when we was at gram’s house and y’all was crying. Now he gone.” Richard replied, dropping his gaze to the floor, hoping Alicia couldn’t see the wells of tears trying to surface.

A chasm of emptiness filled Richard’s heart. He missed his mother, and now his father. The man he’d adored and looked up to all his life was gone. Now he had to be the strong one. Fear, despair and grief all rolled into one overwhelming emotion. A hard lump formed in his throat, one so hard and large that he couldn’t swallow. His tears continued to grow, edging closer to his eyelids, but just before they’d had the chance to successfully spill over, Alicia’s voice cut into his dark pit of sorrow. He blinked hard a couple of times, trying to push the wetness back, hoping the action wouldn’t push his

tears over the edge. Grasping the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger, he pressed into the corners of his eyes, forcing all traces of wetness onto his fingers.

“Yea brah’. I’m gone miss daddy too,” Alicia replied. Sadness washed over her and filled her heart; its effect crippled the volume of her voice, bringing it to a shade above audible. She looked down at her hands, hands that now clasped her crumpled tissue. New tears pooled in her eyes and streamed down her cheeks. *How we gone manage with Daddy gone?* The thought brought on the heaviness of concern – concern for all of them, but mostly for Richard. He was the last man left in their family, and their father had left some big shoes for him to fill.

Alicia’s gaze drifted back towards her brother; he had returned his attention back to the pastor. Alicia only half listened to the final prayer as she analyzed Richard’s posture and expression. His tough exterior didn’t fool her; Richard was broken inside. How hard it must be to go through life

pretending that nothing could break you, but everyone breaks.

What if she lost Richard too? She couldn't bear the thought of losing anyone else she loved. Not now.

“Richard!” Gina’s loud voice carried through the crowd pushing towards the door, jabbering on about how great the service had been. Alicia had been so engrossed in her own thoughts that she hadn’t realized the service had come to a close. She snapped her head in the direction of Gina’s voice, but Richard merely glanced at his older sister before turning back to the casket in front of him, silently saying his final good-bye.

Gina’s appearance was a little less disheveled than their younger sister’s, but the tell-tale signs of grief were still evident - red, puffy eyes, crumpled tissues in hand and smudged mascara in the corners of her eyes. Richard felt empathy for his oldest sister. Like him, she was trying to stay strong. *Strong all ya can be.*

“Rich Kid!” Gina hollered again, navigating her way through the crowd.

Richard took one last glance at the casket before turning towards Gina’s approaching form. Gina had never been good with patience; Richard could already sense the irritation in her voice. “Yeah, Sis! Wuz up?”

“Boy, ya’ comin’ to my house today?” Gina asked, now standing directly in front of him.

“Yeah, Sis, I’m gone be there. I just gotta get Skinny over at her gramma’s house,” Richard answered.

“Well, a’ight.” Placing one hand on her hip, Gina waved a finger at him. “But you best be there. Everybody gone be there.”

Richard rolled his eyes in response. “Yeah, Sis! I’m gone be there.” Gina’s face contorted into a sour frown. Richard could see new puddles of tears forming in the corners of her eyes. *Ain’t that some shit? She the one bein’ rude.*

He hadn't meant hurt her feelings, but of all places to be bossy, their father's funeral wasn't one of them. Richard took in a deep breath and held it, trying to calm his irritation and soften his tone before finishing his response. "I give you my word, Sis. I'm gone be there."

Gina replied with a weak smile before turning on her heel and disappearing into the crowd. At least she'd smiled. The thought brought a small smile to his own lips.

Richard watched as the rest of the crowd filed out the door. He couldn't stop thinking of how he would never see his father again. The depressing thought trapped him inside the stained glass room.

A tapping on his shoulder pulled him out of his depressing thoughts. Richard turned quickly to see its source, bringing him face to face with his cousin Dwayne.



Dwayne's brow creased and his eyes seemed laden with concern. His eyes were red from crying. "Boy, everything gone be ok."

*You ain't fooling nobody nigga.* Richard saw past the distressed look on Dwayne's face. He knew the secrets hiding behind Dwayne's look of sadness and concern; the deep, dark ugly truth. Being this close to Dwayne made Richard's blood boil. He could feel the heat rising up in his ears as his grief gave way to anger. His fists clenched at his side as he envisioned Dwayne's head with a bloody, gaping wound, his brains halfway across the room. Slowly, Richard's hands edged towards his pants; he wasn't thinking, just acting on impulse.

Dwayne nervously forced a smile, one that barely lifted the corners of his mouth. He didn't notice Richard's hand moving towards his gun. Dwayne's only focus was convincing Richard of how genuinely sad he was for their loss. Dwayne understood the ramifications of his mistake, and he knew his actions were unforgiveable. If given the chance to change it, he would have

done things differently. But what's done is done. Dwayne understood what the consequences would be if Richard ever discovered his secret. The realization that Richard might already know sent a blood-curdling chill down his spine. His stomach knotted and bile rose into the back of his throat. Dwayne held his breath, forced the smile a little bigger, and hoped it hid his fear.

To Richard, Dwayne's smile was insincere, and it only angered him further. The fact that he could smell Dwayne's fear made the taste of revenge seem even sweeter. His fingers curled around the cold hard steel of his gun, his grasp tightened around it, but as his arm flexed in anticipation, Richard caught a glimpse of Alicia out of the corner of his eye. Her disheveled hair and grief-stricken face pulled Richard back from the angry pit he had started to fall into, headfirst. He relaxed his muscles, cleared his throat and forced the anger down into the pit of his stomach. After an awkward moment of silence, deadpanning his cousin, Richard finally replied, "Yeah, I know, cuz. I know."

Dwayne's heart fluttered with relief, the knot in his stomach dissipated. Maybe Richard really didn't know, and maybe he would be okay after all.

"A'ight then. See ya' at Gina's house tonight?" Dwayne asked.

Richard forced a painful, superficial grin. "Yea'. Fa Sho'"

As soon as Dwayne was out of sight, Alicia stormed towards Richard. *Please let me talk him out of doing anything stupid!* She could still see the look of stifled indignation and sinister revenge in his eyes. As she approached, he attempted to cover it up with another painful smile.

Now standing in front of Richard, Alicia narrowed her eyes. "Rich, why you looking at Dwayne like that?" Her arms were stationed tightly over her chest.

"Ain't nothing sis," Richard replied. "E'rything's cool."

Everyone else in the room might have bought Richard's lie, but Alicia knew better. She could read him like an open book, and everything about his conversation with Dwayne screamed retaliation. "Well, I know you like nobody else. Only one person knows you better is Daddy, and he gone," Alicia said, dismissing her brother's claim to innocence. "I know when you smile like that, you got something cruel and deadly on yo' mind." Alicia brought her face closer to Richard's, making sure he couldn't try to look past her. "Don't you do nothing to him. Whatever he done, he done in the past, he family Rich."

*Damn Sis! Can't ya' leave well enough alone?! He done cause all this!* Rather than yell at Alicia, Richard stuffed his frustrations and nodded, acting as though he were really considering Alicia's words. He forced another smile. She wasn't the object of his anger anyway; Dwayne was. *He'll get his.*

"I just happy to know Daddy ain't gotta go through no more pain, Sis. That's all," Richard lied, all the while, mentally

picturing the look on Dwayne's face when Richard could finally make him pay.

“Boy, I know what you thinking ‘bout right now as you talking to me. What you gone do to Dwayne.” Alicia let out an exasperated sigh. She knew she couldn't change Richard's mind, at least not right now. But she did have a plan, one she hoped would work. With a flick of her wrist, she shooed him away. “Just go get Skinny and meet me at Gina's house,” she said, adding, “and whatever you do, don't kill Dwayne.” She turned and stomped off and headed straight for the doors, her arms crossed over her chest and a deep scowl still on her face.

Richard narrowed his eyes as he entertained the thought of telling Alicia off, but then thought better of it. Shaking the idea from his head, he took several long strides to catch up to her. “Sis! Wait up!” Reaching her side, he placed one hand on her shoulder and waited a moment for her to relax. He reached his other hand out and gently grasped her chin and turned her face towards him.

“I got you, Sis. Just trust me this time. A’ight love?” His soft, gentle words wafted through her entire body. The softness in his eyes quenched her fears and worries. “See ya’ at Gina’s house, “He leaned in and squeezed her tightly, rubbing her back as he held her.

Alicia felt so safe in her brother’s arms. She felt like a little girl again, crying to her big brother after a bad day at school. He had always looked out for her, he had always protected her, been there for her. Everything really was going to be okay.

As she pulled away, Richard connected with her caramel colored eyes. Glistening puddles collected at the inner corners. He wondered whether it was the loss of their father or the fear of him killing Dwayne that had brought on this new wave of tears. He wrapped his arm over her shoulder. He hoped it brought her a little comfort.

As Richard walked Alicia to the limo, he weighed how probable it was that she knew that he still had killing Dwayne on his mind; he figured the odds weren’t really in his favor.

Honestly, he couldn't understand why she cared so much after what the slimy snake had done to their family. He really didn't want to worry her; they had already been through enough, lost enough. But even Richard's love and concern for Alicia couldn't quench his thirst for revenge. Dwayne would pay for what he had done; Richard would make certain of it.

## ***Chapter 2***

The tires of an emerald green Nissan Maxima squealed in protest as Richard brought the car to a halt. Throwing the gear shift into park, he looked up at the single story house in front of him just before killing the ignition. Chipped blue paint gave the impression that it had weathered many storms. Broken car parts in the yard told the story of an out of work mechanic who had tried to pick up odd jobs wherever he could.



Richard smiled when he caught sight of Mike sitting on the stoop, fiddling with a carburetor. “Yo’ Mike!” yelling through the open passenger window. “Where my girl at?”

Mike looked up from his tinkering, his face and hands covered in grease. “She in that back room sleeping.”

Richard swung the driver’s side door open and stepped out onto the street. He took quick strides towards the front door, excited to see Skinny. Not having her by his side at the funeral had been difficult, but it was something he had needed to do alone.

When Richard reached the stoop, he stopped to greet Mike, giving him a dap. “Wuz up cuz’?”

“Nothing.” Mike looked up at Richard, his eyes hopeful. “A’ you got some beans on you?”

Like Mike, Richard preferred ecstasy over any drug known to man. Ecstasy didn’t make him jittery, like dope, nor did it make him tired or hungry, like weed. And the brightly colored

pills gave him a high that both he and Skinny could enjoy together; a high that always sent her up the walls screaming his name.

“Yeah, I got two in the cup holder. You can have them,” Richard waved his hand in the direction of the parked Nissan.

“Bet that up, cuz,” Mike smiled. “You always looking out for a nigga.”

As Mike made his way towards the Maxima, Richard made his way up the remaining stairs. The barred metal door creaked as he pulled it open. The scent of fried chicken and collards tickled the inside of his nose, causing his mouth to water and his stomach to grumble. On the couch, Richard saw the source responsible for the delectable scent: Momma Pearl. She was watching her favorite show, *Wheel of Fortune*.

Without looking away from the television, Momma Pearl greeted Richard, “Boy, you a’ight?”

Richard stopped just to the side of Momma Pearl and stared down at her. He wondered why everyone kept asking him that question.

His silence broke Momma Pearl away from the spinning wheel. She turned her pudgy face up towards him, noticing the baffled look on his face. “What is it boy? You a’ight?”

“Yea’ Miss Pearl, but why everybody keep asking me that?” Richard shook his head gently, tossing the haunted feeling out of his head. “I mean I guess it’s what you supposed to say after somebody die. It’s just strange ‘cause my Daddy asked me that question at my Momma’s funeral.”

Mamma Pearl gave Richard a sympathetic smile. “Boy, they just worried ‘bout you, that’s all. Making sho’ you a’ight.” Mamma Pearl’s soft smile suddenly disappeared, replaced by the wrinkled forehead of correction. “And what’s this ‘Miss Pearl?’ You my grandson, so you just call me Momma like all my grandkids, you hear?”

“Yea Momma,” Richard replied, stifling the urge to roll his eyes, giving her a smile instead. He knew better than to get the old woman started.

Richard had known Momma Pearl since before he could remember. She had watched him play in the front yard of his grandmother’s house as a toddler, and she had been there for him after his mother had died. Richard had watched Miss Pearl struggle through the years as well, but she has always held her family together; she was as strong as they came.

“That’s more like it,” a big grin of satisfaction filled Miss Pearl’s round face. “Now go see that girl. She back there waiting on you.” Finished speaking, Momma Pearl returned her attention back to the spinning wheel.

Richard made his way down the narrow hallway, his steps padded by the green shag rug under his feet. Without bothering to knock, he turned the knob to Skinny’s door, swung it open and leaned against the wall just on the other side of the door. He stood there, watching her sleep, her legs spread wide, as if

she were inviting him to dive in between them. A bulge hardened in the front of his pants as he thought about jumping unto the bed and burying his face in her tasty snatch.

But his relationship with Skinny wasn't just about the sex. She was beautiful, crazy sexy, resourceful and she put up with his shit. She would have his back, in any circumstance, in a heartbeat, with no questions asked. Thinking about all they'd been through and how many times she'd been there to pull him out of the messes he'd gotten himself into, his heart filled with pride. *That's my bitch!*

“Skinny!” Richard yelled, causing her to jump straight up in bed. “Get yo’ fine ass up!”

Skinny's eyes shot around the room before finding Richard. Her hair reached to all different directions and her eyes hung in half-open, sleep-filled slits. She rubbed them, trying to focus on the handsome, slightly taller than her, muscular man standing in her doorway.

“Baby, you back already?” Skinny’s voice cracked, still groggy from her nap. She tried to smooth down her dreads. Knowing the action was pretty much useless, she scooted towards the edge of the bed and motioned for Richard to come closer.

“Yeah baby. You didn’t think I was gone watch them throw no dirt on my Daddy’s casket, did you?” Richard replied. “I know that’s what people’s supposed to do, but seem s like disrespect to me.”

“Yeah, I feel that, but baby, why ain’t you let me come to the funeral?” Skinny’s full lips formed a pronounced pout.

Richard reached down and wrapped his hands into Skinny’s. “I told you baby. I wanted to do that by myself,” pulling her up from the bed. Her tiny frame melded with his body. She leaned in to kiss him, and he pressed his groin further into her pelvis.

Suddenly, Skinny pulled herself out his arms, “You done took that gun in there with them church people?” Both of her eyebrows raised and her mouth hung slightly open.

A sly grin spread over Richard’s lips. “Baby, you know this like my Visa card. Can’t leave home without it.” He reached for Skinny again, forcefully grabbing one of her butt cheeks into his right hand, and pulled her back into his embrace. Gently, he pushed a lock of hair away from her milky chocolate forehead.

“Damn baby. You think we got some time before we go. I’m a little hungry,” Richard said. He leaned down and bit the flesh on her neck.

She quickly dodged him in protest. “Boy, you ain’t gone have me climbing the walls with my gra’mma out there. You know how she is.” Giggling, she placed her hands on his chest and pushed him away.

He unzipped his pants and pulled his penis out. Grabbing her belt loops, he pulled her forward and yanked her towards his semi-hard shaft. “Girl, get over here,” whipping his penis around, smacking it on the front of her pants, he tried to arouse her.

She squealed and swatted his shoulder with the back of her hand, smiling. “Richy! Put my toy up before you get me in trouble with my gra’mma!” she whispered sternly. She wanted nothing more than to feel Richard bulging between her legs. Watching his penis flop around brought a tingling sensation to her crotch and moistness to her panties, but she knew better than to give in. She could never muffle her screams of pleasure with him, and the last thing she needed was trouble from her Grandma.

A giggle emerged from behind Richard. “Richy, put my toy up before you get me in trouble with my gra’mma,” mimicked a small, nasal voice. He recognized it immediately. His testicles shot up into his groin. Frantically, he scrambled to put



his penis back in his pants and zipped them up. He turned around to meet the small intruder, but by the time he'd composed himself, all that he could see were a set of braids bouncing back and forth on the little head that belonged to Skinny's cousin, Ke-Ke as she skipped back down the hall.

“See what I be talking ‘bout,” Skinny hissed from behind him. “You know there ain’t no locks on no doors ‘round here.”

Richard stood there, speechless, staring down the hallway. His face was still warm from embarrassment and mouth hung open in a complete stupor. Skinny walked around him to shut the door and returned to Richard's side, rubbing his arms with her palms, trying to help him come out of his shocked trance.

Shaking his head, he shrugging off the idea that Ke-Ke might have seen his penis. “Come on baby, let's go. I got shit to do before we go to Gina's.”

“K, just let me get my stuff,” Skinny replied, walking over to her dresser, grabbing her cell phone and purse. She stopped

in front of Richard and gave him a short nod, indicating that she was ready to go.

Skinny and Richard walked down the hallway and headed towards the front door. As they rounded the corner to the living room, they saw Ke-Ke sitting next to Momma Pearl on the faded blue couch. Ke-Ke watched them approach, a smile on her face so big, it reached from one ear to the other. Momma Pearl didn't speak, but her gaze followed them as they walked towards the front door, arms crossed over her extraordinarily large bosom.

“Lil hater,” Skinny mumbled under her breath, the words barely audible, even to Richard. Walking out the door first, Skinny flung the barred door so hard it made a loud “*BANG!*” on the exterior of the house. It bounced back and almost hit Richard in the face. He shot his hand out to catch it and held it open as he stood in the doorway for a moment, a plan brewing in his head. He glanced from inside the house to Skinny. “Baby, head on out to the car.”

Skinny narrowed her eyes and glared at Richard. Her mouth opened to protest, but instead of saying anything, she turned and stomped off to the car, stopping at the passenger side door to wait for him.

Once satisfied with Skinny's location, Richard called back into the house, "Ke-Ke! Come holla at big cuz."

Ke-Ke came running outside, stopping just in front of Richard, her braids still bouncing with the momentum of her sprint. She gave him a gap-toothed grin and waited patiently for him to speak.

Squatting down so that he was level with Ke-Ke, Richard tucked a twenty dollar bill into her pocket. "Don't tell Miss Pearl what we was doing, okay?" Ke-Ke's grin grew wider. Her braids flopped around her head wildly as she nodded.

*Maybe she won't say nothing now that she's got some money in her pocket,* Richard thought as he walked towards Skinny.

“You know she already told on us baby,” Skinny yelled into the yard, her hands cupped around her mouth. “You shouldn’t gave her nothing!”

“Well, then it’s some learn how to stop snitching money,” Richard called over his shoulder, yelling loud enough for Ke-Ke to hear.

“Okay, I won’ tell nobody else,” Ke-Ke hollered back. Happy to have the twenty dollars, she committed to not tattling on anymore, at least not on Richard, anyway. She skipped back into the house.

As Richard reached the driver’s side door of the car, he heard Mike call from the front yard, “Holla’ at you later cuz.” Richard answered with a nod of his head and looked down into the car from the driver’s side door.

“Baby, I don’ feel like driving.” He tossed her the keys. “You drive.”

“A’ight daddy,” she answered, catching the keys in mid-air. She walked around the car to the driver’s side door while Richard headed over to the passenger’s side. “Where to?” she asked as she opened the door to climb in.

\*\*\*

*Click...click...click*

Dwayne lifted the lighter towards the glass stem. A crackling sound filled his ears as the now black rock of crack heated inside the small glass tube. He let the lighter go out and pulled in a long, slow hit. The almost burnt rubbery-tasting smoke filled his mouth and his lungs. He held the deep hit and a tingling sensation, followed by a warmth spread throughout his body. With that warmth came a strange sense of relaxation and anxiety, all at the same time. Dwayne knew Richard would find out about his indiscretions eventually, and when he did,

there would be a price to pay. He exhaled slowly. “Damn! I done fucked up this time.” He passed the pipe to his girl.

“Maybe he won’t find out,” she replied, holding the stem just inches from her mouth as she prepared for her hit. “Why you so worried?”

Dwayne snatched the stem back out of her hands, just before it touched her lips. Confusion flooded her expression and desperation filled her eyes.

“Bitch!” Dwayne’s face turned red as he spoke. “My lil’ cuz can feel when somebody done something to his Daddy. I don’t know why, but he can.”

“Why you acting like that, baby?” Her eyes rested hungrily on the glass stem in his hands. “I just want to smoke.”

Dwayne ignored her request, lit the lighter again, allowed it to heat the stem and pulled in another long draw. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched her squirm, itching for her high. Once the thick, vapor-like smoke escaped his lips, he turned to

look at his girl. Guilt for what he had done, disgust and regret over his decision to allow her back into his life and fear for his life overwhelmed and angered him.

“Cause it’s your fault I’m gone get fucked up. If I’d just let you keep walking, I’d have never gotten back on this fucking crack in the first place.” Dwayne yelled, spittle flying from his lips.

“Dwayne, I love you, baby. Now, just give me back the stem,” she pleaded, grabbing for it. She didn’t even care if the hot tip burned her, as long as she could finally take a hit, but Dwayne had already lifted the stem and all of the rocks above his head.

“Bitch, this is all you love,” Dwayne replied, voice thick with hatred. For maybe the first time ever, he saw her sunken cheeks, hollow eyes and withering frame for what they really were: the signs of a crack head. And not just a casual smoker or an addicted crack head. Those traits only belonged to a crack head that would do anything for their next high.

“You use to be finer than a mother fucker when I met you.”

Vomit rose into his throat as he realized just how pitiful his life had become. “Now look at you.” He shook his head in grief as she continued to claw at him, trying to pull his arm down so she could reach the stem Begging for one more pull-off that glass dick.

\*\*\*

Skinny put the car into park and turned to look at Richard.

“Baby, you still ain’t told me why you put on thug gear to go to Wine’s funeral, or why you took your gun with you.” She couldn’t shake the feeling that he was intentionally hiding something from her. The thought was unnerving. He never hid things from her.

Richard rubbed the palm of his hand across his forehead and then his scalp, trying to clear his frustration and organize



his thoughts. He still wasn't sure how to explain everything to Skinny. Closing his eyes, he pulled in a long breath and released it slowly. After a few more seconds of holding his eyes closed and contemplating his words, he turned to face Skinny. His gaze was intense with anger, but under his anger, Skinny could see a deep sadness. Something was really bothering him.

“This is the deal,” another shorter, frustrated sigh left his lips. “You remember my cousin Dwayne?”

“Yeah, I remember him. Why?”

“Well, I was gone kill his fuck ass today,” Richard replied intensely, seemingly unaware that he spoke louder than necessary, given their close proximity to one another. “But Alicia made me promise not to.”

Shock and confusion crumpled Skinny's face. Dwayne wouldn't be the first person that Richard had killed; there had been many that had crossed his path the wrong way, but

Richard usually drew the line at family. Besides her and Momma Pearl, family was all Richard had ever really had.

Had she really heard him say he was going to kill his cousin? “Hold up!” she said, shaking her head, trying to determine if something had happened to her hearing. “Baby, did you just say you was gone kill yo’ cousin?” Her voice lifted half an octave as she neared the end of her question.

Richard focused his steely gaze on the street in front of him. He knew what was running through Skinny’s head. He wasn’t ecstatic about crossing the family line, but what Dwayne had done was inexcusable, unforgiveable. “You ain’t imagining shit,” he replied flatly, shaking his head. “I said what you thought I said. But like I was saying, I made a promise to Alicia today that I won’t kill that bitch ass fucking nigga Dwayne. But I’m gonna fuck him up real bad though.”

Staring right past Richard, Skinny contemplated Richard’s statement. For him to be that angry with a family member, the wrong-doing had to have been something really big. Her eyes

lit up as the many possible indiscretions filled her head. “What’d he run off with baby? Some dope?” She bit her lip and shook her head, realizing that a little dope wouldn’t be enough to push Richard over the edge. “No, no, he stole a gun from you. That’s gotta be it.”

Richard shook his head no and leaned in towards Skinny, whispering as if he had to tell. “Don’t tell my sisters this, but I found out he stole from my Daddy. I’m talking like thirty g’s.” He leaned back and waited for the bomb to go off. .

Skinny felt as though her heart rate had tripled. The rush of blood coursing through her veins made her head throb with adrenaline. “Let’s go fuck his ass up right now then! What we waiting on?” Whatever Richard was planning to do, she would be right there with him, ready to back him up if he needed her.

Richard likened her reaction to a provoked pit bull on a chain; it made him smile. He thought she might explode, or, at the very least, put the car in drive and take off to Dwayne’s without thinking things through, so he gently placed his hand

on her forearm. But he wasn't done riling her up just yet. "Baby, you know the worst part? I don't think he even know I got a bank statement showing me exactly what he done took out."

Skinny's expression reflected the deep and sinister thoughts running through her head. Richard could just imagine what she might be plotting, but he also realized that couldn't have her foaming at the mouth just yet. He needed her to reserve those feelings for later. The timing needed to be perfect. "Just chill baby," he said, rubbing her arm gently. "I'm gone get his ass when it's time." He waited to continue until her wild eyes met his. "It's gone be hard for me not to kill him though. I can't break my promise to Alicia."

Skinny bit her lip. She'd been with Richard long enough to know that he always kept his promises, especially promises made to family. But she couldn't see how he could possibly avoid killing Dwayne. She was ready to kill him, and Wine

hadn't been her father. Of course, he had been the closest she'd ever had to one.

“Stay here baby,” Richard said, pulling her from her thoughts. “I got to go talk to E for a minute.” Leaning over, he gave her a quick kiss before opening the passenger side door. Stepping out onto the street, he turned to face the two-story brick apartment building in front of him and headed towards the stairs on his left, the flight that led up to E's apartment.

## ***Chapter 3***

Richard scanned the area before knocking on the apartment numbered 217. After the second knock, the door swung open; behind it stood his childhood friend, E.

“Brah!” Richard said, giving E daps and a half-hug. E stepped aside to let Richard in, closing the door behind him. “Wha’s u’ nigga?” Richard asked, nodding at the group of men sitting in E’s living room.

“Just chilling,” E replied, a gold-toothed grin stretching across his face. “You a’ight?” E’s smile replaced by a look of concern. “I know you gonna miss Big Wine. Your ol’ boy was cool as fuck.”

Richard shifted his weight from one foot to the other, thinking of how that question kept haunting him. “Yea brah, I’m straight.” Finally deciding that the people asking him that question had real love for him, he gave E a smile and playful slug on the shoulder.

Pretending to dodge Richard’s slug, E delivered a brotherly smack to Richard’s shoulder. “So what’s up, brah?”

“We got to get this money,” Richard answered.

“You never take a break!” E exclaimed, another golden grin spreading across his face as he shook his head. “Always thinking ‘bout money or how to get some. But hey, I’m with you”

“Shit nigga, money make the world.” Richard made a spinning, circular motion with his index finger. “But check this shit out here.” He took a few steps towards E’s mother’s room.

Caught off guard, E instinctively stepped in front of Richard, cutting him off from the room. He figured that Richard was just checking to see if E’s mother was home. “She at work, brah.”

Richard fully understood his friend’s defensive nature; he had the same nature himself, even when dealing with life-long friends and family. It wasn’t necessarily a lack of trust; it was simply a primal instinct of survival.

“I know, nigga,” Richard said, planting his hands on E’s shoulders, smiling. “I brought something over here last night. She called to tell me this morning and let me know where she put it.”

Suddenly aware of how ridiculous he was being, E stepped over to the side, shook his head and laughed. He knew he could



trust Richard, and his mother had always treated Richard like a second son, which was exactly why Richard had a key to their apartment. A little embarrassed, E looked down at his feet.

Richard gave E a loving, brotherly smile. “What? You done forgot that’s my momma too nigga?”

“I know, I know,” E said, shaking his head, unsure of why he had become so defensive in the first place. “Fuck it.” He gave a small bow and extended his arm towards his mother’s room dramatically. “Let’s go get this shit.”

Without even looking at the rest of the room, Richard headed straight for the mattress on the floor. “Come on, help me flip this mattress over.” Richard grabbed one side and started to pull.

E walked over and grabbed the other side. Together, they flipped it over onto its opposite site, revealing a small tear on the bottom. Richard reached his hand in and fished out a large Ziploc bag.

“Wheeeeww,” E whistled when he caught sight of its contents. It looked like a big bag of Skittles. He tried to estimate just how many pills were in the zippered plastic bag, but there were just too many to count.

“Damn!” E rubbed his jaw in amazement. “Where the fuck you get all them pills?”

“I don’t ask you no questions when you come up on shit,” Richard replied. He gave E a hard glance, but the playful smile that pulled at the corners of his mouth reflected the trust and love the two men shared.

“A’ight,” E flashed a smile and raised his hands, palm up in surrender. “How many pills that is?”

“Two thou’,” Richard answered, holding the bag up so that E could better examine them. “Check this out – I paid six g’s for these pills.” He then placed the bag on the bed so he could explain the plan. “Now, here’s what we gone do, we gone put some in Big Brah trap, some in Richmond’s trap and then

whatever club we gone to, we gone sell some for ourselves.” Richard opened the bag and started dividing some of the pills up into smaller bags. “We gone put them in the traps tomorrow, but when y’all get ready to go to the afterhours tonight, take a hundred with you and sell them there.” Each of the smaller bags that Richard had divvyed contained fifteen of the brightly colored pills. He then closed the larger bag and placed it back inside the mattress.

E listened intently, despite the fact that he already knew Richard’s plan. He and Richard had been selling together since they were kids; they had an understanding. Hell, they were family. But the discussions were always necessary. They were a technicality that you always discussed, no matter how long you had known someone.

“Here, brah,” Richard smiled, holding one of the tiny bags in between his fingers and thumb as he extended his hand towards E. “I know you wanting to roll out, especially after seeing all them pills.”

“Bet that up, brah,” E replied, reaching for the pills, but just before E’s fingers closed around the tiny package, Richard snatched it away, clenching it in his fist.

“Don’t give them niggas in there no free pills neither.” Richard said, voice hard, face stern. “Charge them six dollars a pill. That’s homeboy price, but anybody else...”

“I know, ten dollars,” E cut in.

“A’ight,” Richard placed the bag into E’s open palm, smiling, satisfied that he had E’s full understanding. “I’m gone holla at you later.” Richard stuffed the other bag of pills into his pocket, flopped the mattress back down on the floor and prepared to leave. “You can come to Gina’s house tonight if you want, before you head to the club.”

E smiled and reached for his friend and pulled him in for a hug. “Kid, I love you.”

Richard reciprocated the hug with a smirk. “You my lil’ brother from another mother. I love you too.” Richard smiled

and playfully shoved E as they finished their hug. “Now stop getting soft on me, nigga.” As he exited the bedroom, Richard stopped by the couch, giving daps to all the guys sitting in the living room before heading for the door, “I’m gone holla at you boys later.””

As E closed the door behind Richard, Mondo, one of the men sitting on the couch, seared the door with a hateful glare, but before E turned back towards the group, the look had vanished.

E turned to face the guys sitting in his living room. “A’ight! Y’all niggas listen up! I got these pills for the low.” He held up the small bag Richard had just given him. The looks from the group ranged from complacent to eager. Mondo was particularly interested in what E had to offer, but he turned his head away in an effort to hide his eagerness.

“Now look, y’all niggas only got to pay six dollars a pill cuz Rich Kid a pill junkie too, and he know how it is.” E glanced around the room, making sure that he made eye

contact with each and every man in the room before he continued. “Everybody else got to pay ten dollars though. I don’t give a fuck if they know you. I don’t know them, so it’s ten dollars.”

“Damn E,” Mondo said as a smirk spread across his face.

“Let me get one them, make sho’ they straight.”

E’s brow furrowed in anger and disbelief. “Who the fuck you thinks’ you is?”

“I’m gone pay for it,” Mondo replied defensively, trying to hide the fact that he had really hoped to get one for free.

*Beep! Beep!*

E walked over to the apartment window, pulled back the thick green polyester curtains and peered outside to see what all the commotion was about. Sitting right out front was a gray Nissan Maxima. Not recognizing the car, he closed the curtain most of the way, leaving only a tiny slit for him to peer through.

He watched the driver's side door swung open. Out of it stepped Bay-Bay, one of his girlfriends. Her five and a half foot tall frame, tiny waist and voluptuous hind end walked towards the stairs of his apartment. Her breasts looked like ripe mangos under the blue tank top, and it looked as though she wasn't wearing a bra by the way her nipples poked through the sheer material.

His heart raced faster with each step she took. The thought of bending her over and smacking her round ass while pounding her from behind excited him, but the fact that she had a motive beyond simply having a good time gave him a good enough reason to resist the urge.

"Damn!" E cursed under his breath as he headed for the door, opening it just before Bay-Bay knocked. As she walked through the door and into the room, she grabbed the front of E's pants, cupped his penis in her hands, and pulled her face into E's neck, nuzzling it with her nose.

“Damn baby, you gone make me put a baby in you, grabbing me like that,” E groaned, pulling away from her grasp.

“Pfffft!” Bay-Bay snapped her head side to side. “Don’t play no games with me boy. I done tried to make you blow me up, but you back out every time.”

“You think I playing?” E took a hold of her wrist and pulled her into his body, whispering in her ear, “Be here tomorrow morning when we get back from the afterhours.” But even as the words had left his mouth, he tried to devise a plan for avoiding her predatory claws.

“Why can’t we do it now?” Bay-Bay gave E a seductive pout. She reached for the front of his pants again, but he quickly pushed her away.

“Cause I got shit to do.” Just then, he remembered the Maxima sitting outside of his apartment. Quickly changing the subject, he asked, “Who that rental for baby?”



“Rich Kid told me to get it for you.” She dangled the keys in front of his face.

He extended his hand to take the keys, but then wondered whether Rich Kid had paid for it yet. “He give you the money for it or do I still got to pay for it?” He knew that, even if Richard hadn’t paid for the car, he could just coax Bay-Bay into paying for it. Of course, that meant giving her what she wanted, and what she wanted was his dick; more accurately, his baby. The thought made him shudder.

“Depends on how you plan on paying,” Bay-Bay cooed seductively, jingling the keys once again. “If you plan on paying in dick, then hells yeah, you got to pay. But if you paying in cash,” she jutted her hip out in annoyance, “then he already gave me the money.”

Without another word, E snatched up the keys. She had already given him the answer he needed, which meant he could avoid her tomorrow morning without having to pay for the car.

Bay-Bay placed her hands on her hips and chomped loudly on her gum. A clicking sound exited her mouth as the gum snapped between her teeth. E knew what was coming; she was steaming inside, ready to tell him off. She'd been trying to nail him for months, but so far, the furthest she'd gotten was a few grabs at his penis.

“E, you gone sell me one them pills or what?” Mondo hollered from across the room. Had the circumstances been different, Mondo's interruption would have been a source of irritation. In this instance, however, he was grateful for the interjection. Mondo had probably saved him from a serious tongue-lashing and a great deal of embarrassment in front of his boys.

E walked over towards Mondo so he could pay for the pill. E couldn't be certain, but it looked as though Mondo was irritated. He assumed it was because he'd had to pay for his pill.

“Baby, you got pills?” Bay-Bay asked. She was standing over by the window, looking over her shoulder at him.

E answered her over his shoulder as he exchanged Mondo’s cash for a pill, “Yea’ baby. You want one?”

“Nah, but these bitches might” Bay-Bay replied, pointing out the window. She had heard the girls pull up, music blaring, when Mondo had interrupted her conversation with E.

E turned to look in Bay-Bay’s direction, trying to determine which girls she had been talking about, but he couldn’t see past the curtain or her head. He started to walk towards the window so he could join her, but she had already dropped the curtain and turned to face him before he had reached her.

“Well,” Bay-Bay said, giving E one final lustful look-over, “I gotta go.”

E walked her to the door. Just before she walked out, E grabbed her elbow. He’d just remembered something. “When that nigga give you the money for that car?” He wondered how

Richard had come up with enough money to rent two cars. E had always suspected that Big Wine had had money stowed away, but he hadn't been certain. It wasn't that it really mattered, one way or the other. E was just curious.

“Like two days ago,” she replied. That confirmed it. Richard hadn't ever had quite that much money just laying around. Wine had to have left it to him.

“You know his ol' boy died, right?” E asked.

“Yeah, but he don't act like it.” To be honest, Bay-Bay was a little bewildered at Richard's calm demeanor over these last few days. It was like he had something else on his mind...but what else could possibly be more important than mourning the death of his father. Shrugging her thoughts off, Bay-Bay leaned in, stood on her toes and gave E a kiss before turning around and heading for the stairs.

Just as Bay-Bay was shrugging her thoughts off, E started contemplating Richard's strange behavior. It was one thing to

act strong in front of your homeboys, but E was like family and Richard had barely mentioned Big Wine's death at all. It was like something else was fueling him forward, distracting him from the grief. Like Bay-Bay, E wondered what that distraction might be.

## ***Chapter 4***

“I want some conch salad too, so don’t let them eat all of it,” Richard said as he gave Alicia a hug, rocking her back and forth, squeezing her tightly.

As Richard squeezed, Alicia could feel the hard steel of his gun jutting into her side. “Boy, Daddy should have never gave you no gun, cause now, every time I see you, you got one,” her nose wrinkled as she pulled away from his intrusive thug gear.

She glared in the direction of his hidden gun with disgust. “You even had one at the funeral today.”

“Sis, you know a lot a mother fuckers don’t like me, so don’t even trip,” Richard replied. His tone was serious, but a half grin gave away his joking demeanor.

Alicia hardened her look and crossed her arms over her chest. She knew her brother well enough to know that you had to be hard with him when giving a direct order, and what she was about to say was a direct order. “Hmph,” the haughtiness in her voice palpable, “Well, you bet not do nothing to Dwayne.”

Richard raised an eyebrow and asked, “Where he at anyway?” Alicia had only said that *HE* couldn’t hurt Dwayne. She’d never said anything about E or Skinny. Maybe E could catch Dwayne off guard and pistol whip him at the party.

Even before the sinister grin could finish taking its place on Richard’s face, Alicia knew what her brother was thinking.

“He ain’t here yet, and you bet not let Skinny or E do nothing to him neither.” Her face was so close to Richard’s that he could smell the barbeque ribs on her breath.

“Damn, Sis,” he said, retreating back a step. “You bee reading my mind? How ya’ know E and them be coming over here anyway?”

“You don’t stay nowhere long without them popping up,” Alicia replied matter-of-factly.

“A’ight, you got my word,” Richard seethed through gritted teeth. “He good and I ain’t gone fuck with him,” quietly adding, “Today.”

Alicia scowled at him, her eyes intense. She drew in deep breath, ready to give Richard a what for, but before she could attack, Gina entered the kitchen.

Gina spotted Richard immediately. Her face lit up with a wide smile and sparkling eyes. “Brother!” She yelled across the tiny room. “Come give your big sister a hug.” As Richard



reciprocated her grin and wrapped his arms around her shoulders, Gina fought the urge to nag him about Dwayne. She was certain that Alicia had already given him the third degree. Besides, Alicia had more pull when it came to talking Richard out of doing something crazy. Those two had always shared something special. Gina had been jealous of it when they were younger, but now it was just a part of life.

Richard released Gina from the embrace but kept his hands on her arms, the smile that had been on his face just moments before was replaced by a look of concern. “How you holding up, big Sis?”

“I’m gone be a’ight,” she replied, smiling weakly. Secretly, she doubted the certainty of her own words. Trying to cover her doubt, Gina quickly changed the subject. “Where Skinny at?” glancing around the room as she spoke. “I know you running that girl crazy.”

Before he could answer, Gina’s son, Pop bolted through the back door.

“Ma!” he yelled. “The DJ’s just got here!”

Richard smiled as he spotted his nephew. The young features, eager attitude and feisty temper always reminded Richard of himself when he’d been that young. Richard walked over to where Pop stood. “Wuz up, nephew?” putting his arm around Pop. “Come on. Let’s go pay the DJ’s.” Just before walking out the back door, Richard remembered Gina’s question. Calling over his shoulder, he answered, “Skinny out here in the car. She coming in a minute.”

“Damn Unc,” Pops said, looking up, still wrapped under his uncle’s arm. “What, you cried when you went home? Cause I ain’t seen you cry at the funeral and you sho’ don’t look like you gone cry now.”

Richard smiled down at his nephew and tightened the grip on Pop’s head slightly for a brief second. Crying hadn’t crossed his mind since he’d left the funeral. Sure, he was sad. Sure, he missed his father, but crying was a sign of weakness and weakness could get you killed. “Ain’t nothing to cry for,

Pop.” Richard’s head shook in the negative as he spoke. “That ain’t how my daddy raised me.”

As Richard and Pop made their way towards the DJ van, Richard noticed Skinny storming down the walkway to the house. Her arms swung stiffly at her sides. Her lips were tightly pursed. Richard knew that look well. Skinny was pissed.

“Get them joints out the car, boy,” Skinny hollered over her shoulder as she stormed up the stairs. It was just like Richard to pop too many pills and then make her roll joints for him.

“Wuz up, Auntie Skinny,” Pop called, waving his hand frantically. He hoped he could find a chick as fine as Aunt Skinny when he got older.

“Hi baby,” Skinny hollered back just before opening the door and disappearing inside the house.

With Skinny gone, Pop turned his full attention back to Richard, who was looking down at him patiently.

“How long you want them to be here, Pop?” Richard asked, referring to the DJ’s.

Pop gave his uncle a quizzical look. “Unc, I don’t call no shots round here.”

“Well,” Richard said as he pulled a wad of cash from his pocket. “Check this out. Whatever you say gone go tonight, a’ight?” It was high time the boy learned what it was like to be in charge.

Pop weighed the decision carefully. He’d never felt so important. Trying to think like a grown up, he considered how long the adults might want to listen to music. He knew the party usually got hot around midnight, so they would need at least a couple more hours of music after that.

“Well, it’s eight right now,” he spoke slowly, testing the authority of his voice, still thinking as he spoke. “So get them to stay for six hours.” He looked up at Richard expectantly, watching for a reaction.

Richard smiled and nodded. He handed Pop four hundred dollars in cash. “Take this and pay them. Then keep the change.” Lovingly, Richard gave Pop a quick pat on the back, indicating a job well done.

Pop’s eyes grew to the size of saucers. Uncle Richard was paying him. He knew what that meant. Trying to maintain his composure, he took the money and sauntered off, heading for the DJ van, but as soon as he was out of sight, he smiled ear to ear and pumped his fists in the air.

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After sitting in the car for more than thirty minutes, which had further irritated Skinny after the joint incident, Richard finally made his rounds, saying hi to all of his family members and friends. Now, he lounged in a folding chair in the back

yard, rolling and listening to the DJ, watching but not watching the crowd around him.

“Unc!” Pop called from the back door.

“Yeah, wuz up, nephew,” Richard called over his shoulder.

“E and them out here looking for you.” Pop shifted his weight quickly from one foot to the other, waiting for his next order.

“Tell them to come back here,” Skinny called back, adding, “Tell Auntie Alicia he’s here, too.”

Skinny knew Alicia had wanted to speak with the three of them once E arrived, and she wasn’t one to ignore Alicia. While less violent, Alicia could be just as crazy as her brother sometimes.

E came through the back door and walked towards Skinny and Richard. His jaw jutted back and forth, and his teeth were tightly clenched. His dilated pupils hid the colored irises of his eyes.

“Brah! Wuz up nigga?” His teeth grinding had stopped, but only long enough for him to speak.

Richard chuckled, “Lil’ Brah, you must be rolling nigga.”

E opened his mouth to respond, but Alicia’s voice cut into their conversation, calling them all from the back door. “Well, all y’all follow me,” she said, motioning inside with her hands.

E looked at Richard in silent question. He wondered what Alicia would need to talk to all of them about. Richard only shrugged in response as they headed towards the back door.

Once inside, the small group made their way to Pop’s room. The crowd parted slightly as they navigated their way through the kitchen and living room.

Alicia entered the small bedroom first, holding the door open so that Richard, E and Skinny could all make their way in. Shutting and locking the door, she turned to face the small crew now surrounding her. She looked at each of them, waiting to speak until she was certain that she had their attention. “I

don't know if Rich Kid told y'all or not, but Dwayne stole money from our Daddy while he was on his death bed." With her plan now in motion, Alicia simply stood back, crossed her arms over her chest and analyzed each reaction.

E slowly moved his head in Richard's direction as he tried to meet Richard's gaze, but Richard only looked down at the ground. E could see the evidence of a deflated plan in Richard's expression. Turning his gaze back to Alicia, he answered, "Naw, he ain't tell me shit."

"Well, I told him not to do anything to him," her body slightly leaning forward in their direction as she spoke. "Y'all hear me?"

"We hear ya, Sis," Richard and E replied, quickly and in unison. "He good."

Alicia turned her attention towards Skinny, giving her a hard stare. She was innocently looking around the room, acting as though she hadn't heard Alicia, but Alicia wasn't buying the



innocent look; she knew Skinny better than that. “I’m talking to you Skinny,” Alicia’s tone hard. “What? You think I don’t know you gone bust a bitch’s head if my brother told you to?”

“Sis, I told ya already. We ain’t gone do nothing to the man,” Richard cut in, hoping he could distract Alicia. If successful, he could help keep Skinny from having to make an official promise. Without that spoken promise, Skinny was free to do as she wished, and Richard knew Skinny had the same wish as him, for Dwayne to pay for what he’d done.

Alicia shot Richard a venomous glare, making it clear that she was on to him. “*You* probably wasn’t,” pointing at Richard as she spoke. “But you would have told E or Skinny to do it and then act like they ain’t know I asked y’all not to. That’s why I want *y’all*,” turning her attention back towards Skinny, “to promise me you ain’t gone do nothing to Dwayne.”

Skinny glanced over at Richard, waiting for his signal. Once the promise left her lips, the deal was sealed; there would be no retaliation for Dwayne. In response to her silent question,

Richard made eye contact and nodded once. “We promise you, Sis,” Skinny said through clenched teeth. The expression on her face made it clear that the words caused her great pain

## ***Chapter 5***

“I should try and fuck Skinny,” Mondo said, standing outside of E’s apartment, smoking a joint with Rex. As he exhaled, a thick cloud of smoke curled around his face and filled the star-studded sky above his head. The wind carried the smoke away, leaving only the pungent smell of marijuana in the air.

Rex choked and coughed, causing the lung full of smoke he had just inhaled to sputter out in short bursts. “Man, you bet

leave Rick Kid alone before he fuck you up,” his voice straining through the pain of his lost hit.

“Man, fuck that,” Mondo replied, blowing off Rex’s warning. “They bleed just like me.”

“You keep on, you gone get right what you looking for,” Rex warned again, shaking his head, pulling the joint back to his lips.

“Man, give me my joint back, nigga,” Mondo said angrily, snatching the joint from Rex’s hand. Just then, two Maximas pulled up, tires screeching to a halt. E stepped out of the first car, Richard and Skinny out of the second.

“Ay Maybay,” E said, walking through the grass towards the house. “How many pills you sold?”

Maybay snapped his head in E’s direction, jaw twitching. “I think seventeen.”

Taking notice of Maybay's twitching jaw, Richard raised an eyebrow and asked, "How many you pop?"

"Brah, I only popped three all day." The peaceful, nonchalant feeling the drugs were giving him seeped through into his statement of defense.

"How many pills you gave that nigga to sell E?" Richard whispered in E's direction.

"I gave him thirty out of the hundred you gave me," E replied. Suddenly, thinking of the pills, E remembered the cash he had on him. "Here your sixty dollars off the pills you gave me this afternoon," he said, pulling the cash out of his pocket.

Richard took two of the twenties and waved the other twenty away. E was already paying a price much lower than the rest of the guys, but E was his right hand man.

E smiled at Richard, grateful for the extra cash. "Brah, why you always treat me so good?"

“Cause ya my lil’ Brother,” Richard grinned back, giving E a playful slug on the shoulder.

Skinny walked through Richard and E’s roughhousing towards the front of E’s apartment. “Baby, I’m gone use the bathroom.” Her stomach was doing flips from all the alcohol she’d drank at Gina’s. The acidic burn of vomit rose up in her throat. Afraid she wouldn’t make it to the bathroom in time, she quickened her pace, holding her stomach. As she staggered up the steps, she heard Richard answer from behind her, “A’ight.”

Richard looked after Skinny as she stumbled up the stairs. For a moment, he wondered if he should follow her, but then dismissed the thought. She had made it up the stairs okay, and she would only be offended if he followed her. It was one of the many things he loved about her; she didn’t need him, she wanted him. Smiling slightly at the thought, he turned his attention back to E.

“Ay brah, ya gone bring Sis with us to the afterhours?” E asked, trying to determine the seating arrangement for the night.

“If she want to come,” Richard shrugged. “I’m gone ask her if she want to come when she come back outside.”

E turned in the direction of the guys crouched along the wall of his apartment. “How many y’all niggas coming to the afterhours?”

“Just me, Rex, Smoke, Dirt and Mondo,” Maybay answered, speaking for the whole group.

“Damn,” E said, turning back towards Richard. “We gone need three cars then if sis coming.”

Skinny cut in. E had not seen her walking up, now she spoke from right behind him. “I ain’t going,” she said, cutting into the conversation. She had just lost her dinner, so she felt a little better than she had a few moments ago, but her stomach

was still doing flips. “I drank too much at Gina’s house. I want to go home and lay down.”

“A’ight then,” Richard answered, a little concerned. He pulled Skinny into his arms, brushed her forehead with his thumb and searched her slightly glazed eyes. He was looking for even the slightest sign that she couldn’t handle driving herself. Seeing no indication that her driving would be unsafe, he said, “Drive the gray car home.” Still holding her in his arms, he turned his head over his shoulder. “Brah! You left something in that mother fucker?”

“Naw brah,” E answered. “But I’m ‘bout to go get the choppa out the house and put it in the car we riding in. Get the Uzi too ‘cause you know Short don’t check me at the door.”

Richard thought silently for a moment as he handed Skinny the keys. “Yeah, you right, cause they ain’t gone let us bring that choppa in the club,” nodding.



“Y’all niggas take that big ass Uzi in the afterhours?” Mondo asked doubtfully, interrupting the conversation between E and Richard.

An eerie silence blanketed their group as everyone turned their attention on Mondo. Richard and E exchanged a glance silently asking each other, *who this nigga think he is?*

Richard released Skinny from his arms, a cocky half-smile on his face, and turned his full attention towards Mondo. “Yeah,” ridiculing Mondo’s idiocy with his tone, “and the choppa gone be in the back seat, cause if something pop off and we run out.”

Richard turned back towards E, shooting a quick, ominous glance back over his shoulder at Mondo. “Brah, where you say you know this nigga from?” Richard asked.

“He cool,” E waved his arm in dismissal. “Don’t worry ‘bout that shit.” Affectionately, he smacked Richard’s shoulder and headed off to prepare the cars for afterhours.

Richard wanted to trust E's judgment, but something about Mondo didn't settle right. Still watching Mondo from the corner of his eye, Richard turned back towards Skinny. "It's four-thirty, baby. Meet me back here at noon."

Skinny leaned in for a kiss, "A'ight baby. See ya later," and headed for the car, Richard following behind her. As he pulled the driver's side door open, she turned to face him again. "And if ya' get some shone, call me so I can get some head from that hoe."

Richard grinned and smacked her rear end, prodding her into the car. "I got you baby girl." He leaned into the car to give her one last kiss and said, "I love you girl."

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Everybody knew the young man making his way through the smoke-filled afterhours. Women ran their hands up and

down his white shirt; a few even clawed at his Polo jeans, hoping to coax him onto the dance floor. Men greeted him with smiles and dap. But all the while, through all the distractions the afterhours had to offer, Richard continued to make his way closer to the bar. “Princess!” he tapped his fingers on the bar and smiled, “Wuz up, Auntie?”

The bartender’s face lit up at the sound of Richard’s voice. “Nephew!” she exclaimed, placing the glass she’d been washing back into the sink. “Wuz up? Ya want something to drink?”

Smiling slyly, Richard held up a full bottle of Hennessy Skinny had left in the car. “Naw, Auntie. I’m good on drink, but I need some gar’s and seven bottles of water.”

“Okay,” Princess started lining up glasses, filling them with ice. “I’m gone give you ten Dutch’s, seven waters and some cups of ice, a’ight?”

“Yeah, that uh be good for now, Auntie,” Richard nodded and handed her a hundred dollar bill. As he turned towards the tables, where the rest of his group had headed, he took in the scene. It was a busy night; that promised good sales. And everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves: smoking weed or glass, sniffing coke, dropping pills. He could even assume that a few patrons sat huddled in the bathroom, shooting up; they always were. All of that promised good sales tonight as well. Richard inhaled deeply, allowing the dank air to fill his lungs. You could almost get a high just breathing the afterhour’s air.

He smiled to himself as he spotted their table. Just as he had reached their table, a female voice calling his name cut through the crowd. Richard snapped his head in the direction of the voice, trying to determine its source. He spotted the dyed cornrows first, then the small upturned nose and large, luscious lips. It was Joy, one of the strippers from Take-One, and she was closing the distance between the two of them quickly, despite the large crowd in the room.

“Wuz good, Joy?” Richard asked when she had reached where he stood. Instinctively, he placed his money back into his pocket.

Joy stood so close to him, he could have buried his face in her exposed cleavage. “Boy, you ain’t gotta be putting your money up when you see me.” She traced her finger down his arm.

Flicking her hand away, he forced himself to focus his eyes on her face instead of her bare flesh. “Girl, that’s just a habit.” He sat down in one the chair, trying to put some distance between the two of them. “What’s on your mind though?”

“You know what’s on my mind.” Joy cooed seductively, trailing her fingernails down his face.

Richard pulled his head back, repulsed by her continued advances. “Girl, I done told you. I ain’t trying to have you fucked up ‘bout the kid.”

“I think you’d be fucked up ‘bout me,” Joy said, coming in for another advance. Just before she closed the gap between them, Princess intervened, placing her body between Joy and Richard.

Princess used her hips to bump Joy out of the way. “Nephew, here go your change.” She shot Richard a knowing smile as she handed him the money.

Richard smiled and winked back, knowing that Princess had intentionally saved him from Joy’s clutches. “Auntie, give Maybay fifty dollars. You keep the change. A’ight?”

“Okay Maybay, here ya go.” Before leaving, she called over her shoulder in a sing-song voice, “Call me if you need something.”

Richard snickered and turned his attention back to a dejected-looking Joy. “Ms. Joy,” he said, trying not to let the amusement seep through his voice. “I knew I had something to tell ya.”

“And what’s that?” Hurt was still evident in her voice, but a glint in her eyes reflected a small remaining shred of hope.

“I got some pills,” he said. “So if you and your coworkers need some, holla at my little brother.”

Joy winced at the words, but quickly recovered. She hoped the deflated feeling inside stayed away from the surface, but looking at Richard, she guessed that it must be displayed on her face. As he held her gaze, he looked like he felt sorry for her. She had been waiting in line for Richard from the moment she’d laid eyes on him. She wondered what Skinny had to offer that she couldn’t? Hurt, angry and irritated, she hid her face by turning towards E. Her back now faced Richard. “All right,” she said, pulling her cell phone out. “Give me your number so I can call you when we need some at the strip club.”

Now out of the line of fire, Richard glanced around the room. He was looking for his very first sale of the night. But not far from their table, Richard noticed another familiar face coming towards them.

“Rich Kid!” Ron called, making his way through the crowd, bumping people out of the way with his shoulder. “Wuz good, nigga?”

Richard greeted Ron with a smile and some daps. “Ain’t much, nigga. I’m just chilling.”

“I see ya got some bad bitches with you, too,” Ron said, noticing the slew of girls that had flocked over to their table, Joy included.

“Yeah, man,” Richard replied. “I do what I can, you know?”

Ron nodded in understanding. “Well, look here. I got a bottle of Patron in the car if you want a little, nigga.” He smiled as Richard’s expression of gratitude surfaced. Ron hadn’t really planned on drinking it, and he figured it would be a good way to connect with the up and coming man on the streets. He’d heard good things about Rick Kid, and what better



way for Ron to pass on his legacy than to reward a newer, younger version of himself?

“Yeah, let me get that.” Smiling, Richard stood. “You know I love that white liquor.” He knew Ron had been hustling for a long time. To receive this much love from a man of Ron’s stature could only mean one thing: Richard really was making a name for himself on the streets.

“A’ight, here go the keys,” Ron said, handing a set of keys over to Richard. “You got to go get it yourself.”

“No problem,” Richard shrugged. “What car you riding in?”

“Ask Marvin. He’ll show you,” Ron grinned with satisfaction as Richard looked down at the keys in his hand and faded back into the crowd.

Once Richard’s trance had finally ended, he looked up to find no one there. Realizing that Ron must have left, Richard started to look for Marvin.

Once Marvin was located, he and Richard headed outside to Ron's car. Richard's face lit up with surprised envy as Marvin pointed towards a Benz CL 600 Coupe. He walked towards the car slowly, taking in every inch of its shiny exterior. Finally opening the back door, he reached in to grab the bottle. He inhaled the sweet smell of new leather. He couldn't wait to start making the kind of money it took to own a car like this one.

Certain that Marvin must be tired of waiting, Richard pulled himself away from the intoxicating scent, closed the door and pushed the lock button on the remote. As he reluctantly handed the keys back to Marvin, Richard again heard his name. At first, he thought he might be hearing things; he hadn't heard that voice in months. But as he turned to where the voice had come from, Richard noticed a figure walking towards him. The figure was too far away to make out the face, but he didn't need to see who was calling his name. He would have recognized that voice anywhere.

“Son-Son!” Richard yelled, walking towards the voice. He couldn’t believe his eyes and ears. It was Balle, otherwise known to Richard and his crew as Lil’ B. Richard had adopted the boy, took him in after his parents had abandoned him. Never mind the fact that Lil’ B was just a little younger than he was; he loved the boy like a son.

“Wuz good, Pa?” Balle asked, now standing in front of Richard. The two young men embraced in a half hug, each of them smiling ear to ear.

“When you got out?” Richard asked, gently smacking Lil’ B on the shoulder.

“I just got out tonight.”

A short moment of silence surrounded the two. Richard considered asking if Lil’ B had heard about Big Wine’s death, but thought better of it. Lil’ B did know and considered giving his condolences, but his own grief over the loss of his grandfather figure threatened to cause a display of emotions,

and Lil' B had learned early on that behavior like that was unacceptable, especially in public.

Clearing his throat, Richard was the first to break the awkward silence. He figured there wasn't any sense in standing around mulling over the loss. Life goes on, after all. "Let's go party then," he said, forcing a smile and motioning for Lil' B to follow him.

As the door to the afterhours opened, loud music filled the streets. Once it closed, the party continued as Richard, Lil' B, E and their friends smoked, drank, danced and enjoyed all that the afterhours had to offer.

## ***Chapter 6***

Outside of E's house, Skinny sat in the passenger's seat of the green Maxima, arms crossed, foot flopping wildly in irritation. "Baby, why every time you go to the afterhours I get all kind of messages from hoes telling me 'bout what you doing?" Like her body language, the high-pitched tone gave away her high level of frustration.

Annoyed by her childish behavior, Richard swatted the statement away, like a black fly buzzing around his head.

“Baby, fuck them hoes,” still staring out the windshield from the driver’s side seat. “Look, I’m gone let Balle take you home and bring the car back to E. A’ight.”

A strongly pronounced pout crossed Skinny’s lips. “I want some dick before you start your day, Daddy.” She knew she sounded like a spoiled little child, but she didn’t care. “Ain’t no telling when you coming home when you on them pills.”

Richard knew how Skinny could be when it came to loving, but he also knew that nothing could come in the way of making money, not even their favorite past time. Trying to appease her, he said, “Look, when E come out the room with Bay-Bay, I’m gone given you want you want. But I can’t leave here. I’m waiting on somebody to come.” He looked over to check her expression. Seeing it had softened a little, he hoped she could take the next bit of news. “I ain’t gone lie though, baby. I might be in the streets for about a week, but when I come home, we gone shack up, a’ight?”

The news severed Skinny's last thread of patience. She knew how Richard could lose track of time when he was high, and she wasn't willing to wait another two hours while he handled the exchange with White Boy. Reaching across the console, she grabbed for Richard's zipper. "Boy, you know what, let me see my dick. Go 'head and pull him out." She tugged furiously at his pants. "I ain't taking no for an answer. I'll rip your pants off."

Richard pushed her hands away playfully. "A'ight baby, hold up." A grin played on his lips as he rolled down the driver's side window. "Ay, Son-Son! Come out and get me out the back yard when White Boy get here!"

A smirk crossed Lil' B's face as he watched Richard and Skinny exit the car. He already knew why Richard needed him to watch for White Boy. He also knew that it had been Skinny's idea. "I gotcha, Paw," adding playfully, "What? Ma can't wait?"

Richard laughed as he and Skinny rounded the side of the building, Skinny already clawing at his clothes. Richard placed his hands underneath her bottom and lifted her off the ground. Her legs wrapped tightly around his waist, her hands clasped behind his neck, and Richard carried her the rest of the way.

The moment they reached the backyard, Skinny let go and dropped to her knees. Like a cougar pouncing on its prey, she already had his pants undone and his bulging penis in her mouth.

Richard released a small moan. “Damn baby girl, you miss your Daddy that much?” slightly leaning his hips into her wet mouth.

“Mmhmmm,” she replied, mouth still full of erect flesh. The throaty sound more closely resembled a moan than an answer.

Placing his hands on the back of her head, he pushed her lips closer to the base of his shaft. His hips rocked with the



rhythm of her head as she continued to moan in ecstasy, each moan more climactic than the previous; she was the only woman Richard had ever known to orgasm while giving head. He carefully timed her moans, waiting until she sounded like she might reach her peak, and then abruptly pulled her head away.

Gasping for air and still hungry, Skinny stood up; a flood of wetness gushed between her legs. Richard lifted her feet off the ground, pushing her skirt up as she wrapped her legs around his bare waist.

Grinding her pelvis into his, she buried her face his neck. “Baby, fuck it!” overcome with love and desire, “Let’s make a baby right here in E back yard.”

Richard pulled his head back, gazed into her eyes, “That’s what you want?” he asked.

Biting her lip, she broke Richard’s gaze and considered the weight of her comment. She couldn’t think of a single reason

why they shouldn't have a baby. A small smile pulled on the corners of her mouth as she nodded. "Yeah. I ain't trying to make you do it," her voice breathy. "I want you to want it."

"A'ight. Let's do it then," he nodded in agreement. "I love you too much to pass on this." Pinning her against the side of E's house, the two melded together into one. Bouncing up and down on his waist, clawing at his back, Skinny erupted into a dizzying climactic spin first. Richard picked up the pace, thrusting harder, pushing her quickly to a second climax. She attempted to muffle her screams of elation with the fabric of his shirt, but failed miserably. Her heightened moans pushed him towards his own climax. He swelled and erupted inside of her. His seed spilled into her and overflowed, dripping down the inner parts of her thigh. Exhausted but fulfilled, they held each other for a moment longer.

"I love you baby," Skinny said, tears of joy glistening in her eyes.

Richard met her eyes and kissed her deeply before replying,  
“I love you too.”

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“How many pills we got left, Brah?” Richard asked. They were driving down Eighteenth Avenue to pick up money from Richard’s trap.

“Only a hundred and twenty, Brah,” E answered. “Them bitches move faster than coke, crack and weed put together.”

Richard did the math in his head. Something seemed off. “I know, but from that, we only supposed to make twelve g back. We just counted fifteen and we still got pills left.”

Bobbing his head to the Lil’ Wayne song playing over the radio, E smiled. “Yeah, I knew I gots to tell you something,

Brah. That hoe Joy been calling me off the chain to buy up all kind of pills.”

Making the connection in his head, Richard glanced over at E. “How much you been selling them to her for?”

A smirk crossed E’s face. “Ten dollars.” Richard’s arched eyebrow encouraged E to continue. His smirk now spread into a full gold-toothed grin. “Shit, she ain’t nobody. So she don’t get the homeboy discount.”

Richard belted out a laugh, “Brah! You crazy as fuck!” punching E’s shoulder jokingly, “She supposed to pay six dollars.” E joined Richard’s laughter and the two exchanged daps.

“Ay, how much Richmond got to give to us?” Richard asked as they neared their destination.

“Six hundred dollars.”

A pleased look covered Richard's face. "That nigga been eating off us, Brah. He sold 'bout seven hundred pills this week alone!"

"That's a good thing, ain't it?"

"Yeah that is," Richard agreed. "Cause Big Brah only sold like..."

"Man, what the fuck they doing?" E asked, cutting Richard off mid-sentence. Both men leaned forward to take a better survey of the situation in front of them.

"What it look like, they robbing Richmond trap," Richard said, slowing the car down. "I tell you what, the choppa still in the trunk, right?"

"Yeah."

"I'm gone get that and come from behind the store, a'ight?" Richard said, turning the corner, just past the barbershop. They now sat at the back of the convenience store. "Here, get this

glock and make sho' they don't get away if I miss one," he ordered, handing the glock to E as he threw open the driver's side door.

Already halfway out of the car, E extended his arm and took the gun. "I got ya, Brah."

"Y'all fucking niggas lay down, talking 'bout how Eighteenth Ave can't get robbed," one of the gunman taunted, a sadistic sneer on his face. "What I'm doing right now? Robbing y'all bitch ass niggas."

Watching the rear view mirror nervously, a man hollered at the robber standing outside of the convenience store, "Man, you talking too long! Get the money and shit and let's go!"

"Man, shut yo' soft ass up!" the second robber yelled back over his shoulder.

*Man, these niggas need to come on before they get us killed.* Between the barbershop and the playhouse, the driver saw a man approaching. Before he could yell, gunshots filled

the air. Instinctively, his foot slammed on the gas pedal. Tires screeching, he looked back in his rearview at the bloody scene now behind him.

“Bro!” Hit that LD up!” Richard yelled. E shot for the back of the driver’s head as he ran towards the car, but he was too far out of range. He could still hear the ring of gunshots behind him as he yanked the driver’s side door open and fired up the ignition.

Tires screeched as E pulled up just feet in front of Richard. Running for the passenger side door, he yelled over his shoulder to the crowd now gathered outside the shop, “Y’all niggas don’t touch shit! Leave it the way it is for the police. Tell them they were robbing.”

“That nigga getting away!” Richard yelled as he threw himself into the passenger side seat of the already moving car.

With Richard now safely in the car, E slammed his foot down on the accelerator. “I think I saw that shit to Seventy-First Street.”

Speeding down the street, surrounded by screeching brakes and honking horns, Richard suddenly spotted the car. “There that shit go, right there!” Aiming the chopper out the window, Richard shot at the car in front of them.

The getaway driver pleaded aloud to himself, “Please don’t let these niggas kill me! Please, God, please!” as he swerved in and out of traffic, trying to lose the car behind him.

E pulled into the wrong lane of traffic, speeding through the oncoming cars. Richard shot off three more rounds as they neared the tail end of the getaway car. A loud pop and screeching tire confirmed his hit.

“I got him, Bro!” Richard yelled. “Slow this shit down before we run into Sixth Ave.”



His calf felt like it was on fire. *Man! This shit hot!* He looked down at his now crimson colored pants, trying to quickly assess the damage. “What the fuck?”

*WAHHH! WAHHHH!*

His head snapped in the direction of the sound, just in time to see the grill of an eighteen-wheeler plowing into the side of his car.

Richard slammed on the brakes just before reaching the intersection. The car turned a hundred and eighty degrees before coming to a screeching halt, dust and smoke flying up, enveloping the car. Throwing the doors open, Richard and E charged at the mangled mess in front of them.

The driver to the semi was already out, trying to pry open the door and failing. Frantically, he looked around for any sign of help. Seeing two men approaching, he yelled, “Hey! Come help...” With the men closer, he could see the guns in their hands. “Man, please don’t kill me,” his hands up in the air.

They raised their guns. He held his breath. Gunfire pierced his ears and he started to cry. Spittle spewed from his lips as big, warm tears streamed down his face.

The gunfire stopped suddenly. The sound, replaced by a loud screeching of tires. Slowly, he opened his eyes, ears still ringing from the massacre that had just taken place. Unsure of whether or not he was still alive, he looked around. The men were gone. They had left nothing more than black tire marks, clouds of dust and gun smoke, a dead body and one sole survivor that had witnessed it all.

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In the living room of E's apartment, lyrics to a Lil' Wayne song played. The television was on, but no one was really listening. E's and Richard's pupils were noticeably dilated, and E was gnawing a hole in his right inner cheek.

“Ay E! Cut that shit down bro!” Richard had just seen a crashed eighteen-wheeler on the right hand screen of the television. Above it, a banner read “Up Next.” He pointed to the television. “Look at the news!”

“What you talking about? What happened?” E made his way into the living room, walked over and turned the radio down. “Cut the T.V. up, Bro.”

“...Reporting to you live from a robbery turned homicide on Eighteenth Avenue and Sixty-Sixth Street in Liberty City.” The camera panned on the store behind the female reporter. “Witnesses say that two men allegedly attempted to rob this store, but before they could enter the building, two other men reportedly shot the robbers, killing them instantly. Leaving the gruesome scene behind them, the men then jumped into a 2005 white Ford Mustang, and chased down the robbery’s getaway driver. Police arrived on the scene to see find the getaway driver dead with multiple gunshot wounds to his body, his vehicle overturned by an eighteen-wheeler. Reportedly, the

driver of the eighteen-wheeler passed out on impact. No other witnesses have reported on what may have happened here last night. If you have any information regarding this case, please call the Miami Dade...”

Richard cut the television off with the push of a button. “That’s us, Bro!”

“Yeah, that’s us,” E replied with a worried frown. This hadn’t been the first time E had killed someone, but it was the first time that one of his murders had received news coverage. He wasn’t thrilled about the idea, nor was he fond of calling prison his home anytime in the near future. Thinking back to the Lil’ Wayne lyrics that had just been playing, E couldn’t help but feel that somehow, the rapper had an influence on Richard’s actions and decisions.

E chewed the thought, mulled over carefully. Suddenly, it occurred to him that Richard’s life often mirrored Lil’ Wayne lyrics. “Bro, you need to stop listening to this fucking Lil’ Wayne shit,” E said, somberly.

“Why nigga?”

E pointed over at the radio, looking at his friend with worry. “Cuz every time you do something, it’s like Lil’ Wayne backing you up or some shit.”

“It aint’ my fault that he rap about how I live, nigga.” Dismissing E’s comment, Richard stood up, walked over to the stereo and turned the music back up.

“Richard!” E’s mother yelled from outside the front door, barely audible over the music.

“Yeah!” Richard yelled back.

“Balle out here looking for you boy!”

“A’ight. I’m coming,” Richard walked towards the door. Before walking outside, he turned back towards E. “Ay. Don’t worry ‘bout that shit, man.”

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Driving back from the strip club later that night, Richard, E and Lil' B joked about the night's events. The club had been dead when they'd arrived, but the three of them had still managed to enjoy themselves thoroughly.

Lil' B's favorite had been their private show from Joy. Richard had given her a thousand dollars – a well-deserved reward for helping them sell so many pills that week, but he still made her dance for them the rest of the night. Visions of her round breasts, quarter-sized nipples and bright red thong still occupied his thoughts. If only Joy weren't so stuck on Richard...

“Bro’ you ‘bout one crazy mother fucker,” E laughed along with Richard and Lil' B as they reminisced about their night.

“Why you say that?” Richard grinned ear to ear. “Cause I do what I want and not what I can?”

“Psshht...That part of it,” Lil’ B leaned forward into the front seat as he spoke.

E turned the upper half of his body towards the back seat, “You right behind him, nephew, so you don’t need to tell him he crazy, “the corners of his mouth turning down in a concerned frown, but his tone gave away that he was only half-serious.

Lil’ B’s lip curled in offense. He slugged E in the shoulder. E smacked him back, and like two young siblings, they engaged in a mock fistfight with Richard catching the side wind of a few hits. The effect of the drugs made them all laugh at the silliness of their behavior.

Richard’s pocket vibrated. Holding the wheel with one hand, he turned his body slightly sideways to retrieve his cell phone.

“Ay, y’all niggas hold that shit down while I answer this call,” Richard flipped the phone open to answer it and pulled it

up to his ear. “Hello?...What’s good Maybay?...Man, you for real?”

Lil’ B and E exchanged an inquisitive look.

“Oh well, fuck that nigga!...I’m driving right now. I’ll get back at you when I get where I’m going.” Richard pushed the end button and tossed the phone into his lap without saying a word. Expression void, he continued to drive.

After what must have been five minutes, Richard suddenly burst into a fit of laughter. E and Lil’ B shot each other a confused look.

“What’s so funny, nigga? What happen?” E asked, his expression now fixed on Richard.

“That nigga that got shot up on Twenty-Second Ave,” Richard paused, speaking through his laughter as E and Lil’ B stared in anticipation, “That was Mondo.”



“You talking ‘bout that shit on the news with the eighteen-wheeler?” Lil’ B asked.

E’s mouth hung open and his eyes widened with shock. “I told you, you crazy bro,” shaking his head.

“Why does what happened to Mondo make him crazy?” Lil’ B asked, a confused expression on his face.

“Cause we did that shit,” E replied.

Lil’ B’s expression turned from one of confusion to one of shock and disbelief. A sinister grin spread across his face, “Oh shit, Paw! You *is* crazy!”

Richard shrugged. To him, Mondo’s death served as nothing more than an ominous message to anyone that dared to mess with him or his crew. If Mondo hadn’t decided to rob Richmond’s trap, he might still be alive.

## ***Chapter 7***

Richard's fingers tapped the steering wheel harshly. His eyes carefully watched the front door of the bar in Overtown. Haughtily, he readjusted himself in the seat and turned up the radio to ease his frustration. *Man! Come on!*

A tall, lanky man in Polo shorts and a white t-shirt exited the bar, laughing loudly. Through the rolled down passenger side window, Richard yelled, "Yo' Cash!"

The man standing outside the bar turned his head in the direction of his name. Seeing Richard, he walked towards the car and leaned in through the passenger window. “Rich! Wuz up, my nigga?”

Richard leaned over from the driver’s seat and reached across the passenger seat to give Cash daps. “Yo Cash, I need two thousand more of them thangs. What can you do for me?”

“Take me to the store.” Cash opened the door and climbed in. “And when you get some money on you.” He assumed that Richard already had the money, otherwise he wouldn’t have asked for more pills, but clarity was always important in these matters.

Richard shot Cash an offended look. “Why you gotta ask me some shit like that?” his tone mirrored his facial expression as they pulled up to the store on Twelfth Street. “You know I got the money.”

Disregarding Richard's defensive tone, Cash motioned to the store. "You want something out of there?"

"Yeah, get me four Dutch and two bottled waters," Richard answered, smiling mischievously, "You know I got to test this new shit out."

As Cash opened the door and exited the car, Richard's phone started to ring. "Hello?"

On the other end of the line, E paced back and forth on the sidewalk, "A bro, Lil' Pop locked up. I just saw them crackers take him to jail."

Richard gritted his teeth as his grip tightened around his cell phone. "Where you at, bro?"

"Over here by the Pork-N with Lil' Rod," E wondered why Richard cared where he was at. Pops was in jail.

Richard's biceps flexed as he squeezed the steering wheel even harder. His jaw had already started to ache from grinding

his teeth so hard. He closed his eyes, willing himself to calm down, to keep it together, “You know what he went to jail for?”

“I think he had a gun,” E replied. “That’s what this lil’ hoe told us.”

“Ok,” Richard sighed, “When I get done with this, I’m gone call sis and tell her he locked up. We can’t do shit, though. He’s going to juvie. Ain’t no bonding him out cause they don’t get none.”

Cash was already back in the car and had overheard the tail end of Richard’s phone conversation. “Who went to jail?”

“My lil’ nephew.” Not even looking at Cash, Richard put the car into drive. “They say he got jammed with a gun a few minutes ago.”

“Damn,” Cash replied, but before he could say anything else, he spotted his car. “Ay! Stop right there and pull up next

to that black Buick,” he pointed in the direction of the car, “on that side of the street.”

A black unmarked car sat around the corner from Cash’s black Buick. From the back seat of the unmarked car, Rex told the two men sitting up front, “That’s him right there,” and pointed towards Cash.

“Getting out of the blue Daytona Dodge Charger?” asked Willie-B, one of the undercover officers sitting up front. He’d been trailing Cash for months, but that slimy drug dealer had always been one-step ahead. With Rex’s help, he might finally nab one of the most prominent drug suppliers in Dade County.

“Yeah, that’s him.”

“Ok people, let’s get ready for that bust,” Willie-B announced, holding down the button of his walkie-talkie as he spoke. Excitement pulsed through his veins as he amped up for the chase. “That’s a fast car, so they might try and run, but don’t move until he’s back in the car he got out of.”

“Copy that,” crackled back over the radio.

Coolly, Cash climbed back into Richard’s car.

“Ay, Cash, I hope you give me a deal on the next batch of pills. I’m gone buy four thousand next...”

“Hit the gas, nigga,” Cash interrupted, slamming the door shut. “That’s the police right there!”

Without hesitation, Richard slammed his foot down on the gas pedal. Smoke from the screeching tires filled the air. “I got this shit, Cash. Just watch the skills, nigga.”

“I hope you do cause I’m out on bond already man,” Cash replied, holding onto the door and arm rest for dear life.

“Go! Go! Go!” Willie-B yelled into the walkie. “They’re getting away!”

Through the streets of Overtown, Richard swerved between right and wrong lanes of traffic. The odometer pushed to eighty miles an hour through the busy city streets. The sounds of car

horns and screeching tires filled each intersection as they flew through without so much as a tap on the brakes. Shops, houses and apartment buildings whizzed by in a blur.

Cash looked over his shoulder. Seeing the gap closing between Richard and the car behind them, he yelled, “Turn left right here!”

Richard turned sharply into the Town Park Apartments, cutting the gas as he turned, increasing speed the moment he cleared the lot.

Cash leaned into the passenger side door, holding onto the handle. “Let me out at the turn down there, man,” he said as he braced himself for his exit.

Richard glanced at Cash in disbelief before turning his eyes back to the road in front of him. “What the fuck you mean, nigga?”

“Man, you can have this shit!” Cash threw the bag of pills into Richard’s lap. “Now let me out!”



“Why ain’t you say that shit the first time?” Picking up speed just a little, Richard tried to increase the gap between him and the car behind them. He was almost to the end of the complex parking lot.

“Let me out! Let me out!” Cash screamed, opening the door. The car was still moving at a neck-breaking speed.

Richard slammed on the brakes. The door flew open and Cash rolled out onto the pavement. Without even waiting for him to get out of the way, Richard slammed the accelerator. He made another left, pulling out onto Twentieth Street.

“Call highway patrol. I think he’s going to get on I-95.” Willie-B spoke into the walkie. He and his crew had missed Cash’s jump and continued to pursue the car weaving in and out of traffic in front of them.

Holding his cell phone in one hand and driving with the other, Richard continued on his path to I-95. “Ay Bro! Where you at? I need you to pick me up ASAP!”

“What happened?” E grabbed his keys and headed for the door.

“I got the police on a chase. I got two thousand pills, my gun and six thousand dollars,” Richard yelled. “That’s what happened!”

*Shit!* “Where you want me to pick you up?” E was already climbing into his car.

Richard calculated how long it would take E to reach him from the apartment, “Go over there on Sixth Ave and Sixty-Seventh Street,” overshooting it, just in case. “Park by the highway. And don’t move!”

“I got you. Just get there,” E spoke to dead air.

Richard had already ended the call and was now pressing speed dial three – Skinny’s aunt, Sue. “Ma! I can’t talk right now,” Richard said, cutting off Sue’s attempt at small talk as he looked over his shoulder to gauge the gap between him and the unmarked police car. Seeing that they were closing in, he

pushed the accelerator a little more. “Just leave the door open, alright?”

Now doing a hundred and eighty-five miles an hour, Richard snapped his phone shut and quickly swerved around a red Pontiac. Sixty-Seventh Street was just up ahead. Pulling into the far left lane, he waited until the last possible moment to hit the brakes. The car’s rear end tried to swerve out from behind, but he quickly turned the wheel back to the right, straightening it just enough to stop it completely. Throwing it into park, he bolted out of the door, leaving it open as he ran.

“That crazy son-of-a-bitch is getting out of the car,” Willie-B slammed on the accelerator and pulled the walkie up towards his lips. “I need all units on Sixty-Seventh Street.” If they moved fast enough, they just might catch the runner.

“Sixty-seventh and what?”

“Sixty-Seventh and Sixth Ave,” he yelled as he watched Richard jump the median into oncoming traffic. “Damn it!”

Waiting just on the other side of the highway with the passenger side door open, E spotted Richard, dodging the expressway cars. Within moments, Richard was climbing into the seat next to him. Undetected by the officers now approaching the car Richard had left behind, they sped off down the street.

Kitchen, Willie-B's partner approached the passenger side slowly, gun poised. He expected to find Cash still sitting in the vehicle. "Come out with your hands up." Willie was just a few feet behind him. Now standing right next to the car, he peered in through the passenger side window. "Ain't nobody in the car," looking over towards his partner.

Willie-B kicked the gravel, screaming obscenities at the sky and the cars driving by. Hunched over and out of breath, he raised the walkie to his lips again. "Dispatch, be on the lookout on a black male, blue jeans, white shirt and dreadlocks."

"Ask that mother fucker if he knows who that was," Kitchen said, motioning to their car with his thumb.

Walking back, Willie-B gritted his teeth, “Trust me, I am. And if doesn’t know, the deal’s off.”

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Richard awoke the next morning to the scent of grits, fried eggs, smothered pork chops and crack cooking in the microwave. Entering the kitchen, he saw the person responsible for the delectable smells standing in front of the stove. “Baby girl, what you hooking up for Daddy?” he asked, walking up behind her, wrapping his arms around her growing belly and kissing her neck.

Skinny smiled as Richard’s arms wrapped around her. “Some breakfast for us,” she pointed to the microwave, “and some breakfast for the block.”

He smiled and nuzzled her neck before walking over to microwave. Grabbing a rag off the counter, he opened the door

and removed the glass measuring cup.” Well, let me handle this block breakfast while you get our breakfast together,” he said, setting the glass cup on the counter to cool. “I need to start paying you for doing this shit,” he smiled as he examined the rest of the crack cookies on the counter.

Skinny shrugged, then turned towards him, suddenly remembering there was something she needed to tell him. “Alicia called for you this morning,” waving her hand in the air as she finished her statement. “But you know how she is about getting you up out your sleep.”

“What she want?”

“She said Pop went to jail for a gun and Gina wanted to talk to you,” she replied, flipping the pork chops.

“Damn! I forgot all about that shit, baby girl.” Richard used his thumb and forefinger to place pressure on the bridge of his nose.

“What you forgot about?”

He stood and sighed. “E done told me he saw Pop go to jail in the Beans yesterday,” still holding the pressure against the bridge of his nose.

“How you gone forget some shit like that baby?” Her sarcastic tone was evened out by her joking smile. “Oh yeah, you was running from the police yourself.” She turned to look at him, and placed her hand on her hip, “And you still ain’t told me what happened.”

A large grin slowly spread across his face. “The police was watching Cash when I was trying to buy the pills.”

Skinny wasn’t sure how to interpret Richard’s smile. “How the fuck you get away from a police raid baby?” A silly half-smile crossed her lips. “Wine know he made a beast out of you.” She turned back to the stove and started to remove the pork chops from the skillet, placing them on a plate.

Richard belted out a laugh. “Fuck how I got away. That bitch ass nigga wanna get out the car while we running from the police!”

Skinny dropped the fork she’d been using and turned back towards Richard with her mouth gaping open in shock. “What you mean he wanted to get out?”

“Nigga threw the pills in my lap and said I can have them if I let him out,” he replied, nonchalantly.

“So what? You made him ride with you?” she asked, certain that he wouldn’t have just let Cash out of the car. Yet she somehow knew that that was what he was trying to say.

“Hell nah!” shaking his head, “I let his ass out when I made that run going through Town Park Apartments and pulled off.”

Skinny chuckled at the idea of Richard making away with all of those pills, all because Cash had been too scared to ride it out. “Baby! You crazy as fuck! So what happened to the pills?”



“They at E’s house,” he answered, waving the issue away with his hand. “I’m ‘bout to jump in the shower and get ready to go.”

With a plate in one hand and a hip in the other, Skinny turned and faced Richard. “So you not gone eat breakfast with me?”

“Baby girl, having breakfast is a part of getting ready to go,” he replied, plainly. “Now, if you gone help me bag this shit up, I’ll stay a lil’ longer.”

Skinny’s nose wrinkled at the thought of having to help bag up the cookies. “No, just breakfast, thank you,” she answered as the phone started to ring. Setting the plate on the table first, she walked over to the phone and answered it. “Hello?...Oh, hold on Alicia,” she held the phone out towards Richard. “Richy, it’s yo’ sister.”

Richard took the phone from Skinny’s hand and placed the receiver up to his ear. “Wuz good, Sis?”

“Boy!” Alicia’s shrill voice came over the line. “I been trying to call you all day yesterday. Why you ain’t answer the phone?”

“Sis, I was trying to do something and the police tried to run down on me and I dropped my phone,” he replied, trying to keep his voice calm, hoping it would help settle Alicia’s anger.

Silence settled over the phone line as Richard’s answer sunk in. “Well,” she finally continued, clearing her throat. “Did Skinny tell you that Lil’ Pop went to jail yesterday?”

“Yeah, she told me,” Richard answered. “I got to get a new phone so I can call that lawyer that owe me one.”

“Why can’t you just call him from your house phone?” Alicia asked, confused.

“Cause I went back last night and found my phone, but it was broke,” Richard answered, rolling his eyes. “You know how them Nextel phones have chips in them that save everything? That’s where the number is.”

“Oh... Well, you gone call Gina?”

“Yeah, when I get done handling my business. I can’t do shit ‘til I holla at the lawyer.” He was ready to hang up the phone. He had things to do, people to see.

“Okay, I’m gone let you do your lil’ business,” she patronized before adding, “Bye boy. I love you.”

“Love you too sis. Talk to you later,” he replied, just before hanging up the phone.

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Methodically, Willie-B paced around the room, gripping his chin as if deep in thought. Without warning, his hands crashed down on the table, palms down. His face just inches away from Rex’s, so close that Rex could tell what the officer had for lunch that day – a pastrami sandwich and tomato soup.

“This is the last time I’m gone ask you,” Willie-B growled.

“Do you know who that was that jumped out of that Charger?”

Of course Rex knew, but he also knew that snitching on Rich Kid was like signing his own death certificate. He hardened his glare and drained all emotion from his face, “I keep telling you. I don’t know man. Only person I know was Cash and y’all say he wasn’t in the car when that dude decided to jump out.” Every time they’d asked Rex that question, his answer had remained the same.

The officer narrowed his eyes, leaned almost nose to nose with Rex. “I know you know,” he seethed.

Rex fought the urge to pull his face back. “Man, just take me to jail. I tried to help y’all and y’all fuck up,” raising his voice now. “And now it’s my fault? Y’all done had me in here for twenty hours asking me the same damned questions.” Now, he was shouting in the officer’s face. “Do y’alls job!”

Disgusted, Willie-B shoved himself from the table and turned away, trying to hide his anger. “Get him out of here,” adding harshly, “and tell the D.A. that the deal’s off.”

“Let’s go son. Time to put you back in your cell,” the bailiff said, grabbing Rex by the chains that connected his hands together.

Once the bailiff had escorted Rex from the room, Willie-B kicked one of the chairs. A scream burned within the pit of his stomach and took hold of his throat. The fiery anger sent him into a fit of rage when it finally found its out of his mouth.

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With the lawyer for Pop called and freshly bagged crack in their possession, Richard and E headed over to Clown City to deliver more product to Lil’ B and Maybay. They’d arrived just

in time to see Lil' B kicking a man on the ground. His face already covered in blood, the man on the ground held his side and gasped for air. He didn't look like he could take much more.

“Look at this wild ass young nigga,” Richard laughed, watching Lil' B deliver one blow after another through the dark tinted windows of the Land Rover they were driving.

“Reminds me of you,” E joked, also watching Lil' B through the window.

“I ain't used to beat on the junkies, nigga,” Richard shook his head and pointed at E. “That's some shit he got from you. Let's go get him,” opening the car door, “'cause you know he ain't gone stop.”

“Balle, stop!” Richard yelled as he slammed the driver's side door shut.

“Man, fuck that nigga!” Lil' B turned his attention to Richard just long enough to yell over his shoulder. He then

turned his attention back to the man on the ground and bent down to yell in his face. “He better get my money ‘fore I kill his ass!”

As Lil’ B stepped forward to deliver the next blow, he felt a set of arms wrapping around his biceps. They curled up under his own arms, and pulled him away from the man on the ground. He knew those hands had to belong to Richard.

E watched Lil’ B squirm under Richard’s grasp. “How much money he owe you?” he asked, ready to join in on the beating if the amount was substantial enough.

“It ain’t nothing but twenty dollars,” Lil’ B answered, now a little calmer. No longer held by Richard, he shrugged his shoulders and tugged at his shirt as he tried to shake the last bit of anger. “But he talking like he bad, so I beat his ass.”

Accustomed to treating Lil’ B like his son, Richard’s face contorted into an authoritative scowl. “Boy, for twenty dollars, you bet not touch that dude again.”

Lil' B nodded and dropped his eyes to the ground. He hated disappointing Richard.

Noticing the shamed look on Lil' B's face, Richard stepped away from the sputtering man on the ground and moved onto business. "Where Maybay at?"

Lil' B pointed towards the trap. "He in the house, waiting on y'all."

"A'ight, come on. Let's do this count," Richard said, already walking through the grass, heading towards the door.

Once inside, Maybay and Lil' B counted out three thousand dollars and handed it over to Richard. A satisfied smile spread across Richard's face as he recounted the money. "Y'all young niggas keep up the good work," Richard said, placing the money in his pocket and pulling out the crack in its place. "Cause I'm 'bout to let y'all have this crack shit and you can just sell pills." He handed the bag over to Maybay.



As Richard left and headed back out towards the Land Rover, Lil' B followed behind. "Hey Paw, I need you to get me a rental."

A sour frown crossed Richard's face. He knew Sue wouldn't give him a rental right now. "You gone have to chill," he said. "Skinny's aunt mad at me right now."

Confused, Lil' B asked, "For what? You gone be giving her the money for the cars, right?"

It suddenly occurred to Richard that Lil' B knew nothing of the police chase last night. "Lil' one, the police put me on a chase yesterday morning," he said, tone matter-of-factly. "I had to jump out the car."

Lil' B envisioned the police chase in his head. A large grin spread across his face and his eyes lit with excitement. "Paw! I want one of them shits! I know you was hauling ass on them crackers." Expressively, he waved his arm through the air.

Climbing into the front seat of his car, Richard chuckled at Lil' B's excitement. "Yeah, I was." Just before Richard closed the door, he turned to Lil'B, his jovial expression replaced by one of reprimand. "Don't be giving a crack head yo' shit if you can't wait on them to pay. I ain't gone tell you no more."

Lil' B's former enthusiasm was extinguished by the firm tone in Richard's voice. Looking over to where the crack head had laid on the street just moments before, he thought about how he'd really messed up. Finally turning back to Richard, he made eye contact. "A'ight Paw. I ain't gone fuck with buddy."

## ***Chapter 8***

Dwayne pulled up outside of Richard's trap in his beat up Coupe de Ville. His eyes bounced wildly from one side of the street to the other as he looked for any sign of Richard. Seeing none, he relaxed just a little, but his eyes didn't slow down. "Go get us a hundred pack," he told his girlfriend, slumping down into his seat, trying to avoid being seen.

She eyed one of the men walking into the house in front of them. "Baby, I think you know one of them boys over here,"

turning her gaze back towards him. “I done saw you talking to one of them when Wine used to live with us.”

An exasperated sigh left his lips. ”Just do what the fuck I said ‘fore I beat your ass,” he sneered, shooting her a hateful glare before turning his attention back towards the street.

“Okay baby.” She opened he car door. “I’ll be right back.”The creaky door shut behind her. As she made her way through the grass up towards the house, she couldn’t shake her certainty that Dwayne knew that man who’d been standing outside. *Maybe we can get some extra.* Having made up her mind about the conversation she was about to have, she knocked on the door and waited for someone to answer.

“What you want?” Lil’ B asked as he opened the door. His eyes fell on one what he thought was probably one of the sorriest looking crack heads alive. Her hair was thinning and oily looking. Her cheekbones jutted out of her face. Her collarbone was noticeable, even under the dirty, ratty t-shirt she was wearing. It was hard to keep the disgust in the pit of his

stomach at bay. In an attempt to hide the fact that he felt like vomiting, he forced a small smile.

“Let me get a hundred pack,” she answered, eyes bouncing around widely as she handed over the money.

“A’ight, hold up.” He turned to grab one of the pre-made bags of crack. “Here ya go.” It took an insurmountable amount of effort to keep his hand steady as she took the bag from his fingertips. He quickly snatched his hand back away from her, grateful that his hand hadn’t touched her scaly looking skin.

Almost reconsidering her plan, she turned to walk away, but the idea of making Dwayne proud of her for getting more crack kept her situated on the front stoop. “Ay, you know a man name Dwayne, right?” she asked, her eyes still bouncing wildly.

Lil’ B’s brow furrowed, “Yeah, why?”

Rather than noticing Lil’ B’s change of expression, she leaned towards him and whispered, as if someone else might

hear them. “Well, that’s who this is for. He told me to tell you to look out for us this time.”

Lil’ B smiled as he fought to keep the anger out of his voice. Knowing that he needed to keep her talking to find out where Dwayne was, he answered her nonchalantly. “I know I saw you from somewhere. Where Dwayne at now?”

Still oblivious to what she had done, she pointed over to the car. “He out there in the car waiting on me.”

“Ay Maybay,” Lil’ B called into the house, “Check this out.”

“Wuz up, Lil’B?”

“I’m gone look out for somebody right quick.” He winked before stepping out around the sickly-looking woman on the front stoop.

Her eyes grew large with excitement. *He must be makin’ sure it’s Dwayne.*

As if to confirm her thoughts, Lil' B turned to her and said, "Let me see if that's the right person first."

Lil' B, Maybay and Dwayne's girl walked through the grass over to the parked Coupe. Through the window of the car, Lil' B could see Dwayne's face, hovering parallel to the steering wheel. Reaching into his pocket, Lil B's fingers closed around his 357. He pulled it from his pocket and charged towards the Coupe.

Dwayne's girlfriend watched in shock as Lil' B pulled the gun from his pocket. No longer thinking about the extra crack, her stomach lurched. "Hold up, what you gone do with that?" She ran up to Lil' B and grabbed his arm. "Don't..." Lil' B's elbow met her forehead and her world went black. Her unconscious body slumped to the ground. Finally reaching the car, Lil' B yanked the car door open.

An alarmed Dwayne turned towards the looming figure trying to pull him from the car. He only saw the gun pointed right at his head. His hands rose up in defense. "What's going

on? Please, don't kill me man." Through his fingers, he recognized Lil' B's face. "Balle, what's going on? I'm sure we can straighten this out."

Immune to his pleas, Lil' B yanked Dwayne from the car. "Fuck boy, we gone straighten this shit out a'ight." In one forceful motion, Lil' B threw Dwayne to the ground. Turning his pistol, he brought the butt of the gun down, smashing Dwayne in the back of the head.

Dwayne's hands rose up to the injury. Instantly, a warm, sticky substance covered his fingers. He brought his hand back towards his face to examine it. Just as he caught sight of the blood, another blow pierced the side of his head. His head throbbed with pain. A crippling jab from the gun came down on the back of his neck.

Maybay watched the whole scene play out, at first complacent, but then the thought of how Richard would react popped into his head. He'd probably be pissed, especially if he found out that Maybay did nothing to try and stop it. "Lil' B!



Chill before you kill his ass, man,” he said, taking a hesitant step towards Lil’ B.

Lil’ B turned and looked over his shoulder, then turned back towards Dwayne. “Man, fuck this nigga! This nigga robbed my granddaddy before he died.” Lil’ B gave Dwayne’s unconscious body a final kick to the ribs. Just before walking away, he spit on Dwayne in disgust.

Lil’ B and Maybay walked back through the grass, stopping just next to Dwayne’s girlfriend, trying to think of how to handle the two unconscious bodies. Just as they’d decided to simply pull the bodies into the house, she started to stir.

A painful groan left her lips as she tried to sit up. Her head felt as though it weighed ten times its normal weight and her vision was blurred. “What happen?” She looked around, trying to place where she was and what had just happened. Finally able to focus on the faces standing above her, she suddenly remembered. “Don’t kill him, please!”

Lil' B reached down, hastily grabbing her under the armpits. He pulled her to a standing position. "I'll tell you what," he said, keeping his voice calm, hoping to keep her from screaming, "I'm gone give you ten rocks. You gone put this nigga in the car, drive away and get yo' ass outta here." He reached in his pocket and produced the bag of rocks. He shoved them in her hand, completely forgetting how repulsed he had been by those same hands just moments before, placed his hands on her shoulders and walked her towards the car. .

"Okay, just don't kill us," she said. The worry of how Dwayne would react when he woke up, sadness for causing so much trouble and intense fear of the men now hoisting Dwayne into the car flooded over her. The feelings were so intense that they had an almost numbing effect. As if entranced by all the thoughts and emotions running through her mind, she slowly walked to the driver's side of the car. After stepping over the puddle of blood on the ground, she climbed in and drove away.

With the car now driving away, Maybay turned towards Lil' B. "What was all that shit about?" he asked, hoping to get the full story now that Lil' B was a little calmer.

"Nigga, that's my Paw's cousin I told you 'bout." Lil' B pointed to the fleeing vehicle. "He stole a whole lotta money from Big Wine."

Glaring at the car as it rounded the corner, Maybay considered what to say next. Knowing that Lil' B was like family to Richard and Big Wine, he figured it would be best to not say anything. Kicking the ground, he simply replied, "Well, fuck that nigga then," before turning to walk back towards the house.

Following behind, Lil' B started to worry about how Richard would feel if he heard about this incident. He had just reprimanded Lil' B for the crack head he'd beat down in the street. "Don't tell Rich 'bout what happened," he said, knowing that Maybay would have his back as long as Richard didn't find out some other way.

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“Know what? Fuck you, *Rich Kid*,” Skinny yelled, emphasizing his street name. She followed behind him as he walked through the front door towards the living room. Her now prominent baby bump made her walk look more like a waddle. “All you want to do is run the streets!”

Sitting down on the couch, Richard took a deep breath and looked over at a very pregnant Skinny, one hand poised behind her back for support, the other resting on her hip, a scowl on her face. “Baby girl, you been real emotional since you been pregnant.” Skinny’s scowl only deepened, but Richard ignored it. “So I’m gone let that shit slide, but you need to stop tripping, for real.”

“I won’t have to trip if you spend some time with me.” She waddled closer to Richard. Tears of overwhelmed emotion welled, but she fought them with all of her might. She was

supposed to be mad, not sad. Waving her hand in the air, “I be here all by myself every day...”

Irritated at her behavior, Richard cut her off before she could continue. He knew if he didn’t stop her now, it would only be a matter of time before she turned into a big bawling mess. He was making money for her and the baby. He wondered what she had to complain about. “Listen baby girl, go count some fucking money or something. Tell me, how much money I told you to put in the safe last week?”

“Fuck that money in the safe,” she yelled, hand swatting the air, her tears now spilling over, despite her best efforts to hold them back. “Who you think I am? One of them gold digging ass hoes?”

Richard stood, walking towards the front door. “Know what? I’m just gone go. I’ll be back tonight,” was the last thing she heard from him, other than the sound of the large metal door slamming shut.

Blood hot from anger, hot, stinging streams of tears flowed freely down her cheeks. She didn't even bother to wipe them away. She simply stood in the kitchen, watching through the metal bars of the burglar door as he climbed in the car . She wanted to run after him. She wanted to scream. But she knew better than to put their business out on the street. So instead, she watched him drive away.

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“Where you at, baby girl?” Richard called through the house after walking through the front door. He had cooled off now and he hoped that she had, too.

“I'm in the back room, baby,” he heard her call from the bedroom. As he walked down the hall, he wondered if he'd

heard a hint of seduction in her voice; he didn't have to wonder for long. The moment he walked through the bedroom door, his wonder turned into confirmation.

The sight of her instantly sent a rush of blood to his groin. Surrounded by piles of money, she wore nothing but an emerald green thong and push up bra. Crouched in a cat-like pose, she looked as though she were ready to pounce on him.

Looking towards the radio, he tried to play off how well her seduction attempts were working. "Why you up here playing this bullshit ass Fantasia shit?"

An over-pronounced pout crossed her lips. "Cause I'm mad at you," Richard was already making his way to the bed, slowly, as she spoke. "But I counted all the money in the safe and it's eighty-two thousand, twenty-three dollars."

"Well, I tell you what," Richard said as he crawled onto the bed, raising an eyebrow. "Open your legs and let Daddy see

that pussy.” He placed his hands on her knees and tried to separate them gently.

Yanking her legs towards her chest as best she could, Skinny scooted further up on the bed and turned her body away from Richard. “No! Don’t touch me.” She pretended to be angry, but a smile tried to pull at her lips. She had to bite her lower lip to keep a smile from surfacing. Her eyes sparkled with playfulness.

Richard shrugged his shoulders and started to unzip his pants. “A’ight,” he said, pulling out his growing flesh. “You just lay there and look sexy while I jack my dick.” Slowly, he glided his hand up and down the shaft. He watched her intently as she writhed with desire.

Skinny’s entire body tingled as she watched Richard slide his hand up and down his prominent erection. Between her legs felt like a dripping wet inferno. It didn’t take long for him to reel her in. “Baby, you doing it all wrong.” She climbed across the bed to him. “Let me show you how to do it.”



As Skinny started stroking him, Richard leaned over and started to lick the outside of her folds. A gentle moan escaped his lips as her sweet taste filled his mouth. “Damn baby girl, you wet as fuck.” He buried his face deeper into her, caressing her clit with his tongue. Moaning in ecstasy, she wrapped her lips around his dick. He could feel the warm wetness of her mouth and it pushed him closer to explosion.

On the brink of an earth-shattering orgasm herself, Skinny pulled her mouth away, no longer able to continue pleasuring him, “Ooohhh yes! Daddy I love you! Please Daddy, fuck me!”

Richard’s voice was deep and throaty as he spoke. “Tell Daddy how you want it.”

“I don’t care! Just please put it in!”

Gently, Richard rolled her onto her back. Careful to avoid her belly, he started off with slow, deep strokes until she begged him to go faster.

“That’s what I’m talking ‘bout. Beat this pussy up!” she called out, legs locked around Richard’s torso. “Ooooh Daddy, don’t stop! I’m cumming!”

Skinny’s body stiffened and shook. She screamed and clawed into Richard’s arms. When her body finally relaxed, indicating that her orgasm had taken its course, Richard stopped. “Come on. I want you to make me cum now.” He lay down on the bed and pulled Skinny on top of him. The moment he was in her, she started rocking. Faster and faster, she bounced on top of him. Already, she was on the verge of another orgasm. Grabbing her hips, Richard pushed himself deeper inside.

“Yes Daddy! I love you!” Skinny picked up the pace.

Between strokes, Richard spoke, “Then ride...that dick...and tell me...ya ain’t gone act crazy...when Daddy..in..the...streets.”

“I ain’t Daddy, I ain’t,” she said, cumming for the second time.

Richard rolled Skinny off gently, placing her on her side, lifting one of her legs into the air. From the side, he pounded her harder and harder until together, they released. Richard let out several grunts. Skinny’s eyes rolling into the back of her head as she screamed.

Out of breath and exhausted, he curled up next to her, stroking her forehead. “That’s all ya’ had to do was tell Daddy you wanted this dick,” he said softly, kissing her shoulder. Hearing no response from her, he lifted his head, only to find she was already sound asleep.

## ***Chapter 9***

Richard awoke with a jolt. *Boom! Boom! Boom!* Someone was pounding on the door...no, someone was trying to bust the door down. Just before he heard the door crash to the floor, he heard a male's voice yell, "D.E.A.!"

"Baby girl," he said quietly, shaking Skinny, trying to wake her up.

"Richy, what's wrong baby?"

“I’m going to jail. Crackers just kicked in the door. I ain’t got no more dope in here, right?”

“No, you took the rest the other day.” Her eyes welled with large tears.

“Put your hands up!” a man yelled from the doorway of their bedroom. Richard turned slowly to meet the man, keeping his hands visible. The task was practically impossible with Skinny hanging onto him for dear life.

“Man, don’t hurt my girl. She’s pregnant.” He tried to pry her fingers out of his flesh.

“Agent Allen, all of the other rooms are clear,” said another man entering the room.

“Get out of the bed slowly with your hands up, Mr. Gary,” the man who’d just been referred to as Agent Allen said.

“Man, I ain’t got nothing on me, so don’t shoot me,” Richard said, standing up slowly, still naked from the night before.

“Miss, can you put some clothes on so we can continue our search?” The new officer was trying not to stare.

“Man, do y’all have a search warrant to do this shit?” Richard grabbed his shorts from the floor, slowly, pulling them on as he spoke.

“What does this look like, Mr. Gary? Is this a warrant?” Agent Allen asked as he pulled a sheet of paper from his pocket, shoving it in Richard’s face. “Or just some shit I want to show you?” With Richard no longer naked, Agent Allen walked behind Richard and grabbed his wrists to cuff him.

Richard didn’t fight back. He knew it would only make the situation worse. “Man, just do what the fuck you do, a’ight?”

“Davis, look at all this fucking money,” one of the officers said from behind Richard. He was already bagging it up.

Richard belted out a laugh. “Better slow down on picking it up ‘cause some of it got nut on it,” he said, a smug smile on his face.

The officer stuck his tongue out and he looked as though he might vomit. He dropped the money back on the bed. “Fuck!” He pulled a pair of gloves from his shirt pocket and pulled them up over his large bony hands.

Agent Allen shoved Richard forward. “We’ll see how funny it is when you get to headquarters, Mr. Gary.”

“Man, fuck that.” Un-phased by Agent Allen’s threats, Richard smiled smugly. “What’s going on anyway? I ain’t done shit.”

“Really?” Agent Allen asked as he paced circles around Richard. “So how’d you get all this money?”

“From my Daddy, why?” Richard’s voice dripped with sarcasm.

“Well, where’s your father now?” came the voice of one of the officers behind him.

“What the--?” Richard tried to turn around, but Agent Allen yanked on the handcuffs, forcing him to face forward. “Fuck you, D.E.A.! You tell me!”

Richard could feel Agent Allen’s hot breath on the back of his neck as he leaned in to speak. “So you’re going to be a hard ass, right?”

Richard grinned. “Man, get my fucking lawyers.”

It took every ounce of self-control Agent Allen had to keep from punching Richard in the back of the head. He’d dealt with arrogant niggers like this his whole life. He shoved Richard forward again, still holding onto the handcuffs, and pushed him through the bedroom doorway. The forceful action gave the angry officer a temporary release of steam.



As they rounded the hallway, Richard could see Skinny. A female officer had her almost out the front door. “I love you, Richy!” she yelled back through streams of tears.

“Stop crying, baby! We ain’t done shit!” he yelled back, hoping she understood the message behind it. Skinny had always had his back. He was certain that she’d have it now.

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Agent Jones sat down in the metal folding chair across from Richard. In his hands, he held a manila folder. “Ok, Mr. Gary,” he said, setting the folder down on the table, folding his hands over it, “I’m going to ask you some questions. We need answers on where you got all that money from.” The agent opened the folder and pretended to thumb through its contents. “We know you’re a drug dealer, so if you tell us what we want

to know, we might get the D.A. to cut you some slack.” He peered up at Richard over the top of the folder. “You know, one hand washes the other?”

Richard sat back in his chair. “Only hand I’m washing is my lawyers.” A complacent smile spread across his face. “So y’all can just kiss my ass.”

Agent Jones closed the manila folder again, and set it back on the table.” Well, you think it’s funny now,” refolding his hands, “but when they throw the book at you, you’ll be wishing you listened to me and gave us some answers.” He tried to keep his tone neutral and his expression detached, but inside, he hoped Richard would talk. Their department needed this bust, and he needed the promotion that this bust would result in.

A clicking sound came from the white door across the room, announcing the entrance of another officer with a stack of papers in his hands. “Okay, this is what we’ve got on Mr. Gary.” The short, stubby agent placed the new piles of paper on top of the thin manila folder.

Unmoved by their tactics, Richard simply grinned. “I can look at that and tell y’all just pulling some bullshit.” His smug grin gave way to a look of indignation. “Y’all just trying to fuck me over, but I tell you what, when I finish this sentence, y’all can ask the walls in here all the questions ‘cause I don’t know shit, and I ain’t saying shit ‘til I get my lawyer present.”

“You know, we got your girl down the hall, singing like she’s trying to win an award,” the standing officer said, crossing his arms across his chest.

Richard dismissed the comment, without a word and stared at the white wall in front of him. He knew they were lying, trying to rile him, scare him into a confession before his lawyer arrived. He carried that same steely gaze for the next eight hours as he endured twelve line-up books and questions about each page turned.

“Well, Mr. Gary,” the director said as he loomed next to Richard’s chair. “I see you want to spend the rest of your youth years in prison.” He placed his hand on Richard’s shoulder.

Richard stiffened under the director's firm grip. "I'm not going to let my agents bust their brains trying to help you. Agent Jones, Agent Davis, let's go." Without another word, they left Richard alone in the white concrete room.

Safely on the other side of the door, the director turned to Agent Davis and Agent Jones, "My office. Now."

Jones and Davis shared a look of trepidation. It was a look of shared understanding. Once they stepped into the director's office, the yelling would commence. They were correct in their assumption.

The director's face felt as though it were on fire. As he turned towards the bumbling idiots in his office, he clenched his teeth, trying to keep the volume of his voice under control. "What were you thinking going over my head, getting a warrant for that low-life son-of-a-bitch?"

Clearing his throat, Agent Davis tried to answer. "A reliable C.I. gave us..."

“I don’t see any incriminating evidence yet.” The director said, his voice now escalating as he cut Davis off. “The D.A.’s office says they’re not getting involved in this, which means no case.” He was now screaming; his face was a deep shade of red. “That’s wasted man hours, wasted resources...”

A knock at the door cut him off.

“Who is it?” he bellowed, bludgeoning the door with his words.

Afraid to enter all the way into the room, the officer who had just taken Skinny home peeked his head through the door. “Mr. Gary would like to speak with you, sir.”

“This better be good,” the director said, glaring at Davis and Jones. “Otherwise, it’s back to desk work.”

“But sir...” Jones called after the director, who was already several feet away.

“But nothing!” the director yelled over his shoulder, stomping towards the interrogation room. He entered the room to find Richard leaning back in his chair. “Mr. Gary,” his tone almost sing-songish as he crossed the room to sit down. “I see you made up your mind.”

“No need to sit down, director” Richard’s expression remained bland, “I just want to know one thing.”

“What’s that, Mr. Gary?” The director shoved his hands in his pockets.

“Do y’all give out rewards,” Richard asked as an amused grin crossed his face. “Cause I think y’all should give my girl a Grammy for what she told y’all. She deserves one, right?”

Bursts of laughter filled the room, causing the director’s ears to ring and his blood pressure to rise. Without a word, he stormed out of the interrogation room and down the hall; Richard’s laughter following him all the way back to his office. Slamming his office door to shut to laughter out, he looked to

Davis and Jones still standing there, waiting to hear their fates.

“Desks!” he yelled.

Davis and Jones looked down at the floor in shame, but neither one dared to utter a word.

Irritated that they were still standing there, the director screamed, “Get out!” He slammed his door shut again as the two flustered men scrambled out of the room.

With the bumbling idiots now gone, the director picked up his phone, “Yeah, can you start a tax evasion case for me?...Yeah?...Thanks.”

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“Sis, they came and got Richy,” Skinny cried into Alicia’s ear over the phone.

“Who got Rich? What you talking ‘bout?” Alicia asked, voice weak with worry.

“The D.E.A., sis. The fucking D.E.A..” Skinny’s body now sobbed uncontrollably. Tears ran down her cheeks. As they dripped down her chin, they left large, salty drops on her belly.

“Okay, okay. It’s gone be a’ight Skinny. Just chill.” Alicia concentrated on consoling Skinny while simultaneously trying to hide her own worry. Skinny was pregnant. She didn’t need to be this upset. “Do he got a bond?”

“I said the D.E.A.,” Skinny snapped. “If he got a bond, that shit gone be high as fuck!”



Taking a deep breath, Alicia reminded herself of Skinny's very pregnant condition and tried, again, to calm her down. "Well, what happened? What he charged with?"

"I don't know, but when they kicked the door down, they took all the money," Skinny sobbed into the phone.

"How much?"

"All of it. Every dollar that was in the safe." Skinny hadn't fully understood Alicia's question.

"How *much* Skinny?" Alicia asked again.

"Eighty-two thousand, twenty dollars."

The wheels started to turn in Alicia's head. She racked her brain for any possible charges they might be holding him on. Coming up empty, she committed to deciding what to do next.

"Where you at?" Alicia asked. "I'm coming to get you."

“I’m at my grandma’s house.” Skinny’s sobs were a little quieter now, but her belly still bounced with each gasp for fresh air.

“A’ight. I’m on my way.” Before hanging up the phone, Alicia ordered, “Just chill out and stop crying.” She figured the command was useless, but she could at least try.

Alicia pulled up in less than ten minutes. Without even knocking, she walked through the door-less entryway to the house. As she made her way into the living room, a knot formed in the pit of her stomach. She found Skinny in a sobbing mess, phone clutched in her hand as if it were a lifeline. She stepped in front of Skinny and gave her a loving smile. “Girl, come on.” She shoved the worry from her demeanor and replaced it with one of motherly authority. “Let’s go.”

“Where we going?” Skinny asked between sobs.

Taking Skinny's hands in to hers, Alicia pulled Skinny up from the couch. "Out."

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Exhausted from the interrogation and booking process, Richard checked in on the second floor. As he handed over his personal belongings, a man white button down shirt and black slacks placed Richard's things into Ziploc bags labeled with his booking number. The deposit of each item came with an increasing awareness that the man behind the counter was examining him closely. Wondering what his problem was, Richard stopped and stared at the man.

Placing Richard's wallet in the bag, the man held his eye contact. "Ay jit, I think I know you from somewhere." Decayed teeth rested behind the man's lips as they curled into a smile.

Richard's left eyebrow raised and his right furrowed as a disgusted frown crossed his lips, "I don't think you know me homeboy, 'cause you wouldn't be calling me a jit." He placed his cell phone on the counter.

As he entered the cell area, he heard the house man call, "A'ight! Y'all niggas got to get y'all asses in the shower." Standing in front of the now loosely assembled group of new inmates, his hands directed them into a straight line in front of the shower house.

Ignoring the command, Richard walked over to the small call area and picked up the phone. "I ain't taking shit."

The house man puffed his chest as Richard's comment travelled across the room to his ears. "Who said that shit?" his voice boomed as he walked towards the front of the cell.

Setting the phone down, Richard turned to face the house man. "Me nigga." His chest puffed, matching the menacing stance of the house man as he closed the distance between the

two of them. Richard wasn't going to spend his time locked up as someone else's bitch. He figured this time was as good as any to exercise his authority.

Now close enough to see the offender's face clearly, the house man smiled. "Oh shit! Rich Kid!" He gave Richard daps. "What the fuck you doing locked up, nigga?"

"Damn, Tim! You ain't get out this shit yet?" Richard asked.

"Naw, man." Tim shook his head and a frown wrinkled the lines around his mouth. "I think I'm gone get out next month, if this lawyer do his fucking job."

Richard nodded in response. "Ay let me get done talking to my people," he said, holding the phone up for Tim to see.

"A'ight. I gone make these niggas get in the shower." Tim motioned behind him with his thumb towards the other new inmates. "I'll be back when you get off the phone." He faced

the group again, yelling, “Why ain’t nobody in the shower yet?”

Turning back towards the phone area, Richard punched the zero button and gave the operator Skinny’s cell phone number.

“This number is collect call restricted,” the operator responded.

Richard held pulled the phone away from his ear and glared at it as though the operator had somehow offended him. “Man, they fuckin’ need to put collect on the phone!” he said, slamming the phone back onto its cradle. He sat there, staring at the phone, as if he could will it to ring.

“Ay Rich Kid, you done with the phone?” Tim asked as he walked up behind Richard.

“Yeah,” Richard responded as he turned to face Tim. “What’s good, nigga?”

“I got a bed back here if you want it.” Again, Tim used his thumb to motion behind him.

Following Tim to his new “home,” a small cell with a bunk, a toilet and a sink, Richard heard his name being called from the front of the floor. He reached for Tim, without making contact, to signal that he needed to go see what the correction officer needed. “I’ll be right back.”

“What’s up C.O.?” Richard asked as he approached the small desk. A tall, broad shouldered sat with his feet propped up on the desk. A newspaper kept Richard from seeing the officer’s face.

“Here are your sheets,” the officer answered, still reading his newspaper handing Richard a clean set of sheets.

Taking them, Richard gave a half-smile. “Bet that up, man.”

Once back to the place where Tim stood, Richard looked around to see if anyone was listening. “Ay, Tim, I need a pill, bro. Who got it?”

Tim shook his head, his look somber. “Ain’t nobody got no pills.” Tim pointed straight up with his index finger. “They got some weed up on the sixth floor though.”

“They got any coke to put on it?” Richard’s face looked as though he’d taken a bite of a lemon. “You know I don’t smoke A.P.”

“I’ll see what I can do man,” Tim said as he patted the bed he’d set aside for Richard. The wheels already turning in his head, Tim walked away without another word. He knew that getting on Richard’s good side could pave the way for his future, both behind bars and when he got out. Tim had heard the stories; he knew this young nigga had already made a name on the streets. Richard was ruthless, but he took care of his Family. Even more admirable was the fact that he was fair to the dealers that bought directly from him. He purchased the



drugs and was willing to let those who were worthy of trust ride on credit. Already committed to getting Richard anything he needed during his stay, Tim considered how he could use his authority on the floor to meet Richard's first request.

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Together, Alicia and Skinny walked to the car. Using her cell phone, Skinny called the jail for the fourth time since leaving her interrogation with the D.E.A.. Nothing. Driving to Gina's house, she called again. Still nothing. Sitting at Gina's kitchen table, she tried again.

"Skinny," Gina said. "You need to stop calling. They not going to tell you when he gets there 'cause you keep getting on their nerves calling every five minutes."

“Yes, I would like to know if you have a Richard A. Gary in custody,” Skinny spoke into her cell phone, ignoring Gina’s comment.

“Yes, we’ve got him here.”

Excited to finally have some sort of news on Richard, Skinny smiled as she stood quickly. The motion made it feel as if the room was moving. Her smile faded and she slowly sat back down, beads of sweat developing on her brow.

“Does he have a bond?” she asked, still trying to fight off the dizzy spell. While she still felt as though the room was swaying beneath her feet, the sensation seemed to have dissipated a bit now that she was sitting down. A small twinge of panic crept up, but she excused the feelings quickly as the correction officer spoke again.

“I don’t know, but when he checks in his property, he’ll be able to call you.” The correction officer sounded a bit bored

with his job, but was polite, nonetheless. Maybe his stay wouldn't be so bad, Skinny thought to herself.

“Okay, thank you.” Her smile returned at the thought of being able to talk to Richard. “But can you tell him to call this number please?”

“Yeah, I can do that,” Skinny could hear the C.O. shifting through papers, looking for a pen, she guessed. “What’s the number?” he finally asked.

“It’s seven, eight, six, seven, five, three, six, one, four, two.” After a moment of no response, Skinny asked, “You got it?”

“Yeah, I got it,” answered the correction officer. “I’ll give it to him now.”

Gina and Alicia had waited eagerly while Skinny spoke to the correction officer. They had hung on her every word, and now that the call was over, they wasted no time in asking, “So?

What'd they charge him with?" Alicia was the first to speak.

"Does he have a bond?" Gina spoke up next.

"They ain't told me yet." A cloud of sadness swept over her face, but only for a moment. "But they gave him the number to call here." Again, her expression brightened at the thought of hearing Richard's voice.

"Okay then." Gina nodded. The motion had a dual meaning; it was one of understanding but also one that outwardly affirmed her inner decision. She knew that being the oldest of the three women, and the oldest of the remaining family members, it was officially her responsibility to take charge of the situation. "Let's just wait here on the call 'cause we can't do nothing 'til he tell us what to do."

Trying desperately to make small talk, the three women sat in Gina's kitchen, but they were failing miserably at it. The apprehensiveness of the small gathering was thick, palpable. Gina tapped a pencil on the table. Alicia crossed between

pacing the room and sitting down in a chair next to Skinny, who was flopping her foot nervously.

Every so often, Skinny took a trip to the restroom. Waves of dizziness kept creeping up on her. Initially, she attributed the spells to stress, but then she reconsidered the idea when she realized that she hadn't eaten all day. The latter was easier to solve than the former, so she asked Gina for some cheese and crackers. With that and a little bit of water, she started to feel better. That gave her a small sense of relief. *At least the baby's okay.*

Finally, the phone rang. Gina answered it. "Hello? Who would you like to speak to?" She knew that Richard would have only a few minutes to talk and they didn't have time to waste. They needed a plan.

"What kind of birds don't fly?" came through from the other side of the line.

“Boy, you crazy!” A small giggle escaped her lips. “What they trying to charge you with?”

“First they come talking ‘bout drugs and shit, but when I get here, I find out that I got a tax evasion charge.” Richard pulled on the phone cord, watching it spring back into place. “I thought only rich white people got shit like that.”

Innately knowing that her time on the phone was up, Gina turned towards Skinny, and held the phone out. Skinny needed to talk to his voice more than anyone. While she did appear to be doing a bit better, Gina had noticed that the crease in Skinny’s forehead had remained constant since shortly after hanging up the phone with the correction officer.

As if affirming Gina’s thoughts, Skinny’s face now lit up. Smiling from ear to ear, she took the phone and gave Gina a kiss on the cheek.

“Richy, baby.” Skinny held the phone tightly with both hands as she spoke, as if her very life depended on the voice

coming through on the other line. “What did they charge you with?”

“Fucking tax evasion.”

Skinny’s brow furrowed in confusion. “How they gone charge you with that?”

“Look, baby,” Richard stopped the conversation before it could wander. He had business to take care of. “I ain’t got that much time on the phone. So here’s what I need you to do.”

“Hold on, baby,” Skinny turned her attention towards Alicia. “Sis, can you hand me that?” She pointed towards the pencil Gina had been tapping nervously just moments before.

After giving her a few moments ready, Richard explained his plan. He needed her to put money on his books. That would help him with the lawyer. To get the money, she would need to go to E’s house.

“From E, baby?” she asked. She felt uncomfortable telling their business to anyone that wasn’t a part of their immediate family, even if it was to help get Richard out of jail. “No, I ain’t telling nobody but your sisters.”

“Baby girl, he good. You can let him know,” Richard reassured. “That’s my brother from another mother. You know that.”

Skinny admitted to herself that she did, in fact, know that. Sighing quietly, she moved on to her next question. “How much money you want me to bring to you?”

“Get three hundred from E and bring that to put on my books here.” He paused for a moment so she could write the information down. “Then tell him to give the lawyer the money he needs to get started on my case.” Sobbing filled Richard’s ear.

“Okay, baby.” Skinny gripped the phone tighter, if that were even possible. Her sobs came back full force and they



filled Richard's ear on the other line. Between short gasps of air, she spoke. "I love you...more than...you know."

An aching so strong that it threatened to cut off his voice completely grew in Richard's chest. "Baby girl," he spoke softly, hoping to wrap up the conversation before her sobs could paralyze him completely. "You got to go put some collect on your cell phone. That way I can call you, a'ight?" Her sniffles grew louder. "I love you too, and stop crying, baby. It's gone be a'ight."

"Okay, baby," she replied, trying to calm her sobs, "I'm gone do everything you asked right now."

"You can do everything else, but wait until morning to holla at the lawyer," he replied.

"A'ight baby." She used the heel of her hand to wipe streams of tears from her cheeks and chin.

"I love you, baby. Tell sis and them I love them too." She'd understood his instructions, and she would carry them out, he

knew. Without waiting for her reply, he pulled the phone away from his ear, certain that one more sob would be enough to crumble his strong façade. His muscles tensed as he gently placed the phone onto the cradle. Disconnecting from her, in that very moment, was the hardest things he had ever done.

Skippy held the phone to her ear and waited for the click.

The moment she heard it, the sobs returned, even fiercer than they had been before.

## ***Chapter 10***

Deep in thought, E traced the exterior of his cell phone. He was so surrounded by his thoughts of worry and concern that he almost hadn't heard Dirt speak. He flipped the phone open, glanced at it, and then closed again.

“Damn E, what’s on your mind?”

“I’m just wondering why Rich Kid ain’t answering his phone.” E’s gaze still focused on the silent cell phone.

“Man, you know how Rich Kid be,” Dirt responded, dismissively. “He probably still sleep.”

“Yeah,” E responded absentmindedly. Flipping the phone open again, he stared at the display screen, mentally willing it to ring. He gave a sigh just before closing it again. At that exact moment, the phone in his hand started to vibrate. A wave of relief swept over him as flipped it open and pulled it up to his ear. “Hello?” he answered, expecting the voice on the other end to be Richard.

“E, I need to talk to you.” It was Skinny.

E’s stomach lurched. He racked his brain for any reason that Skinny might be calling him, wanting to discuss Richard; he could only come up with one. “Sis, that you?” His voice shook as he asked his next question. “Why Rich ain’t answering his phone?” He wasn’t certain that he wanted to know the answer.

“That’s what I need to talk to you about.” A ball formed in the back of her throat, making it painful to speak. She swallowed hard, trying to push the lump back down. “Just come to Gina’s house, a’ight?” She pulled the phone away from her mouth, trying to hide her sobs.

“Hello? Sis? Sis!” E was shaking. Something was wrong. Very wrong. He could feel it, sensed the desperation in Skinny’s voice.

“Just come, E, a’ight?”

With the click of their ended phone call, E’s heart began to race. What had happened? Why wouldn’t Skinny tell him over the phone? Over the next several minutes, E ran on pure instinct and fear. His thoughts and actions were no longer driven by intention, but by pure adrenaline. Already standing, he grabbed Dirt by the arm and started pulling him outside.

Dirt followed the pull. He didn't try to pull away; he didn't get angry. Something was wrong and Dirt knew it. "What happen yo'?"

"Man, drive this bitch to your house. I got to handle some business." E was already climbing into the passenger's seat.

Dirt climbed into the driver's seat and started up the engine. Feeding off E's adrenaline, Dirt slammed his foot on the gas pedal, leaving a cloud of dirt behind him. "What happen?" he asked, taking his eyes off the road to steal a glance at E; the tense jaw and furrowed brow indicated that something was severely wrong.

"Just go or you can get out and walk!" E screamed. His wild eyes bore into Dirt, forcing Dirt to look away.

Dirt pushed the gas pedal further to the floor. "A'ight, I going." Through his periphery, he caught sight of E pulling his gun out. At that moment, Dirt grasped an unspoken understanding of the situation. His own heart now racing, Dirt

ran a red light. Blaring horns sounded behind them as they cleared the intersection.

Pulling up in front of Dirt's house, E didn't even wait for Dirt to exit the car completely before sliding over the console into the driver's seat. Letting the sudden forward force of the car slam the door shut, he laid into the gas pedal, pushing the car to sixty before even reaching the end of the block.

Speeding down the street, E pulled out his cell phone and hit the call button. The action directed him to the last call made. "What happened to Rich?" he yelled into the phone, not caring who it was that had answered.

"Boy! Quit yelling in my ear!" It was Alicia. "Ain't shit happen to my big brother."

"My bad, Sis." E concentrated on lowering his voice. "But why Skinny crying like that then?"

Alicia knew that E could go on a massive killing spree if he had even the slightest suspicion that Richard might be dead. So

despite the plan to wait until he arrived, she broke the news. “He just got locked up. That’s all boy, so don’t worry yourself.”

A whoosh of air left E’s lungs. Richard being locked up wasn’t a good news, but it was definitely better than the worst-case scenario news he’d been worried about. “I’m pulling in the projects right now. Y’all open the door for me?”

Alicia was already standing in the doorway when E brought the car to a screeching halt. His body jolted forward, just a little, and bounced back into the seat. After placing the car in park, he headed in Alicia’s direction.

Even from the yard, he could hear Skinny’s sobs; they grew louder with each step he took. When he entered the small kitchen, he found her huddled in Gina’s arms, shaking violently from her sobs. Gina’s expression was laden with concern. “What’s going on, Sis?” He directed his attention towards Alicia and took note of her somber expression.



“Ask Skinny, she gone tell you.” Alicia replied flatly, motioning towards Skinny. Her sober expression deepened. “And try to get her to see she gone be alright before she has a miscarriage.”

Nodding at Alicia, E prepared himself. He drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. Finally, he turned and stepped towards Skinny until he was just a few feet behind her shaking body. “Suck that shit up, Sis!” His tone was hard, but respectful. He’d known Skinny long enough to know that she didn’t respond well to soft, gentle prodding. “If Bro was here, he would be going crazy right now.”

Skinny took a step backwards, stiffened her body, puffed out her chest and lifted her chin. Slowly, methodically, she concentrated on her breathing, willed it to slow down. Everyone in the room waited patiently as her sobs lightened, and eventually disappeared completely. Finally calm, she used the collar of her shirt to dry her tear-stained cheeks before turning around to face E.

“Now,” E said, confident that Skinny had her emotions under control. “What happened?”

The four of them, E, Gina, Alicia and Skinny, sat down at Gina’s kitchen table as Skinny retold the story of that morning, leaving nothing out, not even the comment Richard had made when the officers had first started collecting the money. All of them chuckled a little at Richard’s brashness with the police. Finally, Skinny reached the phone call she’d received from Richard earlier.

“And that’s it. What am I going to do?”she asked, placing her hands in her lap, looking down at the table.

Figuring that she might start crying again, E touched her shoulder. “We gone be a’ight,” he said softly, but with confidence.

Skinny looked up at E, eyes glimmering with tears and hope. “That’s what Richy told me.” A small smile pulled at her lips.

For a moment, everyone sat at the table in silence, each lost in their own train of thought. Gina and Alicia worried about Skinny. Skinny and E shared a slightly different line of thinking, however. That thought was one of revenge.

Clearing his throat, E stood up. “Well, look here. I’m gone go get this money together so we can get the lawyer, but fuck that three hundred dollars.” E reached in his pocket and pulled out a stack of bills. He handed it to Skinny. “Here’s a thousand dollars. Put five hundred on his books and keep the rest for you.” As Skinny’s hand wrapped around the bills, he grabbed a hold of it with his free hand. “If you need something else, you let me know.”

Skinny could have read E’s unspoken message from miles away. Nodding, she answered, “I know what I need you to do.”

“What’s that?”

“When you find that nigga that snitched on him,” her voice became thick with hatred, her gaze despondent. “I want to be

the one that kill his ass.” As if snapping out of a gaze, she shook her head and looked up at E pleadingly. “You can do that for me, right?”

Seeing where this conversation was going, Gina stepped up next to Alicia and E, now staring at each other with silent understanding. “Just calm down now.” She touched Skinny’s shoulder gently but warned E with a threatening glare. Skinny was frail right now; she couldn’t be held fully responsible for her words or actions. E was a different story. He needed to stop this before it went any further.

Still sitting at the table, Alicia looked up, her eyes glazed with worry and concern. “She dead ass serious, Gina.” Alicia knew, without a doubt, that no one would be able to stop Skinny; she would have her revenge, with or without E’s help. Having it would be better than the alternative. If he helped her, he could at least keep Skinny safe.

Gina’s eyes bounced from Skinny to E to Alicia. She felt as if her family were falling apart. Pops was in juvie, Richard was

in jail, and now Skinny and E were plotting to kill whoever had ratted out Richard. She wondered how she could stop this horrible chain of events. She racked her brain, trying to find something to say that would change Skinny and E's minds. She was angry too, but killing whoever had done this just wasn't the answer. But before any single thought could come to fruition, E spoke up.

“A’ight. That’s done, Sis.” He gave Skinny a nod. “Just call me in the morning when you see how much the lawyer gone need to start his case.” Without another word, he walked out the door and headed towards the car. After the initial squeal of his tires had faded, the three women sat in silence.

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It had been two months since Richard had left. Most everyone adjusted and went back to their normal lives –

business as usual, but Richard's absence had left a gaping wound in the hearts of some of The Family.

Between business hours, E spent his days and nights looking for the rat. The need to avenge his life-long friend and put Skinny's mind to rest haunted him day and night, but no one seemed to know anything. It was everything he could do to keep from shooting everyone that had ever even acted as though they couldn't be trusted.

Alicia and Gina spent their days and night worrying about Skinny. Richard, they knew, would be just fine. He would find connections in jail. He would find a way out. It was only a matter of time.

Skinny knew this as well, but sleeping without Richard every night, not having him there to share the experiences of pregnancy with, was tearing her up inside. She still cried most days, but she tried to stay strong, or at least tried to appear strong in the presence of others. Having Richard locked up had spread enough rumors – rumors that would be reckoned with,

one by one – but having rumors about Richard’s girl being weak? Well, that was something Skinny wasn’t willing to allow. She might have been able to continue her act, had it not been for the child she had been carrying.

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Gina inserted three quarters into the soda machine and pressed the big red button labeled Coca-Cola. She stared at the vending machine full of cookies, snack crackers, gum and chips, and debated as to whether or not the strong smell of antiseptics would allow her consume one of them. Finally deciding that she couldn’t stomach it, she turned away from the machine without making a purchase. She walked back through the Jackson Hospital waiting room to where Alicia sat, elbows on her knees and head in her hands.

Hearing Gina approach, Alicia lifted her head. “What could be taking so long?”

Gina understood Alicia’s real question – it wasn’t about why it was taking so long, it was whether or not Skinny had lost the baby. “I don’t know,” she said, answering both questions.

Alicia’s head dropped back into her hands. The knot in her stomach had grown with each passing minute, and it was now making her nauseas.

Gina took a seat next to Alicia. The plastic waiting room chairs didn’t make for very comforting accommodations. Hoping to calm Alicia’s nerves, as well as her own, Gina gently rubbed Alicia’s back. Her mind flooded to thoughts of Richard. She wondered what his reaction might be like if Skinny lost the baby. A chill raced over her body and a shiver went down her spine. She wasn’t afraid, necessarily of what Richard might do, but more what the news might do to Richard.



After what seemed like hours more of sitting and waiting, a tall man wearing green scrubs walked down the hallway towards them. His gaze seemed emotionless, as though his face were set in stone.

“Are you two the family of Nicole Scott?” asked the doctor, now standing in front of them. Gina nodded silently. Alicia sat motionless. “She seems to be doing fine, although I do want to keep her for a few days to run some tests.”

Alicia and Gina glanced at each other, both noticing how the doctor had omitted any information about the baby. Gina asked the question that they desperately needed to know the answer to, but were too afraid to ask. “The baby?” Alicia continued to watch Gina, unsure if she could look at the doctor, afraid it would send her into a fit of tears.

The doctor's body stiffened, as if he were standing at attention in the middle of a war zone. “The baby didn't make it.” His features sunk as he added, “I'm very sorry.”

Alicia swallowed hard, trying to fight back the tears, but her grief won out. “Can we see her?” she asked as tears spilled over onto her cheeks and down her chin.

“Yes,” he nodded, glumly. “Just give them some time to move her over to the recovery unit. And try not to stay too long. She needs to rest.”

Gina thought she noticed the sparkling of tears in the doctor’s eyes, but then decided that it might be her own. He continued to stand there, undoubtedly waiting to make sure the news had sunk in. “Thank you,” she said quietly, choking through her tears, letting him know that he was free to go.

Giving them one last look of condolence, the doctor walked away. He stopped at the nurse’s desk and pointed towards Gina and Alicia. Gina figured he must be telling the nurses to send them back when Skinny was ready. Looking over at Alicia, Gina realized that the two of them were in no shape right now to console Skinny. Taking hold of one of Alicia’s elbows, Gina pulled her sobbing sister up from the chair. “Come on Sis.”

Alicia shot a puzzled look. “Where we going? The doctor said we couldn’t see her ‘til she got in a room.”

Gina rolled her eyes but carefully chose a pleasant tone. “I know, but we don’t want Skinny seeing us like this.” She used her hand to motion between the two of them. “She the one who just lost a baby. We need to be there for her.”

Nodding in agreement, Alicia followed Gina to the bathroom where they cleaned their teary faces and reapplied their makeup.

Just as they were leaving the restroom, Alicia’s cell phone rang. “You have a collect call from ‘Richard.’ To accept these charges, please press five. To block...” Alicia pressed the five button on her keypad without bothering to listen to the rest of the automated message. She swallowed hard as she waited for the call to connect. Gina gave Alicia an inquisitive glance, but before Alicia could answer the unspoken question, the line connected.

“Ay, Sis, you saw Skinny today?” Silently, Alicia mouthed the word *Richard* to Gina. “She ain’t answering her phone.”

Plugging her free ear as if surrounded by a large crowd, Alicia started to pace the waiting room floor. “Listen, don’t do nothing dumb when I tell you this...” She paused before repeating her point, out of both nervousness and a need for confirmation. “You have to promise you not gone do no dumb shit.”

Irritated with Alicia’s stalling tactics, Richard rolled his eyes as he snapped at her through the phone. “A’ight! I promise. Now what the fuck going on?”

Alicia hesitated, turned back towards Gina and made eye contact. Silently, Alicia asked with her eyes whether she should tell Richard the news. Gina gave her an affirmative nod, but her eyes betrayed the answer. Letting out a large sigh before clearing her throat, Alicia decided to go by the nod. “Skinny lost the baby, Rich.” She held her breath and waited for his response.

“Damn, Sis. Where baby girl at?” His voice was quiet, barely audible, depressed.

Stunned by his response, Alicia’s mouth hung open until Richard asked the same question again. His voice sounded even more sullen the second time. Snapping back from her surprised reaction, she stuttered out an answer. “Sh-she at the hospital.”

“You want me to call her?”

Worried that a call from Richard might make things worse but also considering the idea that it might help her cope, Alicia battled the answer in her head for just a moment.

Richard must have assumed that Alicia was trying to locate the number because he added, “I got the number.”

“Yeah, go head,” she finally decided.

After hanging up with Richard, Gina and Alicia checked with the front desk to see if they had moved Skinny to her new

room yet. The nurses directed them to room 408. Taking their time, wanting to give Richard some time to talk to Skinny, they made their way towards the elevator and headed up to the fourth floor.

“Hello?” Skinny answered weakly.

“Hey baby girl. You a’ight?”

Richard’s voice stirred a wide array of emotions – happiness, fear, sadness – none of which she could control right now. “Yeah,” her voice cracked as she tried to suppress the sobs. “But Lil’ Richy gone.” Her entire body shook as the sobs took over.

“Baby Girl...it’s a’ight ya’ hear?” Richard soothed. “It’s a’ight. Now stop crying so I can talk to you.”

“Okay Richy, but it hurts,” she sobbed even harder. “He was born dead, and it’s all my fault.”

Hardening his tone, but only a little, Richard tried to calm her down, “Baby Girl, you gone make the phone hang up, so stop crying.”

Skinny inhaled deeply and held it, trying to force herself to stop crying. “A’ight, Richy.” She sounded a little calmer now, but her voice still cut in and out with the sporadic breathing left over by her sobs. “I need you right now baby.” Greif rose into her chest and throat again, but she fought it by closing her eyes and listening to Richard’s barely audible breathing, trying to match her pace with his.

“How long you got to stay at the hospital?” he asked.

“For like a week. I gone come to your contact visit!” she reassured. “Don’t worry, I’ll be there.”

“Girl, you need to get better before you go anywhere,” Alicia interrupted as she and Gina entered the room, sitting down in the chairs next to Skinny’s hospital bed.

“That’s gone be part of my healing process,” Skinny responded, shooting Alicia a look of defiance. “You tripping, Sis.”

“A’ight, now don’t y’all start that shit.” Richard was speaking directly to Skinny, but the comment was for both her and Alicia.

“Sorry, baby.” Skinny spoke into the receiver, but she glared at Alicia. Didn’t Alicia understand just how much she needed to see Richard right now?

Alicia did understand, but she also understood that Skinny had just given birth. The fact that the baby hadn’t survived was of little relevance. Her body needed time to heal. “Skinny,” her eyes pleaded as she spoke. “I love you like a sister. I don’t want to see you hurt yourself.”

Skinny’s expression softened as the love from Alicia shattered her wall of defense. “Sis, I’m gone be a’ight. I need to see him. I can’t wait.”



Alicia started to speak, but she could tell that Skinny's concentration had shifted back to Richard. Skinny spoke into the receiver again and her features shifted back to sadness.

Skinny waited until she heard the click of the call disconnecting before shutting her phone. Sighing as she closed it, she turned her focus back to Alicia and Gina.

“When is this contact visit?” Alicia's expression appeared disinterested, but her tone lifted, indicating both her concern and hopefulness.

“Next month, on the third. Ten-thirty in the morning,” Skinny gushed. “I got to be there at ten though to sign in.”

“Can I come with you?” Alicia pleaded. “I want to see him too.”

Skinny smiled. “He put us all on the paper to come see him.” She motioned towards Gina. “So Gina can come, too.”

Alicia glanced over at Gina as Skinny motioned. Gina's body language and expression indicated that it was time to go. Alicia wanted to stay and keep Skinny company for a while longer, but she knew that Skinny would need to rest. As she gathered her things to go, one last question came to Alicia's mind. "Skinny, I want to ask you a question," she said, turning back towards Skinny.

"What's that?" Her eyes were starting to droop. The sedatives the doctors had given her earlier were starting to take effect.

A hurt expression swept over Alicia's face. "Why you stop crying for him but you don't stop crying for us?"

Before answering, Skinny contemplated Alicia's question carefully. "Sis, you know I'm him trapped in my body? What he says goes in my book." She allowed a small smile across her face.

“A’ight then, Sis,” Alicia responded, not really sure what to make of Skinny’s answer. Chalking the strange answer up to the sedatives, she bent over Skinny’s bed, and gave her a gentle hug. “I got to go.” As she stood back up, Alicia noticed that Skinny’s eyes were filling up with tears again. “Why you crying now? Cause I’m leaving?” She was willing to stay a little longer if Skinny needed her to.

“No,” Skinny smiled through her tears. “’Cause that’s the first time you ever called me Sis.”

Smiling but not quite realizing how deeply Skinny had meant what she said, Alicia dismissed it. “Girl, I love you.” Before walking out the door, she said “bye,” over her shoulder.

“Bye Sis, I love you,” Skinny called back, her words almost missing Alicia’s ears completely as the door swung closed behind her.

As her eyes grew heavier, Skinny realized that she was officially part of the family now; not just the family that

Richard had created, but the family that Richard was born to and loved. Understanding that Alicia had really meant what she'd said about not wanting to see Skinny hurt herself, she allowed the drugs to take over and fell into a dreamless sleep.

## ***Chapter 11***

Richard sat in his bunk as thoughts raced through his mind – thoughts about Skinny and the baby, about who could have sold him out, his Dad, and Dwayne. He was so deep in thought that he hadn't heard Bam approach.

“Yo’ Rich Kid? You straight?” Bam asked for the second time.

“I’m good, Fool.” Richard glanced up at Bam. Maybe Bam could help him take his mind off things for a while. “Just thinking ‘bout some shit. Why? Wuz up?”

“You wuz up, nigga.” Bam nodded towards Richard and his bunk. “You ain’t got back on the phone all day since you got off this morning. Or off your bunk. So what’s on your mind, fam?”

Richard couldn’t help but feel love for Bam. He’d had Richard’s back since the moment they’d taken the long walk over. In return, Richard had always kept an eye on Bam’s back. But while he did feel like their camaraderie was starting to feel more like a friendship than just a relationship of convenience, Richard still wasn’t sure if he could trust Bam with personal stuff yet. “Ain’t too much, Fool,” Richard shrugged. “Everybody business ain’t nobody business, feel me?”

Bam’s face dropped with the realization that maybe he and Richard weren’t as close as he had thought. “Well,” he said,

climbing onto the bottom bunk. “Come holla at yo’ boy when you get done thinking, fam.”

Even though Bam was now out of eyesight, Richard nodded in response before heading back into thought. He had to find out who had snitched on him. But how? Skinny didn’t need to be bothered with finding a snitch right now. She needed to get better. E was looking, he knew, despite the fact that he hadn’t talked to E since being locked up. But E was only one man. If Richard could figure out who had ratted him out, he could give E something to go on, a direction. But for the life of him, Richard couldn’t pin down who it might have been.

As dinnertime approached, Richard started to think that talking to Bam might not be such a bad idea. “Ay, fool,” Richard called out. Bam was talking to another inmate a few cells down. “Check this out.”

Hearing Richard’s voice, Bam told the other inmate they’d talk later and made his way over to their cell. Richard waited

patiently for Bam to walk through the open cell door. Making eye contact with Richard, Bam asked, “What’s good, fam?”

“I’m trying to think of who snitched on me,” Richard mused, rubbing his chin, still trying to sort out his thoughts. “The niggas I buy work from still out there doing they thang. If it’s one of the hating ass niggas, I’ll never know ‘cause it’s not in my paperwork cause they ain’t found no dope in my house. What you think?”

Bam looked down at the floor, thinking about Richard’s question. “It might be a hoe you done shitted on,” looking up to finish his answer, “or just a hater that know too much. Might be somebody you trust or somebody you put out of business.”

Richard considered Bam’s response for a moment. From the day they had met, Richard had known that he would enjoy bunking with Bam, but the two men were definitely becoming more than just bunkmates, Richard decided. Maybe it was time to start letting Bam in; maybe he would become one of the



newest family members. “Know what, Fool,” Richard smiled. “You right. That’s why I fucks with you.”

Bam smiled back, but his smile faded into a look of disturbed curiousness as a question popped into his head – a question that had been bothering him for weeks. “Fam? Why you always calling me Fool?”

“Cause I don’t deal with names,” Richard explained, matter-of-factly. “I deal with faces and give out names. If I met you on the streets, I wouldn’t have known yo’ name was Bam ‘cause I would have given you one.”

Unsure of what Richard’s answer meant, Bam cocked his head to the side. “That’s a good thing, right?”

Richard smiled. “Well, check this out.” He hopped off his bunk, placing himself at Bam’s eye level. “Let’s say you get jammed up on some shit you did, like me. The crackers say they know your name is Fool, then that tells me or somebody that’s around me got you jammed. And if they don’t call you

Fool, but by the name everybody else calls you, then you know me and my niggas ain't got loose lips. I aint' no rat Fool and I'll kill a rat that's on my team any day." He jutted his chin forward and nodded his head upwards in a quick motion. "Fuck the love I got for the nigga, cause a rat don't love nobody."

Bam nodded in understanding. "I feel that, fam. Where I'm from, niggas don't think like that." His comment elicited a shrug from Richard. Moving on to his next question, Bam lowered his voice a little. "I been meaning to ask you, what the fuck you got jammed with if they ain't get no dope? I told you when I went to court everybody on the long walk there was saying you got jammed with dope and guns. I told you 'bout that when I got back, remember?"

Richard crossed his arms, in thought, trying to decide if he was ready to trust Bam with that much information. Finally, Richard decided to give Bam a shot, if nothing else, to see how strong his loyalty was. Without a word, he started for their cell door, motioning for Bam to follow. He made his way past the

line of cells and headed straight for the correction officer's desk. Upon reaching their destination, Richard stopped and faced Bam. "Man, look here, I don't be having everybody in my business." Quickly, Richard scanned the area for anyone approaching. Seeing no one, he continued, but he kept his voice just above a whisper. "But I'm gone show you this anyway." Turning to the female correction officer behind the desk, Richard smiled as asked "Ms. J? Can I see my card real quick?"

Ms. Jackson turned to grab Richard's card. As she reached into the catalog, both Richard and Bam admired her voluptuous curves. "Here you go, Rich Kid," she said, turning and handing the card to Richard with a smile. In turn, Richard handed the card over to Bam.

"Look at the back, Fool. Tell me what you see, but don't say nothing." Richard raised his index finger to his lips in a quieting motion and then removed it to finish speaking. "Just wait until we get back to the bunks."

Taking the card back, Richard turned to Ms. Jackson and thanked her. The two men then headed back to their bunk in silence. Reaching their bunks first, Richard turned to Bam and waited for his response.

“Tax evasion, fam?” A confused look occupied Bam’s face. “How old are you again?”

“Fool, I aint nothin’ but twenty years old. I thought only rich white crackers get charges like that, too.” Richard nodded his head to confirm that he was as confused as Bam the charges he’d been held on.

“Fam, that’s some heavy ass shit.” Bam’s lips curved into a worried frown. “I see why you always be thinking. So they called the police cause you had money?”

Richard shook his head, “No, Fool. Cause I’m that nigga.”

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“Richard Gary!” the correction officer called as he walked through the main commons area towards Richard’s cell. “Richard Gary!”

“Wuz good, Mr. Owens?” Richard yelled, hopping down from his bunk onto the floor.

Hearing Richard’s response, Mr. Owens stopped five cells short of Richard’s and responded, “You have a contact visit downstairs waiting on you.”

Before heading out the cell door, Richard gave Bam a high five. As he crossed the threshold to the door, Richard called back over his shoulder, smiling. “Holla at you when I get back, Fool.”

“Be easy, fam,” Bam responded, waving at Richard as he walked away.

Richard made his way across the commons over to the elevators. Officer Campbell was standing by the doors when she noticed Richard approaching. “Inmate, where are you going?”

“I got a visit.”

Officer Campbell smiled and nodded in understanding. “Okay. I’ll take you down,” she responded, pulling out her keys. “No need for you to wait for Officer Price.”

Richard smiled back. “Bet that up. You always look out for me.”

When the elevator reached the bottom floor, Officer Campbell escorted Richard to where the holding cell officer stood. “He’s got a visit today.” She directed the statement to her fellow officer.

Looking through the clipboard in his hands, the holding officer asked, “What’s your name?”

“Richard Gary.”

After finding Richard’s name and crossing it off the list, the holding officer pushed a button on the wall next to him. A faint buzzing sound indicated that the large double doors were now unlocked. “Go down the hall. They’re waiting on you,” he said.

As soon as Richard pressed the door’s metal bar, the buzzing sound ceased. He released the doors as he stepped into the hallway. Behind him, the spring hinges pulled the doors closed. As he neared the large, open room, chatter from the visiting area filled his ears.

Skinny spotted Richard the instant he’d stepped out of the hallway and into the area that slightly resembled a high school cafeteria. She squealed and jumped up into his arms. She almost knocked him backwards with the sheer force. As he threw his arms around her, she showered his entire face with fervent kisses.

Richard chuckled lightly, “Baby girl, calm down before they make y’all leave.” Gently, he set her back down on the floor.

“Oh but, Richy,” she said, clinging to his arm as though he might disappear. “I’ve miss you!”

Richard rubbed the palm of his hand over her forehead and then her dreads, smiling. But his smile quickly faded, and sadness and concern for Skinny filled his eyes as he remembered the loss of their baby. “Baby girl,” his voice low, “You don’t act like you just had a miscarriage.”

Skinny waved his comment away with a flick of her hand. “Ain’t no time for laying down,” she replied nonchalantly, but her stomach knotted at the horrible reminder of the baby they’d lost. “I just got out the hospital yesterday. Why ain’t you call?” Her lips formed a pronounced pout as she placed her hands on her hips.



Richard gave her a loving smile. “I ain’t been calling nobody.” He brushed her cheek softly with the back of his hand. “I had to clear my mind baby girl.” His mind wandered back to the fact that he still hadn’t found the rat. Remembering that today was about seeing his family, he shoved the frustration away.

Skinny didn’t need an explanation. She just nodded in understanding and wrapped her arms around Richard’s waist. She thought about how Richard had always pretty much kept to himself. What little bit he did share, he shared with her, so if he hadn’t called her, she knew he hadn’t called anyone else.

Peering over the top of Skinny’s head, Richard suddenly noticed Gina standing a few steps away. Still holding onto Skinny, he smiled in her direction.

“Wuz up, boy?” she asked, smiling back.

Richard extended his free arm towards Gina as she closed the gap between them. He wrapped her in a hug on the side

opposite of Skinny. “Just chilling, Sis.” He planted a kiss on her forehead. “What’s good with little Pop?”

Still huddled into the three-person hug, Gina pulled her head back and looked into Richard’s eyes. Her features creased with worry. “They trying to send him to a level eight program for a year.”

Richard shook his head. He felt bad for the little guy, but early mistakes made for a stronger man. He’d get out in a year and would learn how to keep himself low-key.

“Boy!” Alicia’s voice pierced its way into the happy huddle. “You ain’t gone give me no hug?” Her tone was thick with insult, but her smile lit up the room. Above the smile, her beautiful brown eyes filled with tears of happiness and concern.

Gina and Skinny stepped back so that Richard could gather Alicia into his arms. “You know I am. Come here, Sis,” he said, smiling as he wrapped his arms around her. Instantly, she

melted into a puddle of sobs and buried her face into his shoulder. “What you crying for, Sis?”

She looked up into Richard’s face with a weak smile. “I’m happy to see you, but I hate seeing you in this thing.” She tugged at his jumper.

“Well, it’s me in the flesh,” he smiled, rubbing her shoulder as he stepped back. “I stunt in anything I put on.” He pulled at the top of the jumper and snapped it back with a cocky smile.

Smiling, Alicia smacked his shoulder playfully. “Boy, you crazy!” Wiping the tears away from her eyes, she motioned over to the tables set aside for visits with her index finger. “Let’s go sit over there before they really do try and kick us out.”

The trio made their way over to the tables and sat down. The women talked excitedly about the things that Richard had missed and he listened intently. Once in a while, his mind would wander off to other things – thoughts about the baby,

thoughts about the snitch he needed to find – but mostly, he just enjoyed the time he had with the people he loved most. Much too soon, the visit was over and it was time for everyone to say their good-byes. The only dry eyes in the group belonged to Richard.

As Alicia and Gina made their way towards the exit, Skinny stood back and took Richard's hand into her own. "Richy, I'm gone make you happy, baby."

"You do that, baby girl," he said as he gently touched her cheek. Little did he know, she was talking about her plan to find and kill the snitch.

Taking Richard's response as an approval, Skinny's smile reached from one ear to the other as she leaned in for one last kiss. "I love you, baby. See you soon."

Richard watched as Skinny walked away with a bounce in her step and a smile on her face, wondering what she could possibly be up to.

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A black Daytona Charger H.I.M.E. pulled up in front of E's house. Opening the driver's side door, Skinny stepped out onto the street, her dreads pulled up on the back of her head. Walking around the front of the vehicle, she waved at E, standing in the front of the apartment building. "Wuz up, Lil' Bro?"

E smiled and waved back. "Sis! What's good? You been missing about a week. I tried to call your phone but nobody answer for me."

Now standing in front of E, Skinny responded, "I been in the hospital." She shifted her gaze from E's face to the building behind him, avoiding eye contact, afraid his expression might bring on a new wave of tears. "I had a miscarriage."

E looked down at the ground. "Damn. Why ain't you call me and let me know?" He shoved his hands in his pockets. "I

bet Balle knew, too, and ain't tell me shit.” Kicking the ground with his toe, he tried to hide his disappointment at being the last one to know.

Skinny shrugged but her eyes filled with compassion and grief. She hadn't really thought about calling E. Maybe she should have. “Yo’, brother got us like that,” she said, giving a half-hearted smile. “But now you know.”

Figuring there must have been a reason that Skinny hadn't called him, E returned to watching over his best friend's girl. “So what's good then, Sis? You need some money?”

Skinny shook her head, causing her dreads to bob a little. “No. I don't need no money.” A sinister smile crossed her face. “But I do need some guns.”

E's face appeared puzzled as he creased his brow. “What you need guns for?”

“Come on,” she said as she headed towards E's apartment. “Let's go talk inside.”

E called to the men outside of his apartment building, letting them know he would be right back and followed Skinny up to the stairs. Once inside, Skinny began to divulge her plan. The words tumbled out of her mouth so quickly that E had to concentrate on them carefully to avoid missing any of the details.

“...So that’s it,” Skinny said, now finished explaining her plan. She stood in silence waiting for E’s response. She followed his motions carefully and tried to determine whether he was going to try and talk it out of her or not. It didn’t really matter, but she really did want his support. Despite her careful studying, she found it impossible to decipher his reaction. He kept his expression flat and unresponsive. His movements were slow but fluid as he walked towards the couch. He sat down and looked at the ground in in silence. The wait for his response felt like an eternity.

Sitting with his elbows rested on his knees and his hands clasped together, E looked up at her. “Sis, we can’t just start killing mother fuckers ‘cause we *think* they told.”

“Well, if you not gone help me, I’ll do it myself,” Skinny replied haughtily, shrugging one shoulder. In a stance of defiance, she crossed her arms over her chest.

Seeing just how serious she was, E realized that he couldn’t stop her. “A’ight. Look, Sis. I can’t let you go out there in the streets by yourself.” He held one of his hands up and pointed towards the door. “Something might happen to you.” After dropping his hand and pausing for a brief moment, he released a loud sigh. “So I’m all in,” he said, raising raised both hands in surrender. “Fuck it.”

Knowing that she’d won the argument, Skinny’s lips curled into a sly half-smile. “A’ight. Now show me the guns then. What we got to work with?”



“Come on in the room,” he replied, standing and walking to his bedroom. “Let me show you.” Out of his closet, E pulled out four A.K. 47s. He then flipped his mattress over, revealing a full line of arsenals that ranged in size and caliper: 45s, 22 longs, automatics, revolvers, and those were just the ones she knew by sight.

Skinny’s eyes filled with excitement. “Wooo!” she shouted, jumping and clapping like a little kid in a candy store. “Now that’s what I’m talking ‘bout!” Suddenly, she grabbed E’s shoulder, as if to steady herself. “Hold on, I think I just bust a nut!”

She reached for one of the Colt 45s, picked it up, felt its weight in her hands, and savored the feeling of cold steel in her palms. She held it up, aimed at the wall and closed one eye as if she was about to shoot. She smiled and reached for the second 45 on the bed.

“Sis, calm down a minute,” E said as she reached for the second gun. “I don’t think you can handle that right there.”

Ignoring him, she popped a thirty round extended clip into the first gun, and then the second. “I got this, just chill.”

E’s mouth gaped open in disbelief as he watched her cock one of the loaded guns. “Damn! Bro done showed you how to work all this?”

Skinny winked as she placed the guns into her pockets. “I ain’t gone do nothing today, but when we put in some work.” She was already walking out the door. “You gone see how much he taught me.”

Closing the bedroom door behind him, E tried to catch up with her before she left the apartment. “Hold up, Sis. Let me walk you to your car.”

With E close behind her, Skinny made her way out into the yard and towards her vehicle. Before opening the door, she stopped and turned to face E. “Bro, give me like three days. I’m gone come holla at you ‘bout that, but I gotta go see my adopted son.”

Nodding his head, E opened the door for her. "I'm gone call you later on anyway."

Skinny grabbed the door handle to climb in, but stopped when she heard her name being called. "Damn Skinny!" It was John, one of Dirt's homeboys. "You made me bust a nut in there. I bet I can make you bust more nuts than yo' nigga...what's his name...? Rich Kid?"

"Homeboy, what you just said?" E said as he spun around to face John. He hadn't seen Skinny storm past. She was already standing directly in front of John.

"Bro, just chill," she called back to E, her eyes still focused on John. She lowered her voice to a seductive purr. "So you think since my man gone I need somebody to take his place?"

Spreading his legs and grabbing his crotch, John looked past Skinny at E. "Yeah, I think I can help you." Returning his gaze back towards Skinny, John took a small step forward.

As John stepped forward, Skinny called back over her shoulder back at E. “Bro! I think I’m gone have to take this offer.” E and everyone around the apartment stared in disbelief. Turning and walking away, Skinny called back to John. “Come on then, let’s go get a room.”

John turned towards Dirt. “A Dirt, I’m ‘bout to handle this...”

*Boom!* The sound of a 45 rung in John’s ears. His leg burned like it was on fire. “Damn! What the fuck?” His panicked eyes met Skinny’s. “Why you shot at me?”

“Pussy!” Skinny yelled, charging back towards John. “Don’t ask no questions. Suck this barrel ‘fore I kill yo’ pussy ass.” She shoved the gun’s barrel into his mouth. Laughing, Skinny turned her head in E’s direction. “I told you I got this Bro. The power of pussy rule over everything!”

The entire group of men assembled outside of E’s apartment and looked on in shock. Skinny laughed as John

sucked the end of the barrel. Finally bored with her little game, Skinny yanked the barrel of the gun from his mouth, and holding her hand just above the butt, brought it down onto the front of John's forehead. Instantly, he fell to the ground. Blood quickly trickled down his face and into his eyes.

“Why you slapped him with the gun for?” E asked, his laugh almost as loud as Skinny's.

Tears from laughing so hard now formed in Skinny's eyes. “Cause now he made me bust more nuts than Rich Kid. That's what he said he could do, right?”

His laughter finally dying down to a chuckle, E motioned to Dirt. “Ay Dirt, you brought that nigga over here with you, so you got to get him from round here.”

Skinny was now climbing into the car. “Lil' Bro, three days, a'ight?” As she drove away, she couldn't help but notice the looks on the faces of the men standing outside. *Now they got some shit to talk bout.*

As he walked back towards the apartment, E called back to Dirt once more. “Ay Dirt! That nigga bet’ not tell the police shit. If he do, I’m gone kill both y’all niggas.”

Moving just a bit faster, but struggling to lift John’s body up off the ground, Dirt called to the still-gawking men in the yard. “Ay! Y’all niggas help me put this nigga in the car.”

## ***Chapter 12***

Outside of Maybay and Lil' B's trap, a black Charger rounded the corner; Maybay was the first to notice it. "Lil' B, watch that black Charger coming off Twenty-fourth Ave," he said as he handed a bag over to their current customer.

As the Charger drew closer, Lil' B's heart began to race. He smacked Maybay's arm, signaling that it was time to move. Together, they jumped behind a set of bushes. While crouched between the bushes and the house, Lil' B felt the vibration of

his cell phone against his leg. He struggled to remove the phone from his pocket. The Charger stopped right in front of the spot they were hiding. Finally able to remove the phone, Lil' B saw that the call was from Skinny. Flipping it open, he answered. "Hello? Ma? Where you at? I might need you to come get us in a minute. I think jump out watching the trap." His voice was a nervous whisper.

Skinny laughed into the phone. "Boy! Jump ain't round here. I'm right in front of the house."

"You in that Charger?"

"Yeah, this me!" She laughed even harder. "What? Y'all thought I was jump out?"

Hanging up the phone, Lil'B and Maybay stepped out of their hiding place. They could now see Skinny's face through the rolled down passenger side window. She leaned over the center console and shouted so that Lil' B could hear her clearly. "Boy! Get in the car. Y'all probably thought I was the



robbers.” Her laughter suddenly cut off as she rolled the window back up.

“Whatever, Ma,” Lil’ B snapped as he climbed into the passenger seat. “When you got this rental?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Yesterday,” Skinny answered, matter-of-factly. “You know I just got out the hospital boy.”

Lil’ B looked down at the dash, the corners of his mouth turned down. He couldn’t imagine how hard losing the baby must be for Skinny and Richard. Knowing that he shouldn’t dwell on the subject, if nothing else, for Skinny’s sake, he again changed the subject. “So, wuz good, Ma?”

Welcoming the shift in subject, Skinny turned to Lil’ B. “We gone do that thing I was telling you ‘bout at the hospital.”

Nodding in understanding, Lil’ B asked, “You went and hollered at E?”

“Yeah. Just came from over there.” Lil’ B raised an eyebrow in question. He hadn’t been so sure that E would go along with the plan. Skinny answered his inquisitive look with her own look of smugness. “He down with it.”

Hearing of E’s willingness to participate, Lil’ B’s skepticism faded into excitement. “When we starting?”

“In three days,” Skinny replied. “I got to make sho’ I’m off them pills the doctor got me taking first.”

Suddenly remembering everything Skinny had just gone through, both physically and emotionally, Lil’ B gave Skinny a look of concern.” You sure you ready for some shit like this? Me and E could do it ourselves if not.”

Skinny shook her head and pulled out the twin 45s. “Look here Lil’ one. You think I’m playing?” A sinister grin played on her lips as she watched Lil’ B’s surprised but jealous reaction.

“I told that nigga hold them down for me!”

Skinny shook her head, but maintained her smile. “Ain’t nothing! These my bitches now.” She raised one of the guns to eye level and acted as though she were inspecting it. “Besides, I just shot a nigga with this one.” She wiped some blood from the handle with her thumb.

Again, Lil’ B raised an eyebrow in disbelief. “What you mean? You shot somebody already?”

Skinny chuckled as she placed the guns back in her jacket. “Oh, I almost forgot to tell you bout that. I shot some nigga name John at E house before I came over here.” Her tone, expression and demeanor spoke of shooting John as though shooting someone were a normal, everyday occurrence, much like washing the laundry or going to work.

“You killed some nigga at E house today?” Lil’ B’s voice lifted in shock.

Shaking her head, Skinny replied, “Naw, I just shot him and slapped his bitch ass with the gun.”

“Why you just let E handle that?” He knew Skinny had always been able to handle her own, but she’d just left the hospital. Shouldn’t she be resting or something? And here she was, shooting people.

“Cause I got to get the feel of using my bitches, that’s why,” she replied, matter-of-factly.

Still a little unsure as to whether or not Skinny was okay, health-wise, but certain that he’d never be able to convince her to go home and rest, Lil’ B decided to change the subject, yet again. “Ay ma, I want one of these,” he said as he examined the Charger’s interior.

Skinny nodded and smiled in understanding. Tenderly, motherly, she replied, “Just chill Lil’ one. I’m gone make this hoe I fuck with get two more, one for you and one for E.”

Lil’ B grinned, ecstatic that he was going to own one a car just like the one he was sitting in, but his elation was interrupted by a remembered thought. “Oh yeah, I forgot to tell

you that I beat Dwayne like two months ago,” adding angrily, “old pussy ass nigga.”

The news morphed Skinny’s loving motherly tone into one of correction. “Boy, you bet not let Alicia find out you did it.” Her expression was stern and commanding.

“What you mean?” Lil’ B asked innocently, looking at Skinny with confusion. “I ain’t done nothing wrong. And why you looking like that?”

“Alicia made us promise we wasn’t going to do nothing to him,” she replied, rolling her eyes.

Lil’ B lifted his hands in a full shrug. “Well, I don’t know nothing ‘bout that there, but what time you want me to call you?”

A loud sigh escaped Skinny’s lips. “Like five, but look, don’t tell nobody you told me ‘bout Dwayne. If Alicia finds out, she gone think I told you to do it.”

“A’ight, I got you.” Lil’ B pulled the door handle and opened the passenger door. “I’m gone call you at five. You want the money for that car?” He suddenly remembered that Skinny was going to get another Charger for him.

“Boy! Get the fuck out!” Skinny pushed Lil’ B towards the door jokingly. “Talking ‘bout do I want the money.”

Lil’ B laughed as he pretended to tumble out of the car. “See, that’s why I love you, ma.”

“A’ight, see you later,” she said through the still open passenger door as she quickly drove off. The force of her takeoff slammed the door closed.

Now standing on the street corner, Lil’ B watched her drive off, thinking of how lucky he was to have been adopted by Richard and Skinny. They were the family he’d never really had but had always wanted.

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Cloaked in darkness, Skinny and Lil' B sat at the bus stop across from King's Hotel waiting for just the right moment. Entering the hotel would be easy; the whinos, crackheads and prostitutes coming and going with their clientele were unlikely to notice them going in. Leaving, however, might be a bit of a different story.

“You ready, ma?” Lil' B asked, noticing the calculating gaze on Skinny's face.

“I just want to make sure nobody run to Biscayne. I got this nigga,” she replied, putting her hands back into her black hoodie. She let the fingers on each of her hands tighten around one of the 45s. At that exact moment, a light in the hotel room they were watching filled the window.

“Unc, get the car started,” Lil' B spoke into his cell phone, using the walkie talkie feature. “The lights just came on.”

Down the street, E lifted the cell phone to his lips and pressed the button to respond. "I got this. Y'all do your thing."

In one fluid motion, Skinny stood up and started towards the lit hotel room. "Come on, let's go," she called back, already halfway across the street.

"Not yet, ma!" But Lil' B was already following behind her.

Now on the other side of the street, the two of them ducked behind a parked car, watching the hotel window for movement. They didn't have to wait long. A figure crossed the room, hidden only by the cheap curtains.

"Damn, Brandy!" Pulling his pants on, White Boy gazed lustfully at the still naked stripper on the hotel bed. "I didn't know it was like that."

"I told you I got that sniper," she said as she pulled a lighter to the cigarette between her lips.



“I’m gone come pick you up from the club tomorrow night,” he said as he threw his shirt on. “When you get off?”

“Why can’t we just go out tomorrow, then do our thing at your house the rest of the night?” Brandy pouted as White Boy pushed his gun into the worn belt loop of his pants.

“I told you it ain’t serious like that, lil’ mama. We just gone be fuck friends.” He turned to look at her, gauging her response. “You can handle that, right?”

“Yeah, I can handle that,” she smiled. Secretly, she was devising a plan that would make him hers.

“A’ight, don’t forget to call me tomorrow night,” he said, still looking at Brandy as he pulled the door open.

“Had fun, White Boy?”

White Boy’s head snapped in the direction of the voice, “What the...?” but he was already too late. Skinny had already pulled the trigger.

Brandy's screams of terror filled the room. The high-pitched sound rang in Skinny's ears. "Shut the fuck up bitch!" She aimed and pulled the trigger again, silencing the sound.

Lil' B stood in shock. It wasn't the killing that had stupefied him, it was the fact that it had been Skinny who had done the killing. He had never seen her that way. He wondered if seeing her like this might make his Paw proud. The thought almost made him smile.

"Check that nigga's pockets, boy! What you waiting for?" Skinny yelled, ripping Lil' B from his thoughts. She walked over to the bed where Brandy lay, still clinging to life, convulsing from the gunshot wound in her shoulder. Pointing the gun directly at her head, Skinny pulled the trigger once more, taking Brandy out of her pain and misery in the blink of an eye.

"Ma, let's go!" Lil' B yelled, standing between the open door and walkway outside.

“What he had in his pockets?” Skinny asked, crossing the room.

Lil’ B’s eyes bounced from Skinny to the outside. Nervously, he scanned the area for any sign of witnesses or flashing lights. “I ain’t go through his pockets,” he responded, irritated. “Let’s go!”

“Hold up, boy.” Skinny bent down, shoved her hand into White Boy’s jean pocket and retrieved his car keys. Before standing, she grabbed his Desert Eagle handgun.

Already waiting out front, E revved the Honda’s engine. Skinny and Lil’ B pulled their hoods up and ran out of the room, trying to make sure their faces couldn’t be seen by anyone passing by. Lil’ B made his way over to the back door on the driver’s side without looking back, but as he turned opened the door, he noticed Skinny walking past their stolen car towards the street. “Ma! Come on!” he yelled. He wondered what the hell had gotten into her. They needed to get away!

“Get in nigga!” E yelled, turning towards Lil’ B who was still standing at the back door. Lil’ B climbed in, but continued to look around for Skinny. E pulled the car away before Lil’ B had even had a chance to close the door.

“Unc, you leaving her?” Lil’ B’s hand closed around the handle of his gun. His arm muscles tensed, ready to shoot E if he so much as acted like he had planned to leave Skinny behind. E may have been family, but family never left family behind.

“Here she come behind us. You tripping,” E said, looking in the rearview mirror. Even without seeing Skinny climb into the truck now following them, E knew she’d be right behind them. That girl had a plan. E had been able to tell that by the look on her face when she’d exited the hotel room.

Turning around to look out the back window, Lil B’ wondered aloud. “What the fuck we gone do with that truck?”

E wondered the same thing himself, but knew it was probably pointless to wonder. They would just have to wait and see. “Only person can tell you that is Skinny or Rich, ‘cause she got his ways.”

Shaking his head, Lil’ B continued to watch the speeding truck follow them under the I-95 into Liberty City. “Unc! My Paw done got my old girl gooned out!” Unable to suppress his curiosity any longer, he flipped open his cell phone.

“Hello?” Skinny answered, turning down the Tupac song playing on the radio so she could hear.

“Ma? You good back there?”

“Boy! You know I am,” she replied, rolling her eyes. “Ay! Tell E to turn right on Sixth Ave and get behind me.”

“A’ight,” he answered, flipping his phone shut. “Ay E, Skinny wants you to turn right up here on Sixth and then get behind her.”

“A’ight,” E replied, pulling the steering wheel to the right. Once he rounded the corner, he slowed down so that Skinny could pull around in front of him. He followed her all the way up to the 12<sup>th</sup> Street bridge.

Skinny pulled the truck right up against the shoulder. Right across the street from her, E and Lil’ B stepped out of the car just in time to see her duck behind a set of bushes. In just a few seconds, she emerged with a large towel and a gas can.

Not seeming to understand what she was doing, Lil B’ asked, “Ma? What you gone do? Steal the rims and music?”

Skinny shot Lil’ B a look that resembled the *Really?* thought going through her head before returning to the task at hand. She poured gasoline onto the towel in her hand, careful not to drip any on herself. “Boy! Get yo’ ass over here and pour this gas in the truck, “she said, handing the gas can over. Now turning to E, she asked, “E, can you pull the car up some?”

Without thought, question or doubt, E walked over to the still running car and hopped in, pulled it up a few notches and waited inside.

With E now in position and the gas can now filled, Skinny walked over to the truck and inserted the towel into the gas tank, letting the end of the towel hit the ground. “Lil’ one, give me a trail from here to the car,” she said, walking back towards the car. As Lil’ B drew nearer to the car with his gas trail, Skinny pulled a lighter from her pocket.

*Click!* She lit the lighter and brought the flame down to the gas trail. As the blaze sped across the street and towards the truck, Skinny and Lil’ B scrambled into the car. E slammed on the gas pedal and sped away. The shriek of tires quickly gave way to an earth-shattering explosion.

Looking behind them out of the back window, Skinny watched the truck go up in flames as a maniacal grin pulled at her lips. “Bye-bye White Boy.”

## ***Chapter 13***

An annoying ringing sound pulled Skinny from her sleep. Wiping the sleep from her eyes, she tried to determine where the sound was coming from.

*My phone!*

She jumped out of bed and snatched the phone from her dresser. As soon as her fingers wrapped around it, she flipped it open and answered. “Hello?” Her heart fluttered with hope and expectancy.



“You have a collect call from...” without even waiting to hear the rest of the recording, Skinny pressed the number five on her keypad, smiling as she pulled the phone back up to her ear.

“Wuz good, baby girl,” Richard’s voice came through on the other end of the line.

“Nothing. Just thinking ‘bout you,” she answered seductively.

“So how you been out there?” he asked, not really noticing the hint of desire in Skinny’s voice.

“I been getting out a lot lately,” she replied nonchalantly.  
“What about you?”

“Just chilling. You miss me?” Richard produced a cocky smile that Skinny couldn’t see.

“You know I do,” she purred in his ear. “And this pussy been thinking ‘bout you a lot, cause every time I hear your

voice, she start wetting my panties up Like now, I can't even calm this pussy down.”

Richard grinned on the other side of the line.” Well, I tell you what. Take them off and I'll show you how she like's to be treated.” He shoved his hand down the front of his pants and wrapped it around his already stiff shaft. “But you gotta do everything I say.”

“What you want me to do Daddy?” she asked, already lying on the bed, naked, legs spread open.

“First, I want you to wet your fingers with spit.” He slowly stroked his shaft, pulling his hands all the way up to the swollen tip. “Rub each one of your nipples until they rock hard.”

Skinny moaned into the receiver as she followed Richard's instructions. “Mmm, daddy, I love you.”

“Now rub your body until you get to that magic spot. Don't go in yet, just let your fingers run across your hairs down

there.” He listened for her gasp of pleasure as he stroked his bulging flesh faster, harder. “Now I want you to wet your fingers again and rub down there.”

“Daddy, please fuck me, please,” she begged, her fingers already dripping wet with juices.

Richard, on the edge of pleasure himself, slowed his strokes back down to keep up with her. “Now take your wet fingers and rub the lips of your pussy until your clit gets as hard as your nipples.”

“Yes, daddy! I’m ‘bout to cum,” she gasped into the phone.

“Slow down,” he ordered, wanting to push her into an orgasm that would rock her for the rest of the week. “Rub your pearl real slow until you can’t take it.” He listened to Skinny’s moans come louder, closer together as he stroked his cock a little faster now. “Now push one finger in. Do it slow.”

“Richy! I’m cumming daddy,” she screamed over the phone as Richard exploded into his pants.

“Baby girl, I got to go clean myself up.” Richard put the phone down and walked towards the bathroom, his pants tented in the crotch from his still hard shaft.

“You one lil’ freaky something,” Ms. Jackson smirked, as Richard walked by her on the way to the bathroom.

“Ms. Jackson, you mind ya’ business now.” He grinned back at her.

Now wiped down and wearing a clean pair of pants, Richard headed towards the bathroom exit. As he made his way into the door, he could hear Bam yelling. “Nigga! Fuck that! Get in there!”

Walking down the hallway, he could then hear Ms. Jackson trying to calm the argument. “Y’all bet’ stop ‘cause you know them cameras in here.”

Walking straight into the line of fire, Richard looked at Bam. “What’s good, Fool?”

Bam turned away from the other inmate to face Richard. “This fuck nigga tried to take yo’ phone. And then he walked off talking shit like he ‘bout that.”

Richard turned his gaze towards the other inmate. He was a gangly guy, not much taller than Richard. “Ay, buddy.” He kept his voice even and cool. “You want that?” he asked, nodding towards the phone.

“Naw, man,” the inmate replied, dropping his gaze to the ground, fidgeting with his fingers. “I’m good, man. I don’t want no problems.”

“Well, I tell you what – “ Richard waited to finish his response until the inmate brought his gaze back up. “Until you do, you don’t use no phones in here.”

As the man hurried away, Ms. Jackson gave Richard an inquisitive stare. She placed hands on her hips accusingly. “Why you doing that to that boy?”

“Fuck that nigga,” Richard responded, swatting his arm in the direction of the now retreating inmate. “Bitch niggas don’t need to use phones. They snitch too much.” He sat back down and picked up the receiver again and ignored Ms. Jackson’s continued stare. “Ay baby.”

“Richy, what you doing?” She’d heard most of the conversation, but some of it was muffled. What she had heard sounded like arguing.

“Pffft. Some bitch ass nigga tried to get my phone,” Richard replied.

“Baby, you done been chilling for like three months not getting in trouble. So just let that bitch go.” Her voice practically pleaded with him. Trouble could mean more time in jail. More time in jail would mean not seeing him even longer. “Fuck him. He ain’t got the phone.”

Richard shook his head, “Baby girl, I ain’t no bitch and ain’t never gone be one. I let it go,” he said, reassuring her that

he would try to avoid any trouble, as long as it didn't compromise his reputation. He raised his voice so the other inmate could hear the last part of his reply. "But I catch this nigga on the phone anytime, I'm gone give him the business like he 'pose to got today."

"Ay, fam." Bam walked by Richard again, lightly smacking him on the shoulder. "I'm 'bout to go chill on my bunk. It's 'bout to be count time in five minutes."

"Yeah, five minutes 'til count down," Ms. Jackson said, finally walking away from Richard. "You might as well do the same thing."

Richard watched Ms. Jackson walk away. Even in her black uniform slacks, Richard could see her ass bouncing tightly under the fabric. He raised an eyebrow as he spoke into the receiver. "Baby girl, it's 'bout to be count time in five minutes. I'm gone call you back later, a'ight?"

Skinny could hear the lust in Richard's voice as he spoke. "That hoe better let you fuck," she said, smiling as she thought about how sexy the officer must be to have caught Richard's attention. "Then you can send her my way so I can get some head."

"Baby girl, you know I don't want nothing if you don't turn them out first," Richard replied. "I'm gone just give her the number. You holla at her before I even turn her out myself. How 'bout that?"

Skinny grinned on the other end of the line. "That sound more like it." The area between her legs tingling with excitement. "And call me back later, cause when I get out the shower, I'm going back to sleep." Between the orgasm and last night's adventure, she was exhausted.

"A'ight, I love you, baby girl," Richard replied.

"Love you more than you know, daddy. Talk to you later." She flipped her phone shut and headed back over to her dresser



to place it back on the charger, but just before placing it down, it started vibrating in her hand. Checking the caller ID display, she decided she should probably answer it. Flipping it open, she raised the receiver up to her ear. “Hello?”

“Ma, you seen the news?” Lil’ B asked on the other end.

“No.”

“Cut the T.V. on and watch channel seven until it come back on.” Without even waiting for a response, he flipped the phone shut.

“Boy!” Skinny said, using the walkie talkie feature on her phone. “You don’t hang no phone up on me, a’ight?” Turning her phone off, she set it back on the charger, walked over to the television and turned it on to channel seven. Immediately, the voice of a reporter filled the room.

“We are still here at the Twelfth Avenue bridge where the firefighters have just extinguished the flames from a blue Infinity. We’ve just received word that this same vehicle was

connected to one of the victims in a double homicide at the King's hotel on Sixty-Second Street and Biscayne Boulevard. We're going to take you live to that scene now. Rob?"

The charred truck, firefighters and female reporter were replaced by a man holding a microphone standing outside of the King's Hotel. Behind the reporter, Skinny could see yellow evidence tape, warning others not to enter the area. Scrolling words at the bottom of the screen read, "Double homicide and blazing truck connected. Please call Miami Dade Crime Stoppers if you have any information..."

"Yes, Nikki. Investigators now say that the truck belonged to one of the two victims of this brutal murder. No witnesses have come forward with a description, but some have said that they did hear gunshots around 3:47 this morning. While both victims had money in their possession, as well as other valuables, the murderer left those items untouched, so police say that this doesn't appear to be a robbery. However, they are not ruling anything out at this time."

A close-up of the charred truck came back on and the woman reporter stood on the right side of the camera shot. “Thanks, Rob. If you have any information regarding either of these crimes, you are encouraged to contact the Miami Dad Crime Stoppers. This is Nikki Turner, reporting to you live, from Channel 7 News.”

Turning the television back off, Skinny thought aloud. “Damn, that was easy.” Satisfied with her work, she walked towards the bathroom to take her shower.

Inside the commons area of the jail, Richard sat watching the news with Bam. “Damn. I know that nigga,” Richard said, more to himself than Bam.

A little skeptical, Bam asked, “How you know who that is if the police don’t know yet?”

“Remember what I told you ‘bout names?”

“Yeah,” Bam nodded his head, recalling the conversation.

“Well, check this out. Me and my niggas call him White Boy. That blue Infinity,” Richard pointed to the television screen. “That nigga ain’t letting nobody hold that. Plus, he like tricking with the strippers. So from what the news telling me, it’s him.”

“Fam? You sure you twenty years old?”

“Yeah, nigga. What you talking ‘bout?” Richard raised an eyebrow.

“Man, if I know half the shit you know, I would probably be set up in the G.A. making a killing right now,” Bam replied with a grin.

“It ain’t what you know. It’s who you know.” Richard turned away from the television. “Always remember that, Fool.”

## ***Chapter 14***

Skinny smacked her hand down on the obtrusive device ringing by her head. Once her fingers grasped it, she slowly flipped it open and pulled it up to her ear without even bothering to look at the caller ID. Expecting it to be Richard, she answered, “Hey baby.” But she then realized that she hadn’t heard the operators voice asking her to accept a collect call.

“Um...hello? Is this Skinny?” a female voice asked on the other end of the line.

Sitting up in bed, intrigued by the voice, Skinny answered, “Yeah, this is me. Who this?”

“Yo’ boy Rich Kid told me told me that you wanted me to call you,” answered Ms. Jackson.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Skinny said. ”Now I know who this is,” smiling. “So what’s good with you?”

“What you mean by that?”

“What I mean is,” Skinny lowered her voice to a seductive purr. “I want you to bite me and I’ll return the favor.”

Intrigued by Skinny’s proposition but also shocked by her forwardness, Ms. Jackson fought the urge to hang up the phone. “I don’t know.” She paused for a moment. “I ain’t never done nothing like that before.”

Skinny knew it was time to go in for the kill. If she was still on the phone, she was interested. Nervous, but interested. “I tell you what, you give me the chance to get you right and I put my money up that you’ll see it my way.”

“I don’t know,” Ms. Jackson replied. “I don’t want to be gay.” The last word left a bad taste in her mouth. Yet, despite her inhibitions and internal protest, she couldn’t deny the moistening between her legs.

Skinny read behind the rejection and laid out the bait. “I got one question for you. I want you. I want you to be real, so don’t lie, a’ight?”

“What’s that?”

“I want you to tell me if your pussy wet just by talking to me,” Skinny asked.

Ms. Jackson felt the heat rising from between her legs all the way up to her cheeks now. Unsure of whether or not the

flushed feeling was from embarrassment or desire, she answered hesitantly, “Well...”

“Just tell the truth. If you say no, I’ll let you go, no hard feelings,” Skinny said, cutting Ms. Jackson off.

“I’m gone tell you,” Ms. Jackson answered, but she still hesitated a moment before giving her answer. “Yes, I got a flood going through my panties.” The last part of her response quickly spilled out of her mouth. She felt like a high school girl getting ready to have sex her first time. Suddenly realizing that she hadn’t heard a response from Skinny, she asked nervously, “I said it. Now what?”

“Now we meet,” Skinny answered plainly. “It ain’t got to go down the first time we meet though.” Already knowing that Ms. Jackson was probably a little on edge, Skinny wanted to put her at ease a little. “We can get to know each other,” she added.



“You mean, like a date?” Ms. Jackson sounded uncertain, whether it was of herself or of Skinny’s response, Skinny couldn’t tell for certain.

“Yeah,” Skinny answered, nodding her head as she spoke. “You can say that.”

Before she could even reason her response, Ms. Jackson blurted out, “When we gone meet?” With the words now out of her mouth, they felt right. In fact, the whole situation felt right, minus the growing pit of nervousness in her gut.

“What you gone be doing...?” A beeping sounded in Skinny’s ear, stopping her in mid-sentence. Pulling the phone away from her ear, she noticed it was E calling in on the other line. “Hold on,” she told Ms. Jackson. “That’s my brother on the other line. Let me see what he wants.” Clicking the call over, Skinny answered, “Wuz good, bro?”

“Ain’t too much. Just calling to see if you want to go to the club with us tonight,” E replied. Skinny could hear music thumping in the background.

“Yeah, I’ll go,” she replied, already standing in her closet trying to decide what to wear. “Where we going?”

“I don’t even know yet,” E laughed on the other end of the line.

“A’ight. Do that then. I got somebody on the other line waiting.” Suddenly, Skinny realized that tonight would be the perfect time to start Ms. Jackson’s breaking in process. “Matter fact, I’m gone bring her with me.”

“A’ight, a’ight,” E replied. “I’m gone let you get back to the other line. Stay up.”

Clicking back over to the other line, Skinny asked, “Ms. Lady, you still there?”

“Yes, I’m here.” Ms. Jackson realized that she was actually excited to hear Skinny’s voice again. That excitement bled through into her voice.

“You sound happy.”

“Well...maybe I am,” Ms. Jackson smiled on the other end of the line. “So when we gone meet?”

Hearing Ms. Jackson’s response, Skinny grinned. She rarely ever guessed wrong and Ms. Jackson was as curious as they came, but you always had to act fast with the “virgins.” Time gave way to logic and logic gave way to back-pedaling. Tonight would be the perfect time to meet up. “You got to work tomorrow?” Skinny asked.

“Wait...” Ms. Jackson suddenly became so nervous that she almost dropped her phone. “I thought you said we ain’t got to do it the first time.”

“It ain’t like that, lil’ mama,” Skinny soothed. “I was gone take you to the club with us tonight.”

Ms. Jackson's pitch lifted in a defensive question. "And who is us? I told you I ain't gay, so I ain't hanging out with a clique."

"It ain't like that," Skinny chuckled. "I'm gone go with Rich Kid's lil' brother and son and them."

"Hold up." Ms. Jackson suddenly realized that she knew very little about Richard and Skinny, but she knew that it was impossible for either of them to have a son old enough to go to a club. They weren't much older than she was. She started to wonder what she was getting herself into. "What you mean Rich Kid's son?"

Laughing in Ms. Jackson's ear, Skinny replied, "Don't think like that. It's just a young nigga that he adopted from the streets."

"A'ight, but I ain't going to no teen club," Ms. Jackson replied.

Skinny smiled to herself. "I'm glad you think like that. I just hope you ain't got to work tomorrow, 'cause you ain't gone make it."

"I don't," she replied, a little less nervous now that Skinny had explained everything. "I can be ready at ten. You got my number?"

"Yeah, I got your number," Skinny answered. "But I still aint' got your name."

"Shakita, but everybody call me Kita."

"A'ight Kita, I'll see ya' at ten." Skinny enjoyed the way Kita's name rolled off her tongue.

"Okay, bye," Kita responded, ready to hang up so that she could start deciding what to wear.

"Oh, Kita?"

"Yeah?"

“Just so you know, it’s against the rules of our family to tell each other bye,” Skinny explained. “It’s see you later.”

“A’ight.” She wasn’t sure what it really mattered, but figured it must have been important if Skinny had thought it was worth explaining. “See you later then.”

“Yeah, see you later.”

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Before pulling out of her driveway, Skinny searched for Kita’s number. Finding it, she pressed the dial button. It only took two rings for someone to answer. “Hello? May I speak with Kita?” Skinny asked the voice on the other end.

Kita giggled. “This me. Why you asked like that?”

“Cause I don’t know who you stay with,” Skinny answered, matter-of-factly.

“Oh. Well, I stay by myself.”

“Okay Miss I-stay-by-myself,” Skinny joked, putting the car into drive and pulling towards the front of her driveway. “You ready?”

Kita answered Skinny with a loud sigh. “No, ‘cause I don’t know where we’re going so I don’t know what to put on.”

“Just tell me what you got out,” Skinny replied, putting the car back in park.

Kita gave Skinny a run-down of the three outfits she’d pulled out earlier. Skinny immediately chose the Roca-Wear jean skirt set. “Where you want me to pick you up at?” Skinny asked, ready to get on the road now that the outfit issue was out of the way.

Wriggling into her skirt, Kita asked, “Can I trust you to pick me up at my house?”

Skinny laughed. “Yeah, you can trust me. I ain’t no stalker. Believe that.”

“A’ight then, you know them apartments on Sixth Ave and Fifty-Eight Street?” Kita asked.

“Yeah, I know where that’s at,” Skinny said, pulling the car out of the driveway, turning right. “I’ll call you back when I get there.”

“Why you can’t talk to me on the way over here?” Kita pouted.

“Cause she talking to me right now,” interrupted a deep male voice.

Shocked to hear another voice on the line, Kita’s breath caught in her throat for a moment. “Who that is that, Skinny?” she asked, finally finding her voice again.



“That my boy Rich Kid,” Skinny laughed. “Who else you think that is?”

“Baby girl ain’t doing nothing without my say, Ms. Jackson,” Richard said, making things clear, right from the start.

Kita’s eyes bounced around her apartment as if she were looking for someone listening. “Boy!” she hissed loudly, cupping her hand around the phone receiver. “You better stop saying my name on that phone! You know they be recording on them jail house phones.”

“Well, hang up then so I can get done talking to my girl,” Richard chuckled. He understood that being a correction officer was her job, but could she really get in trouble for talking the inmates or was she just being paranoid?

“A’ight. See you later,” Kita replied before flipping her cell phone shut.

After hearing the other line click, Richard asked, “Baby girl, she hung the phone up?”

“Yeah,” Skinny answered, pulling onto the I-95S on-ramp. “I hope she bad like you say she is, ‘cause I want them niggas to go crazy over her.”

Smiling to himself, Richard answered, “She is baby girl. You’ll see.”

Skinny and Richard talked nearly all the way to Kita’s apartment building. As she pulled up to the light just before the last turn, the operator came on to notify them that they had one minute left on their phone call.

“Baby girl, talk to you later,” Richard said, a hint of sadness in his voice. “Y’all have a good time.”

“A’ight baby.” She steered the Charger into the parking lot of Kita’s apartment. “I love you more than you know. Talk to you later.” After pushing the end button, a loud sigh escaped Skinny’s lips. She knew the reason for Richard’s sad tone. She

knew because it was the same reason she was sad. Things just didn't feel the same without him there. She missed him so much.

After taking a minute to regain her composure, Skinny opened her phone again and called Kita. "You got here fast!" Kita replied.

"Well, I was gone go get my brother first, but you was right here on my way to the house," Skinny answered. Through her rearview mirror, she watched the metal gate that, as far as Skinny could tell, led to the inner portion of the yellow and red apartment complex. She then turned and scanned the parking lot. She didn't see anyone wearing the agreed upon outfit, so she assumed that Kita must still be inside.

Kita leaned against one of the apartment complex's inner walls, just behind the red metal gate. Encompassed by the shadows of the inner portion of her complex, she knew Skinny couldn't see her. "Well, what you driving? I don't want to be looking crazy coming out the lobby."

“I’m in the red Daytona Charger,” Skinny answered, finally seeing someone come through the gates – someone that she hoped was Kita.

“I see you. I’m coming.” Kita flipped her phone shut and headed straight towards the Charger.

Skinny watched every sexy step Kita took. Her Coke bottle figure swayed gently left to right as she walked. Not a man alive (or woman in Skinny’s case) could avoid lusting after that. *Damn! If ‘bad bitch’ were in the dictionary, her picture would be next to it. She prolly robbed ten bad ass bitches for those looks!*

Skinny bit the inside of her cheek a moment to conceal the grin that was trying to blow her cool and casual approach. “Wuz good, Kita. I see you came looking your best.”

“I see you look good to,” Kita replied, giving Skinny a quick look-over.

Smiling slyly, Skinny put the car into drive. “We gone slide by bro them house to see where we going first. Then we out.”

“If they done been through the jail, I hope they don’t remember me,” Kita said nervously, looking out the passenger side window.

“Don’t worry ‘bout that,” Skinny replied, “If they do, they ain’t gone say shit.” *If they do, they gone get some what John got.*

## ***Chapter 15***

“Wuz good, Lil’ one?” Skinny asked as she swung out of the driver’s seat and headed towards the front of E’s apartment building.

“Wuz good, ma?”

Skinny searched around the yard, but E wasn’t anywhere to be found. “Where E at?” she asked.

Lil' B motioned over to the apartment. "He inside counting money I just brought from the trap."

Skinny nodded in understanding. "You know where we going yet?"

"Naw, why?"

"I got the officer that work in yo' Paw's cell in the mornings to go out with us," Skinny answered, grinning and nodding.

Lil' B figured that Skinny and Richard must be up to something, but he had a hard time believing that one of the correction officers actually wanted to accompany their group. "Which one?" he asked.

"This bad ass bitch named Kita," Skinny's smile grew wider. "They call her Ms. Jackson at the jailhouse."

Knowing that Richard and Skinny both had good taste, Lil' B couldn't wait to see what Kita looked like. "Tell her to get out the car Ma," Lil' B said, smiling.

"A'ight, hold up." Skinny walked back towards the car and opened up the passenger side door. "Kita, get out the car. My son wants to meet you."

Sliding out of the car, Kita stood on the sidewalk and looked around for a young child, but saw a man not much younger than her. She glanced over at Skinny, quizzically. "Okay, but where he at?"

"Who I was just talking to." Skinny pointed towards Lil' B. "That's the one I was telling you 'bout."

Kita looked at Skinny in disbelief. "That ain't no boy," she whispered, eyes wide, as if she were telling Skinny a secret that no one else knew. "That's a man."



Skinny laughed and started walking forward expecting Kita to follow. Right on cue, Kita followed behind, looking hesitantly at Lil' B.

Kita, Ms. Jackson, really was a bad ass bitch. He could just imagine those round curves in between his hands as he pounded her from behind. "Wuz good lil' mamma?" he asked, his voice low and seductive. Of course, he already knew that Kita was off limits, but looking and fantasizing until she became a full-fledged member of The Family couldn't hurt.

"I'm good. How 'bout you?" Kita asked. Despite the fact that Lil' B was practically undressing her with his eyes, and despite the fact that she barely knew any of these people, she realized that she felt strangely safe with them.

"So I'm gone tell you straight up, my ol' boy..."

"Hold up, who is your ol' boy?" Kita asked, interrupting Lil' B.

"Rich Kid, you know? Richard Gary," Lil' B chuckled.

Kita placed her hands on her voluptuous hips and turned her head to the side in thought. This just didn't make any sense to her. "How is that your daddy and you look like you're a grown man yourself?"

Lil' B shook his head. "Let's just say, it's a long story. But Rich Kid adopted me when I ain't had nobody." There'd be plenty of time for catching up, later.

Skinny laughed and redirected Kita's line of questioning. "Kita, you ask too many questions." She wrapped her arm around Kita's waist.

Kita looked around, embarrassed and nervous. "I'm gone go sit in the car, a'ight?"

Kita started to turn towards the car to walk away, but Skinny was already ahead of her. Slightly tightening her grasp around Kita's waist, she pulled Kita forward, moving her in the direction of the E's apartment. At just that moment, E came walking down the stairs, holding an AK47. "Hold up," Skinny

said, pointing in E's direction. "You got one more person to meet."

Kita peered at E nervously. Her heart raced. "What he doing?" she asked. She turned her head slightly to address Skinny, but never fully took her gaze off of the large gun in E's hand.

"Nephew!" E yelled as he stepped down from the last step onto the ground. "Get off the trunk so I can put this shit in!"

Lil' B swatted E's comment away. "Just put that shit in the back seat." His butt remained firmly planted on the trunk of the car.

Almost missing Kita altogether, E did a double take passing her and Skinny. The new face suddenly registered and he took a few steps backwards. Pursing his lips, E shot Skinny a silent question. *Who the new eye candy?*

"Bro," Skinny said, smiling as she hugged Kita's hips a little tighter. "This is Kita. Kita, this is E."

E smiled politely, “Wuz good, Kita?” He couldn’t help but notice how nervous she looked with her eyes darting back and forth between him and the gun in his hands. Then suddenly, her eyes dropped to the ground and she took off at the speed of lightening, calling, “I’m going to the car,” over her shoulder. E watched her speed walk to the car and climb in before turning to Skinny. “Wuz good, lil’ mamma?” his tone questioning.

“She probably ain’t use to being around people like us,” Lil’ B piped up from behind them.

“Whatever, Lil’ one.” Skinny rolled her eyes. Richard never would have sent Kita to them if he’d had any doubt that she could handle all of this. Sure, she needed some breaking in, but the effort would be worth it. “Where we going?” Skinny asked, turning her attention back to E.

“I was thinking Coco’s,” E answered and then shrugged. “Or the Rolex one.”

“I’ll follow you,” Skinny replied, already walking back towards the charger. Climbing in the driver’s seat, she turned the key in the ignition then glanced over at Kita to see how she was doing. “You act like you ain’t never seen that big ass gun he had.” Skinny looked on as Kita continued to watch E through the passenger window.

Kita’s heart was still beating wildly in her chest as she watched E place the gun in the back of the car. She held her arms over her chest tightly as if she were cold. “Skinny, I ain’t never saw one of those in real life, only in the movies.” She watched as E placed another gun in the back of the car. Without taking her eyes off of him, she asked, “What’s that he putting in there now?”

“That’s what you call a hundred round drum,” Skinny answered matter-of-factly.

Kita finally turned her gaze towards Skinny. Her eyes were glazed with fear. Her face was at least five shades paler than it should be. “And what they going to do with that?” She was

now biting her lip, using the pain to keep her from screaming at Skinny. “I thought we was going to the club, not a shootout.”

“Calm down,” Skinny said, expression stone. “It’s just for our safety. It’s better to be prepared then get caught slipping.” Skinny started to wonder if breaking Kita in was going to be harder than she had originally thought, but just as the thought formed in her mind, Kita started to look as though she was starting to relax a little.

“Skinny, I don’t know why, but I trust you,” Kita said, turning and giving Skinny a small smile. “So please don’t let nothing happen to me tonight.”

Skinny returned the smile, satisfied with Kita’s response. “Kita, I got you. Now give me a kiss.” Skinny leaned over the console towards Kita a little.

Kita’s heart raced again, only this time, it was a different fear. She could feel her hands shaking and hoped that Skinny couldn’t see it. Hesitantly, she leaned over towards Skinny. As

she slowly neared Skinny's lips, Kita's own lips started to quiver – with fear or anticipation, she wasn't sure which. Finally making contact, Kita closed her eyes and concentrated on breathing. She blanked out the fact that she was kissing a woman at first, but then Skinny touched the side of her face and pulled Kita in further. Skinny's soft hands forced Kita's eyes wide open. Skinny was staring right back at her.

Out of nowhere, yet somewhere deep inside, a tingling sensation started to ignite between her legs. Kita leaned in further and allowed Skinny's tongue into her mouth. The soft, warm caressing of Skinny's tongue sent her into overdrive. She was now thrusting her own tongue into Skinny's mouth, hungrily, but Skinny slowed the kiss down and started pulling gently on Kita's lower lip, so Kita stopped moving and just enjoyed the feeling. Closing her eyes, she breathed in Skinny's scent. And then the kiss suddenly stopped.

Slowly, Kita opened her eyes. Skinny's nose was still just inches away. "And what was that for?" Kita asked, trying to

slow her breathing, fighting the urge to pull Skinny's mouth back to hers.

“That was to tie you into The Family.” Skinny smiled and sat back in her seat. “Now roll down the window and call your brother E over there.”

“You serious?” Kita asked, her face crumpled in disbelief.

“You think I'm playing?” Skinny's brow furrowed and her lips thinned as she waited for Kita to follow direction. Watching Kita reluctantly roll the passenger side window down, Skinny added, “And tell Lil' B he yo' nephew now, so stop calling you lil' mamma.”

Kita turned her head back towards Skinny for a moment, looking for a change in expression, but there wasn't one. Kita really had meant what she said; she did feel safe around Skinny, and her fear of E had diminished some, but now she was a little afraid that she might have hurt his feelings. Finally, admitting defeat, Kita yelled out the window, “Ay bro, come



here.” Her voice wavered, making her statement sound more like a question.

E looked up to see who had called his name. It hadn't sounded like Skinny. Seeing it was Kita, he turned to Lil' B. Quickly, Lil' B gave E the run down, letting him know who Kita was and how it might benefit them. Finally realizing that there was a plan behind inviting Kita into The Family, E walked towards the red Charger. “Wuz good, Sis.” E smiled at her warmly, officially welcoming her to the family.

“I..uh..I didn't mean to walk off on you like that.” Kita looked down at her hands, a little ashamed at how she'd behaved earlier. “I just ain't never been round guns like that.” Suddenly, she lifted her gaze back to E's face, her eyes pleaded for forgiveness and understanding. “I'll come around eventually, trust me.”

E looked past Kita at Skinny, a shocked look on his face. “You told her to say that, Sis?”

Skinny shook her head, “I ain’t told her to say shit.” A prideful smile crossed her lips. “I don’t know where that came from.”

E shrugged. “It don’t matter. She family now. I know she cool if Rich Kid trust her round us.” After giving Kita one last courteous smile, he turned and walked away.

*Skinny was right!* Kita thought to herself. Seeing Lil’ B out in the yard, Kita put the next part of Skinny’s command into play. “And, Lil’ B!” Kita yelled out the window. “Stop calling me lil’ mamma ‘cause you my nephew.”

“I got you, Auntie,” Lil’ B replied, smiling and nodding in Kita’s direction. “Say no more.”

## ***Chapter 16***

Even before they had reached Rolex, Skinny could tell that they were going to have to pay for parking. The place was packed. After having E pull to the side so she could lead the group, she pulled up beside the club's head bouncer and rolled down her passenger side window. "Ay Red!"

The tall muscular bouncer named Red turned to the sound of his name and peered into the car it had come from. He

recognized Skinny immediately. “Skinny! What’s good girl? Where your man?”

“He out of town,” Skinny lied, adding, “You gone get us somewhere to park?” She asked as she pointed towards the parking lot.

“I know he locked up,” Red replied, shaking his head and ignoring her question. “It’s the word on the street.”

Skinny’s brow creased as she leaned further into the passenger seat. Her head was now parallel with Kita’s breasts. “How the streets know ‘bout that?” she asked.

“Don’t worry ‘bout it. I got three parking spots right here for y’all three.” Red pointed towards the spaces as he spoke.

Skinny dug some money out of her purse and tried to hand it over to Red, but he held his hands up in protest. “It’s on the house ‘cause you know Rich Kid showed me love when he was out here.” Red smiled and then turned to move the orange and white construction cones that separated the street from the

parking lot. Once moved, Red waved Skinny into the lot, using his hands to tell her to pull forward.

Kita had silently sat by and watched the whole conversation. At the exact moment that Red had said “on the house,” Kita’s jaw had dropped in shock and the expression had stayed there until Skinny had finished pulling into one of the open spots. Now she turned to Skinny; her jaw was now closed, but her eyes were still wide with amazement. “Damn...a lot of mother fuckers know y’all. Do everybody treat y’all like this?”

Not really understanding what Kita was so shocked about, Skinny turned and answered, “Just me, Rich Kid, Lil’ B and E...why?”

“Cause when I came here last time, they made us park at Walgreen’s across the street.” Kita’s expression reflected the disgust she had felt that night having to walk so far just to get to the club.

“Well,” Skinny smiled. “I’m gone let him know you part of The Family, so you ain’t got to worry ‘bout that no more.”

Kita watched Skinny fish under the driver’s seat for something, her mouth twisting into a look of concentration as she searched for whatever it was she was trying to retrieve. A satisfied smile crossed her lips as she started to sit up, a colt 45 in each of her hands. Again, Kita’s mouth hung open in shock. She wondered if there were more guns under the seat. She also wondered how everyone could just drive around with guns in their cars without considering the consequences. “What if we would have got pulled over?” Kita asked, pointing to the guns.

Dismissing Kita’s question as naïve, Skinny nodded her head in the direction of Lil’ B and E. “Lil One would have made them turn around with the hundred pound drum. “Her tone matter-of-factly, but there was an edge of irritation starting to creep up. Skinny wasn’t used to answering so many questions.

“What about the tag numbers?”

Skinny rolled her eyes. “These rentals. Just report them stolen and have more cars in the morning or we can just lose them in a chase. These cars go damn near two hundred twenty miles an hour.” Done answering questions, Skinny shoved the driver’s side door open and swung her legs out.

Kita climbed out of the passenger side, but hadn’t picked up on Skinny’s irritation at answering questions. “They gone let you in there with them?” she asked, pointing at Skinny’s purse, where she’d tossed the guns.

Skinny stopped, turned around and marched back where Kita stood, about eight steps behind. “What I told you’ bout all them questions?” Skinny asked, the irritation in her voice now palpable.

Kita looked down at the ground. “I-I just want to know.”

Feeling a little bad for being so hard on Kita, Skinny placed her hand on Kita’s shoulder and guided her towards the door of the club. “Well,” she whispered in Kita’s ear. “This is what I

want you to do. I want you to just watch everything and how it goes down. Then you won't have to ask no questions." Kita nodded in understanding as Skinny continued. "Don't make it obvious though, cause you don't want the haters to think you slipping."

Skinny had finished the explanation just as they had reached the front of the club. Kita replied, "I got you. I can do that." She smiled at Skinny, hoping that all of her questions hadn't been too much of a bother.

Certain that she was now free of all the annoying questions, Skinny turned to where Red stood, still guarding the parking lot entry. "Ay Red! Let me holla at you before we go in the club."

Without a word, Ron walked towards Skinny and Kita. Only when he'd reached where the girls were standing did he say "Wuz good, Skinny?"



“Check this out,” Skinny wrapped her arm around Kita and pulled her into the small group as she spoke. “You see her? This here my girl ‘til my boy come home. If she come up here with her lil’ friends, do her right. She family.”

Red nodded in understanding, smiled, and walked away as Kita and Skinny made their way back towards the club doors. Just as they were getting ready to walk in, Skinny heard a familiar voice calling her name.

“Ay Skinny!” Skinny spun around to face a grinning Ron. “How much y’all pay for them Daytona’s?” he asked, pointing back towards the Charger.

Skinny grinned back. “Wuz good, Ron?”

Ron suddenly noticed the new face standing next to Skinny. “Who this with you?” he asked, his gaze sweeping over Kita’s curves.

“I’m Skinny’s wife and Rich Kid’s wife,” Kita blurted without thinking. “We just got married tonight.” She smiled

shyly and dropped her gaze to the ground. She wondered where that outburst had come from.

Skinny noticed the disappointed look on Ron's face as he said "Oh, ok. So you family then."

Lil' B and E had finally made their way up to the door. Knowing how Ron could talk, Lil' B came up to the crowd, set on getting them through the front doors. He was ready to play with some strippers already. "Yeah, yeah, yeah," he said, smiling and using his hands to motion them forward.

As Ron pulled the door open for everyone to enter, Alicia stepped out of the exit door. They would have missed her completely if Lil' B hadn't turned to watch another hottie coming out of the exit just before Alicia.

"Ay Auntie!" Lil' B hollered over, smiling. "I know you ain't leaving!"

"I ain't going nowhere," Alicia said, stepping out into the cool night air. She walked over and gave Skinny a hug, then

moved on to Lil' B. "I'm going to get some fresh air. I'll be back in in a few."

"A'ight," said E, leaning over for his hug from Alicia. "We gone be in the V.I.P., Sis."

Alicia nodded her head as she spoke, "Okay, I'm coming back in like five minutes."

Ron, Skinny, Kita, E and Lil' B all headed into the club and requested three tables in the V.I.P. section. As they headed back, one of Lil' B's favorite songs came on and he bopped his head to the music, leading the group to the back of the club, looking the honeys up and down as the crowd parted to let them all pass.

The music pulsated through their bodies, the flashing lights added excitement to the atmosphere. Bodies gyrated throughout the club, some of them strippers, some of them patrons. It was a busy night.

“What y’all want to drink?” Skinny asked as they took their seats.

While everyone ordered their drinks, Kita leaned over and whispered in Skinny’s ear. “I feel new, baby.” Kita’s caramel complexion looked even more enticing under the neon lights.

Patting Kita’s shoulder lovingly, Skinny smiled. “I know baby. Just stunt on these hoes.” She pointed to the girls now crowding around Lil’ B’s table. “That’s what this family do.”

“Here’s your drinks,” the waitress said, placing a bottle down in front of each of them. Kita watched Lil’ B carefully and finally decided that there was only one way to figure all of this out: dive right in.

“I’m gone chill with my nephew,” Kita said as she stood up. “I know them hoes off the chain.” Something about the club – the pheromones rising in the air, the dancing lights or music that vibrated through every bone – she couldn’t be sure

which, had ignited something in her that she'd never known was there before now.

Skinny smiled and stood as well. "Go head. I got to go to the bathroom." Before leaving the V.I.P. section, Skinny shot a look back at Kita. She seemed to be doing much better after their little talk. Breaking in was hard, but Kita had what it took, of that, Skinny was certain. Seeing her, right now, only solidified that confidence.

Walking down the hall that led to the bathrooms, Skinny heard a commotion coming from the women's restroom. "Look here! You hoes let me get out this bathroom or its gone be on!" *Funny, that voice sound a lot like Alicia's...*

Skinny's eyes rested on three girls crowded into the far corner of the restroom. They had their backs to her. Inside their little circle was another female, but Skinny couldn't see the face around the heads of the small crowd.

“Wuz up?” Skinny asked, standing directly behind the three girls. They turned away from the person they were crowding around, but still kept her hidden behind them. Looks ranging from anger to confusion and shock flooded each of their faces.

If it hadn't sounded like Alicia yelling a few moments ago, Skinny probably would have minded her own business, but she was certain that it had been Alicia. Her suspicions were quickly confirmed as Alicia poked her head around the girls to catch a glimpse of Skinny's face. A loud laugh of relief escaped Alicia's throat as she threw her head back. “Sis, these' hoes trying to jump me.”

Calmly and without a word, Skinny reached into her purse and pulled out the two colt 45s . She aimed each one at one of the girls in the group. “Y'all hoes get naked,” she said as an evil grin pulled at the corners of her mouth.

All three of the girls reacted in fear and shock. One pulled her hands up over her face, as if she could will Skinny and her guns to disappear. Another bounced her eyes wildly around the

restroom, no doubt looking for help. The third jumped behind the second, looking as if she would cry. “Please don’t shoot us,” she whimpered, hanging onto the shoulders of the girl in front of her.

Skinny’s nose wrinkled in disgust. “I ain’t trying to hear that shit!” She lifted the gun in her right hand in an upward motion and brought it back down, as if she were nudging the girls. “Now get like God sent you into the world.”

Out of nowhere, Alicia brought her right fist across the side of the whimpering girl’s head. “You heard what she said, bitch!”

Quickly, the girls started stripping down to nothing but bras, underwear and shoes. “Y’all done fucked with the wrong person tonight,” Skinny said, shaking her head. “Take it all off.” She waved the gun again.

“And give me them heels,” Alicia said, shoving one of the girls right out of her shoes, smiling with gratification at the way her situation had turned around in her favor.

With all three girls completely naked, Skinny stepped to the side, unblocking the exit to the bathroom. “Now get the fuck out,” she said, using the gun in her left hand to direct them out the door.

Trying to cover their breasts with one hand and their crotches with the others, the girls ran out of the restroom. Skinny and Alicia followed them to the end of the hall and laughed as they watched the three women run out of the club completely naked.

With their entertainment now over, Skinny turned to Alicia and said, “Come on, Sis,” as she led the way back to the V.I.P. room.

Kita had watched the three naked, crying girls leave the club and then noticed that clothing in Skinny and Alicia’s



hands as they walked into the V.I.P. room. “What was that all about?” Kita asked, putting two and two together as glanced towards the exit that the three women had run out of, just moments before.

“Just some hating ass hoes,” Skinny answered nonchalantly. Alicia shot Skinny a questioning look, wondering who the new girl was. “Oh! This here’s your sister, Kita,” Skinny said, answering Alicia’s unspoken question before turning to Kita and saying, “This here’s your sister, Alicia.”

“How she my sister?” Alicia asked.

“It’s going to show in some time,” Skinny answered, smiling.

Shrugging, Alicia extended her hand out to Kita. “Well, nice to meet you then,” she said, smiling.

Tossing the clothes onto the ground next to their booth, Skinny and Alicia sat down and enjoyed the party. They had so much fun that four o' clock in the morning came quickly.

Stretching a little, Skinny looked over at Alicia. "Sis, how you getting home?"

"I told my friends to leave 'bout an hour ago, so I guess you taking me 'cause they got my car," Alicia answered with a yawn.

"A'ight then. We bout to leave," Skinny said before standing up and walking over to where Lil' B sat, enjoying the company of two scantily clad strippers. Placing her hand on Lil' B's shoulder, Skinny leaned down and spoke into his ear. "Lil' one, y'all go make sure everything straight outside before we leave."

Lil' B nodded his head in agreement, "A'ight ma," he answered, shooing the women away with his hands. With disappointed looks on their faces, the girls headed back out into

the club. Standing up, he called over to Maybay and Ham.  
“Let’s go y’all!”

The guys headed out to the parking lot and did a quick scan. Seeing no one, Lil’ B hopped into his Charger and turned it around so it was facing the street. Seeing no one worth worrying about, the men headed back inside to fetch the women, but they had missed the car sitting across the street in the Walgreen’s parking lot.

“They made me get naked and walk out the club baby,” sobbed the whining girl from the group of women who’d tried to jump Alicia.

Her boyfriend looked over at her naked, shivering body and stroked her cheek softly with his thumb. “Don’t worry ‘bout it, baby. I’m gone handle this shit right here tonight, so stop crying.” He turned his gaze back towards the front door of the club. “They gone pay.” But he had missed Lil’ B’s trip to the Charger’s trunk.

“You had fun, Wild Kat?” Skinny asked as she, Kita and Alicia walked through the club doors out into the parking lot.

Kita wrinkled her nose at the nickname. She wasn’t so certain she liked it, but a smile quickly came to her lips as she answered Skinny’s question. “Hell yeah! I had a ball! But why I...”

“Ma! Get down!” Lil’ B yelled, shoving Skinny, Alicia and Kita to the ground. He had been the first to see two men walking across Twenty-Seventh Ave, guns raised and ready.

“What’s up now, pussy ass hoe!” the man yelled as he pulled the trigger, sending the first line of shots in The Family’s direction.

Shots from Lil’ B’s AK47 rang above the women’s heads. Lil’ B stood and took both men down with one round. One of them died instantly, but the other wriggled on the ground, clenching his gushing side. He looked up to find Maybay

looming over him, the barrel of a Mack 11 staring him in the face.

“Still breathing, nigga?” Maybay asked.

“Please....”

Maybay aimed the gun directly in the man’s face, pulled the trigger and watched the brains of the begging man fly across the street. “Face off, mother fucker,” he said as he delivered on last kick to the now dead body.

As everyone ran towards the Chargers, Red came through the club doors into the lot yelling Skinny’s name. “Take this!” he said, tossing the security camera tape to her.

“Come on y’all! Load up,” Skinny yelled, throwing the driver’s side door open to climb in. “Let’s hit it!” she yelled, just before slamming the door shut. She shoved the key into the ignition and the engine roared to life. Slamming the car into reverse, she backed out, leaving a cloud of burnt rubber behind.

“Baby, I’m scared,” Kita cried as she watched Skinny toss the security tape under the driver’s seat with one hand while driving with the other. “I ain’t never been in a shootout before.”

“Calm down, Kat,” Skinny said, placing her hand on Kita’s arm. She explained how the only witnesses were dead and that they had the security tape. “It shouldn’t have been like that, but this gone be your first secret,” she said, turning to meet Kita’s frightened gaze. “We gone see if you can hold water. If you do, you all in. If you don’t...,” Skinny pulled her arm away, turned her gaze out the driver’s side window and shrugged. Her tone dropped an octave as she finished her sentence. “Well, you know...” Then, without another word or even an expression for Kita to read, Skinny reached forward and turned the music up.

## ***Chapter 17***

Richard walked out of the shower and headed back towards his bunk, passing by Bam on his way. “Ay, fam.”

Bam followed Richard back to their bunk. “You hear what everybody say happened at the Rolex night before last?” Bam asked.

“Yeah,” Richard chuckled. “That some shit I would have done if a nigga would have made my girl get naked and walk

out the club.” Richard tossed his wet towel over the edge of his bunk so it could dry and turned to face Bam’s shaking head.

“Fam, I believe you would do that shit,” Bam grinned. “You ‘bout one crazy mother fucker.”

Richard’s face turned contemplative as he stared back at Bam. He held his chin held in between his thumb and index finger. He was trying to think of a way that he could use Bam on his team. He’d proven himself time and again, and he could be a great asset to The Family. Raw niggas like that didn’t come around too often. That thought sparked another one. “Ay Fool,” Richard said finally breaking his silence. “I ain ‘t calling you Fool no more.” A smile played on Richard’s lips as he spoke. “I’m gone call you Raw from now on. How you like that?”

Bam cocked his head to one side, as if he were listening to the name in his own head. “I like that,” he said, smiling. “I should have thought of that when I was a young nigga. That’s a



hard ass name!” A crease formed on Bam’s brow. ”But why you changed it up all of a sudden?”

“Cause you keep it gutter,” Richard stated, matter-of-factly. “You don’t hold shit back. You give it to a nigga raw.”

“That’s the only way to be! Niggas can’t sugar coat nothing in these streets.” He swatted the air with his hand. “If you do, the street’s gone come eat you like a black ant.”

Richard nodded his head slowly, considering Bam’s analogy. He decided that he liked it. Then another thought popped into Richard’s head: a thought that would help him further test Bam’s trustworthiness with secrets. “Ay Raw, when Ms. Jackson come back to work?”

“She should be here tonight. Why?”

“Cause I want to ask her something.” Richard intentionally raised an eyebrow at Bam. “You know she went out with my girl them the other night, right?”

“Damn,” Bam replied, shaking his head. “You aint’ tell me nothing ‘bout that.”

“Yeah, I ain’t been thinking ‘bout that shit.” Now with the bait set, Richard moved on to other topics. “You know, I been calling my lawyer for the past two days?”

“What he been talking ‘bout?”

“He say he might have some good news for me when I go to court tomorrow,” Richard answered, although what that news could be was still a mystery to Richard.

“Well, I hope he do, fam.” Bam smacked Richard’s upper back in brotherly love, a sympathetic expression on his face. “‘Cause a good nigga like you shouldn’t be locked up ‘cause another nigga can’t do they time.”

“Well, that’s the game,” Richard shrugged. “That mother fucker don’t love nobody.” His jaw set in steel as he thought about how he still had no idea who’d put him behind bars. But as quickly as the anger set in, it disappeared as he thought

about how his time might almost be up. “If I jump though, just chill ‘cause I got you,” Richard told Bam. “Everything gone be a’ight. Trust me.”

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“Girl, I ain’t gone be in this mall all night,” Skinny said, tapping her foot in irritation as Kita stood in the doorway of yet another department store.

“How you got all them clothes in your closet if you don’t like shopping?” Kita asked, pulling her attention away from the department store window.

“Rich Kid know bitches that sell clothes.” Skinny flicked her wrist, dismissing the idea of spending so much money in a mall. “That’s how.”

“Well,” Kita replied, furrowing her brow as she thought about how much she’d already spent on clothes. “You need to call them for me ‘cause that would save me money. I know they don’t charge no full price.”

Kita reluctantly walked away from the department store entrance, resisting the urge to reap the rewards of the 25% off advertisement.

A sigh of relief escaped Skinny’s lips as she caught up to Kita. “Trust me, I would. But when they kicked in our door--” she shoved one of the large glass doors to the mall and stepped out onto the entrance walkway, “--they took Rich Kid’s phone and that’s where all the numbers were at.”

Kita stopped as they reached the curb of the mall walkway and looked around the large parking lot before turning to Skinny. “Where we parked at?”

Skinny pointed over towards the fourth row marked with a big sign displaying the letter “D.” “Over there, I think.”

Skinny's stomach growled as Kita started loading her bags into the back of the Charger. "Girl, put that shit in there. You ain't got to put it in there like you gone hurt them clothes," she laughed.

"What? You want me to throw them in?" Kita asked, voice dripping with sarcasm as she shot Skinny a look over her shoulder.

"You good," Skinny smiled and shrugged. "I'm just fucking with ya'."

With Kita's bags now fully secured, Skinny tossed Kita the keys. Climbing into the passenger seat, Skinny looked over at Kita. "Let's go get something to eat. I'm hungry as fuck."

Keys already in the ignition, Kita pulled the gear into drive. "Where you want to eat?" she asked before pressing on the gas pedal.

"Go to Burger King."

Kita laughed. “Why you ain’t get that in the mall? They had a Burger King there.”

“I ain’t trying to be in the mall all night,” Skinny shook her head. “Besides, if I would have ate there, you know you would have thought of another store to go in.”

“We gone go eat inside?” Kita asked as she pulled the car into the Burger King parking lot. “I don’t like to drive and eat.”

“It don’t matter,” Skinny said, flicking her wrist.

Kita pulled into a parking space. After placing the car in park, Skinny reached in between Kita’s legs. Kita gasped with nervousness and shock. “I know you ain’t taking that in there.” Her forehead wrinkled with concern.

Skinny tucked one of the 45s in her purse, and bobbed her head back and forth as she spoke. “Hell I ain’t! Watch me.” With that, she shoved the passenger side door open and headed for the restaurant’s entrance.

“Why you always take that with you?”

“Just a habit,” Skinny shrugged, pulling open one of the restaurant doors. “I can’t leave home without it.”

After ordering their food, Kita followed Skinny over to a window booth and sat down. “Kat, you got a boyfriend?” Skinny asked, chewing on a bite of her hamburger.

Kita stopped dipping her french fry and looked across the table at Skinny. “I had one.” She placed her elbows on the table, her french fry suspended in mid-air. “Why? What took you so long to ask and does it matter?”

Skinny shrugged, “Cause I wanted to know.”

“Well, now you know,” Kita replied, popping the soggy french fry into her mouth.

Neither of them talked while they finished their food. Kita wondered why Skinny was all of a sudden interested in whether or not she was seeing anyone. Skinny was devising a

plan in her head. Now finished with their food, they tossed their trash into one of the trashcans along the way and headed for the door.

Kita and Skinny hadn't really paid any attention to the guys coming into the restaurant as they were going out until one of them grabbed Skinny by the elbow. "Ay lil' mamma," he said, trying to pull Skinny closer. "Check this out." A grin that was probably meant to be seductive, but ended up being more repulsive than anything, crossed his lips.

Skinny's ears turned hot, but she kept her composure. "Kat, I know this nigga ain't just grab me." Her tone remained cool, but it carried a deadly undertone. Only Kita noticed or cared.

"Look, we got a man," Kita said, her eyes bouncing from Skinny to the man who held Skinny's arm. A chill ran down Kita's spine as she thought of what might happen if he didn't let go soon. "Please just leave us alone."



“She say that like they got the same nigga,” one of the other guys from the group said as he smacked the shoulder of the guy holding Skinny’s arm. “How can one nigga share both y’all?” he asked, turning his attention to Kita.

“He can’t share shit.” Skinny yanked her arm away forcefully, and shoved the guy who had just been holding her arm. Using her shoulders to shove the men out of her way, Skinny pushed her way towards the door, pulling Kita along by the wrist as she went. “Now excuse us.”

“Man, fuck them hoes,” said the man who had grabbed Skinny’s arm. He dismissed the girls with his arm and was the first to turn his back and walk towards the counter. The other two men followed. “Pussy ass hoes wanna act like that.”

Skinny spun around quickly. Now facing the backs of the retreating men, she fished the 45 from her purse. “Hoes?” Her eyes narrowed as she spoke in a vengeful whisper. “Who you calling hoes fucking nigga?” She charged at the group of men,

gun aimed straight for the group leader - the man who had grabbed her arm.

“Pussy ass bitch, I’ll slap yo....”The man turned to find the barrel of Skinny’s gun in his face.

Skinny wore a cocky grin as she watched the eyes of the man in front of her fill with terror. “Slap who fuck nigga?”

“Lil mamma, pl-pl-please don’t shoot me,” he stuttered. A warm sensation filled the front of his pants and trickled down his leg.

Skinny started to laugh so hard that her stomach cramped and her eyes filled with tears. “Kat!” she said, holding her waist with one arm, the gun with the other. Despite her laughter, the gun’s barrel remained level with the leader’s head. “This bitch ass nigga done pissed on himself!”

“Girl, let’s go,” Kita said, both nervous and angry as she pulled Skinny away from the men standing in the Burger King lobby. As they made their way towards the car, Kat searched

frantically for the flashing lights she knew had to be coming. “Baby girl! You crazy!” Kita yelled, marching for the driver’s side door. Opening the door, she took one last look to see if there were any signs that might indicate whether the police were on their way or not. She didn’t see any, but she did notice the Burger King girl behind the counter smiling and waving good-bye.

Now in the car, Kita slammed her foot down on the gas pedal and sped away from the restaurant. Even though she hadn’t seen any signs of police coming, she couldn’t help but think that they would be on their way at any moment. Switching her gaze frantically between the road and Skinny, she asked, “How you know them people ain’t call the police on us?”

Rolling her eyes, Skinny dismissed the question. “I know they didn’t. Don’t worry about that.” Skinny’s focus drifted downwards until it honed in on the back of Kita’s legs. The

power she'd just felt inside the restaurant had made Skinny hot with lust.

“Why you looking like that?” Kita asked when she finally noticed Skinny staring at her.

“Can you use your left foot on the gas and brake when you drive?” Skinny asked, acting as though she hadn't heard Kita's question.

Kita's face contorted into a confused stare, but her eyes remained focused on the road in front of her. She had slowed down a little, but was still driving a little faster than usual. “Yeah, why?”

Skinny shot Kita a pretend look of disbelief, “Put your right foot up on the seat then,” she said, sitting back in the passenger seat, waiting.

Still confused as to why Skinny was asking such an odd question, Kita moved her left foot over to the gas pedal and then lifted her right leg up onto the seat of the Charger. The

movement forced her skirt up around her hips. “See, I told you I could do it.” Her eyes still focused on the road, but a tug at her panties forced her to look down. When she did, she found Skinny’s face just inches from her snatch. “Skinny, why you doing me like this for?” She returned her eyes to the road and tried to focus on her driving as Skinny gently licked her folds, but she was failing miserably.

“Just drive,” Skinny commanded in a low, sexy voice. Returning to Kita’s inner folds, Skinny listened to Kita’s deep, throaty moans. “You like that?” Suddenly, Skinny thrust her tongue into Kita, making her gasp in surprised pleasure.

Kita struggled to keep the car on the road as Skinny gently stroked Kita’s clit with her tongue. “Yes! Yes! Please don’t stop,” Kita screamed as she veered the car back to the right, barely missing the car next to them. “You gone make me crash,” she yelled as one hand involuntarily came away from the steering wheel.

Skinny pulled back. “I thought you could drive with your left foot,” she taunted, a sly grin on her face. Saliva and juices dripped down her chin.

“I can,” Kita breathed heavily, “but not with you going down on me.” She leaned over towards Skinny, her right foot now back on the gas pedal. “Kiss me,” she whispered. Their lips met briefly. Kita licked the outsides of Skinny’s mouth when the kiss ended.

“Now you gone be hooked,” Skinny said as she smiled. “This shit just like when a pit bull taste blood.”

“Next time I’ll be ready,” Kita replied, returning her full attention back to the road.

## ***Chapter 18***

Lil' B and E had been scouring the streets for hours. They were nearly out of cocaine and they needed to find a new connection, but so far, they'd been unsuccessful.

“Ay Unc, we gone go see my Paw at court tomorrow, right?” Lil' B asked as E made a right onto Second Street.

“Lil' B, why the fuck we let Skinny kill White Boy?” E asked, ignoring Lil' B's question. He was shifting his gaze from the street in front of him to Lil' B sitting in the passenger

seat. It wasn't that he hadn't heard Lil' B's question or that the question wasn't important, E just knew that business was running dry and that was something that Richard had never allowed to happen. He had to figure something out, and fast.

“Unc, fuck White Boy!” Lil' B exclaimed, pounding the dash with his fist. “I asked you ‘bout my Paw.” Still receiving no response from E, Lil' B added, “If you think I'm gone look for a plug with you tomorrow, you got me fucked up.” Lil' B crossed his arms over his chest. He glared at E, challenging him.

“Nephew, we going to the courthouse tomorrow,” E replied with a loud sigh. “Just calm down. You always get all emotional when a nigga ain't thinking ‘bout Rich.” Truth be told, E had been thinking about Richard all week. He couldn't wait to see his best friend, but right now wasn't the time. He needed Lil' B to focus.

“Whatever, Unc.” Lil' B uncrossed his arms. Now having the answer to his question, he was ready to focus on business



as usual. “I know a lil’ stripper bitch that say her people’s got work.”

“How much they taxing?” E asked, glad they were finally getting somewhere.

Lil’ B shrugged. “I’m gone holla at that hoe tonight and see what’s up,” he replied, but as they neared Lil’ Haiti, Lil’ B came up with a better idea. “Matter fact, make a left right here.”

E turned left on 53<sup>rd</sup> and Lil’ B told him to pull over and park just up the road. “Who you know over here?” E asked, looking around.

“That lil’ stripper bitch be over here sometimes,” Lil’ B answered, looking around as well. “There she go right there.” He pointed just up ahead to a tall, slender girl with bright red hair just up ahead.

“That’s that hoe always hating on Joy,” E said, a frown crossing his face. She’d caused a lot of trouble, always calling

Skinny about how Joy behaved around Richard. Joy's behavior had never been an issue to them. She was just another dick hungry hoe. Cherry, however, tried to cause an issue, for what reason, no one really knew.

“Yeah, but that bitch bad, ain't she?” Lil' B asked as he eyed the sexy stripper. She was making her way towards their car, but she hadn't noticed either of them. Her black mini skirt crept up with every step she took, but it never quite revealed what hid underneath.

E rolled his eyes in response, “Yeah, but fuck that. Go holla at that hoe and see if her people got something.”

Lil' B nodded in response and opened the car door. Slamming the door shut behind him, Lil' B yelled down the street, “Ay Cherry!”

Cherry snapped her head in the direction of her stage name and recognized Lil' B instantly. The two of them walked

towards each other and met halfway between the place where Cherry had been and where E still sat, waiting in the car.

“Lil’ one, what’s good?” Cherry asked, now standing in front of Lil’ B.

“What I tell you ‘bout calling me that?” Lil’ B’s brow furrowed. “Only two people call me that,” he seethed, pointing an index finger at Cherry, driving his point home.

Cherry rolled her eyes. “Whatever boy. What you want?”

“Yo’ people still got that? What you was telling me about?” Lil’ B asked, glancing between Cherry and the car.

“What you talking ‘bout?” she asked dimly. “That coke?”

“You know that’s what I’m talking ‘bout,” Lil’ B answered in a condescending tone. Strippers could be so stupid sometimes. “Matter fact, you got a number you can call them at?” he asked as he pointed at her phone.

“Yeah, why?”

“I want you to call them and ask them how much they want for a zone,” he answered, crossing his arms over his chest.

Cherry huffed out a loud sigh. “A’ight, hold up.” Turning her back to Lil’ B, Cherry flipped open her phone and dialed the number. “Hello? Cuz?” Cherry turned back around to face Lil’ B. “Y’all still straight?...’Cause I got somebody want to buy a couple of plates from y’all...Hold on.” She looked up at Lil’ B. “How many you want?”

“Nigga need half a block,” Lil’ B answered, adding, “but tell them we gone buy one zone to see what they working with.”

“Ay cuz, they want eighteen plates, but he only want one right now...Yeah, he want to see what it tastes like...Ok...a’ight...Love y’all.” Cherry flipped her phone shut and returned her full attention to Lil’ B. “For only one, they want six hundred fifty, but if you end up getting the half like you said, they’ll give you that for eleven g’s.”

Lil' B shook his head, "I ain't never been bo-bo-the-fool, so just get one zone for me now," he said, pulling a wad of cash from his wallet. "And if it's right, we gone fuck with y'all." He counted out the six hundred and fifty dollars and handed it over to Cherry.

Cherry shrugged as she took the money, thinking that it was silly for Lil' B to pass up such a good deal, but it was his money. "You want me to bring it on Eighteenth Ave?" she asked as she shoved the money into her pocket.

"Naw. Just take it to work tonight with you and we'll come get it from there," Lil' B answered before turning to walk away. As he made his way back to the car, he tried to think of a way he could get E into the strip club after what had happened earlier that week at Rolex's.

"What time y'all coming?" Cherry called to Lil' B who was now halfway back to the car.

Lil' B turned around to answer her, but continued walking backwards. "Don't worry 'bout it. Just know we coming. And don't feel like a nigga just using you. Everything go smooth, I'm gone break you off, long as we like what we get tonight."

Smiling and waving, Cherry yelled loudly so Lil' B could hear her. "A'ight. I'll be waiting on y'all."

Without another word to Cherry, Lil' B climbed back into the passenger seat and waited for E to finish his phone call.

"I'm gone call you back baby, a'ight?" E cupped his hand around the receiver, as if doing so could keep Lil' B out of the conversation. "Yeah, see you later." He flipped the phone shut and turned to a grinning Lil' B.

"Unc, I think you gone get that bitch pregnant." Lil' B knew E well enough to know that'd been Bay-Bay on the other end.

E shook his head in response, a disgusted expression on his face. “Fuck that shit!” he said before changing the subject to more important matters. “So her people straight?”

“What you think I gave her that money for?” Lil’ B asked, knowing that E had been watching them the whole time.

“A’ight, so how long she gone take to get it?” E asked eagerly.

“Unc, you know shit hot round here in Lil’ Haiti.” Lil’ B tried to murmur the next words just enough to make them sound not important. “So I told her we’ll come to Take One and pick it up tonight.”

E winced at the words. “Why you told her that? I ain’t going in that death trap.” E put the car into drive and headed out of Lil’ Haiti thinking about how badly they needed to find a new connection. As he made the next right, without looking at Lil’ B he said, “I’ll just wait for you in the parking lot.”

Lil’ B shrugged. “Whatever, Unc. It’s gone be straight.”

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E pulled into the strip club parking lot several hours later and parked the car in one of the open spots. From where he sat, he could see both the entrance to the club and the street leading up to the club. "Don't be in there all night, nephew."

"I ain't gone be too long," Lil' B said, opening the car door. "I'm just gone get that."

"I'm for real, nephew," E said as Lil' B climbed out of the car. "These hoes be gettin niggas fucked up out chea."

Lil' B shook his head as he closed the passenger side door and headed towards the club's entrance. "Ay Fatboy, Cherry in there?" he asked the doorman.

"Yeah, she in there," the doorman answered, only glancing quickly at Lil' B as he waved a freshly patted patron forward. "Hold up," Fatboy said as he put his arm out to stop the next



man in line. “Let him in first, homeboy,” he said, nodding to Lil’ B.

Giving the door man a quick smile, Lil’ B walked around the man that Fatboy had stopped from entering the club. “I ain’t gone be in here long,” he told Fatboy. “I’m coming right back out.”

The two men who had entered the club just before Lil’ B – the one who had just been cleared by Fatboy and the one that was still waiting for his pat down – gawked at Lil’ B as he walked by. The fact that the doorman had let Lil’ B pass without a pat down hadn’t gone unnoticed. The two men exchanged a silent, confirming nod - a nod that no one else noticed.

Lil’ B made his way through the club, past the main entrance, past the bar and through the lounge area. He was looking for Cherry, but she wasn’t on the floor. Heading towards the stage, he noticed Ice Cream walking over towards

the dressing rooms. He stepped up behind her and grabbed a hold of her arm. “Ay Ice Cream, check this out.”

Ice Cream spun around and glared at Lil’ B, her free arm poised and ready to deliver a slap to his head. Her arm dropped when she recognized the face attached to the hand that had grabbed her. Her eyes narrowed to tiny slivers. “What you want pulling on me like that?” she asked, yanking her arm out of Lil’ B’s grasp.

Lil’ B blatantly ignored her defensive attitude. “Where Cherry at?” he asked, looking around the strip club once more.

“She on stage next, so probably in the dressing room,” Ice Cream shrugged.

Just then, Juvenile’s lyrics filled the club. The house DJ announced Cherry’s entrance. As she walked onto the stage, Lil’ B headed over to one of the tables and sat down to wait.

Across the room, the two men who'd watched Lil' B pass by the doorman without a pat down sat and sipped on Jack and Cokes. Like Lil' B, they weren't interested in a show tonight.

"Ay Ben, you see that young nigga sitting over there?" the taller, lankier man named Jay asked his partner as he nodded in Lil' B's direction.

"Yeah, you talking 'bout that nigga who came in after me?" Ben shrugged, unsure of what that young boy had to do with their deal tonight.

"I bet that's who she got fo' us."

Ben quickly glanced over his shoulder and assessed Lil' B. "You think so?" Ben turned his gaze back to Jay, his eyebrow cocked in disbelief. "He don't look like he got no money for half a block."

Jay took a long swig from his drink and sat back in his seat. "He got it or whoever he fuck with got it," he said, certainty in his voice.

After finishing her performance, Cherry hopped off the stage and headed straight for Lil' B. Planting her butt firmly on his lap, she extended her hand. "You like what you saw?" she cooed as a seductive smile spread across her lips.

Lil' B leaned forward and whispered in her ear. "I got a tip for you when you get my coke."

Cherry jutted her bottom lip out in a pout, but stood and responded, "Okay, let me go get that then." A loud sigh escaped her lips as she walked away.

Cherry took the long way around the club, zipping through the bar area and past the DJ station, glancing back every couple of steps, making sure Lil' B wasn't following her with his eyes. Convinced that he hadn't seen where she was headed, she walked over to Jay and Ben's table and slid in to one of the chairs. "Y'all got a tip for me?" she asked, hand extended as Ben handed her the bag of coke.

“Come give me a dance when you get back,” Jay replied with an impish grin.

“Baby, you always want a dance when you come in here,” Cherry said, shaking her head and giggling.

Instead of going straight back to Lil’ B, she walked into the dressing room, hoping that he would think she had come from there. After waiting a few moments, she stepped out into the lounge area.

“Damn, you took long enough,” Lil’ B said, digging a tip for Cherry out of his pocket.

Rolling her eyes, Cherry exchanged the money in his hand for the coke in her hand. “Here you go, boy.” She smiled to herself with satisfaction and stuffed the money into her thong.

Without another word, Lil’ B marched towards the exit. Once Cherry was certain he had left, she made her way back over towards Ben and Jay.

Lil' B stormed towards the car, yanked the door open and plopped himself into the passenger seat.

“Damn, nephew!” E said, turning the radio down. “You took long enough.”

Irritated at how long the deal had taken, Lil' B grumbled in response. “That’s the same thing I told that hoe Cherry.”

E put the car into reverse and backed out of their parking spot. “What the fuck took you so long anyway?”

Lil' B rolled his eyes. “When I walked in the club, that hoe was just getting on the stage.”

Now driving down the road, E looked at Lil' B expectantly. “So, what that shit look like anyway?”

“This shit look straight,” Lil B answered, pulling the bag from out of his crotch.

E reached into his lap and produced a small bag of broken weed and a twenty-dollar bill. "Take a lil' bit of that and put it on this weed," he said, handing the items over to Lil' B.

"Look at yo' junkie ass," Lil' B laughed as he took the items.

"Nigga, got to make sure that shit right," E smiled, watching Lil' B roll a joint.

## ***Chapter 19***

Richard and Bam were sitting in the commons area when Ms. Jackson started her shift. Bam was the first to see her. “Yo’ fam, there go Ms. Jackson right there,” he said, nodding his head over in her direction.

“Count time! Count time! Count time!” she yelled, walking in the direction of the correction officer’s desk.



Immediately, the inmates started heading for their bunks, Bam included. “Fuck with you after count,” Bam said as he headed for their cell.

Richard nodded at Bam, but instead of heading straight for his bunk, he hung back and walked by Ms. Jackson’s desk. “After count, I’ll take the trays back.”

Jim, the house man, had heard Richard. “Ay Rich Kid! That’s my job!”

Without responding, Richard started heading towards his bunk. He could hear Ms. Jackson respond as he walked away. “Well, it’s his job while I’m here.” He also heard Jim’s response, “Ay Bob, that nigga Rich Kid hating,” along with Bob’s response, “That young nigga ain’t got to hate on you.”

“Ay Jim! Check this out!” Richard yelled out his cell after making it to his bunk.

Bam gave Richard an annoyed look. The look of annoyance wasn't directed towards Richard, but the idea of having Jim in their bunk. "Why you call that bitch ass nigga over here?"

"Just chill," Richard replied. "You gone see."

"Wuz up, young blood?" Jim asked, standing in the doorway of Richard's cell.

Richard slowly pulled one of his shoes on. He avoided making eye contact with Jim. "If you don't like what I did, you know we can go to the bathroom and handle it like men." Richard reached for his other shoe and slid it on, slowly, methodically. "You ain't got to be talking shit when I'm not around."

Jim stood in shock. He hadn't realized that Richard had heard the entire conversation. His heart thumped in his chest as he watched Richard slowly tying his shoes. He knew Richard's reputation. He didn't want any trouble. "Naw, young blood.

You got it all wrong.” Jim shook his head. “I don’t give a fuck about them trays. You can do whatever you want to do.”

Suddenly, Richard stopped tying his shoe. Finally meeting Jim’s eyes with a stone cold glare, he said, “I ain’t no bitch. I’ll get there with anyone of you fuck niggas. Win, lose or draw, that’s the worst that can happen. Get me?”

Jim raised his hands in defense. “Naw, young blood. I don’t need them problems. I’m good. You can take the trays out every day.”

Certain that he and Jim had an understanding now, Richard nodded in Jim’s direction, letting him know that things were cool, as long as Jim didn’t try to create any more problems for himself. “A’ight. I’m gone holla at you.” Richard stood to his feet. “Just chill. I’m trying to do something.”

“I got you. I’m good,” Jim replied before heading back to his own cell. Once a few cells down, a whoosh of relieved air left his lungs.

“Gary!” Ms. Jackson’s voice came right outside his cell.

“Come on. You gone take the trays tonight.”

The moment Richard’s cell door closed, Ms. Jackson transformed into Kita. “Rich Kid, I had so much fun the other night!”

Richard pushed the carts down the walkway. “Oh you did, huh?” he asked, smiling.

Ms. Jackson nodded and continued to gush about her time with Skinny. Suddenly, she stopped walking and turned to Richard. “Skinny told you we married, right?” A look of nervous guilt crossed her face.

Richard chuckled. “Don’t nothing go down without my say so.” His amused grin disappeared and a stone cold expression took its place as he asked his next question. “Ain’t none of my niggas tried to holla at you, did they?”

Kita shook her head wildly.” No, they were treating me like family.” Richard began pushing the cart forward again and Kita

followed a step behind. “I think if I would have tried to give one of them some pussy, they would have flipped on me anyways.”

“You right, but you wrong,” Richard spoke, using his hands to emphasize his point. “They would have gave you the business, but that’s all you would have been good for after that.”

Kita contemplated his statement in silence for a moment. Finally, her face lit up as she remembered the bag of pills in her pocket. “Oh!” she said, digging in her pocket for the tiny bag. “Here you go.” She slid the bag into Richard’s hand.

Richard examined it quickly. “Damn, why you brought so many? I ain’t got no music to listen to.”

Kita gave him a satisfied grin. “I got you an mp3 player in my bag.”

Richard bumped Kita with his hip and smiled back. “A’ight, now that’s what a nigga need. I want you to bring

some hard for Jim's bitch ass too," Richard said as they passed by Jim's cell.

"What's that?" Kita's nose wrinkled. "That stuff that look like lil' rocks?"

Richard's eyebrow cocked in disbelief. "You mean to tell me you don't know what crack looks like and you from the hood?"

"I ain't never been round that stuff until I went and got them pills from Skinny," she replied, shaking her head.

"She show you how to bag them?"

"She showed me how to cook the coke, cut it up and bag it." She counted the tasks on her fingers as she spoke. "I was over there all day with her doing that, then we gave it to E and he came back with the money in less time than it took us to get it ready."

"She paid you, right?"

“She tried to give me some money, but I ain’t take it,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest. “And she got the nerve to get mad.”

Richard pushed his full tray cart next to the empty ones so that Kita could take it down to the kitchen. “She still got that money for you,” he said, turning to face Kita. “Nobody in the family does work for free. That’s why she got mad at you.”

“I didn’t know that,” Kita murmured, walking with Richard back to his cell. “I thought she was just trying to see if I was a gold digger.”

Richard gave Kita a sympathetic smile, just before walking back into his cell. In a way, he felt a little sorry for her. Breaking her in was hard, and Kita seemed to know very little about life on the streets. But he had to admit, she was doing better than even he’d expected. Suddenly he remembered the mp3 player. He looked back out into the hallway for her. She was already halfway to her desk. “Ms. Jackson, you need me to empty the trash can for you?” he yelled.

“Yeah, do that for me,” she called over her shoulder, understanding that his question was more of a statement. *Put the mp3 player in the trash can.*

Once he'd taken out the trash and made it back into his cell, Ms. Jackson yelled, “Lock down!” from her desk and the familiar click of the cell doors filled the prison.

Turning to Bam, who was already on his bunk, Richard asked, “Ay Raw, you ever pop X pills before?”

“Yeah...why?”

“Look, nigga.” He dropped two of the pills into Raw's hand.

Staring at the blue four leaf clover pills in his hand, Bam asked in amazement, “Where'd you get these from?”

A slick half-smile tugged at one side of Richard's mouth. “Just take them, nigga.”



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“Richard Gary!...Richard Gary!” a male correction officer called from the desk. He’d taken Kita’s place sometime after Richard had fallen asleep. Estimating the time, Richard assumed that it was too early for shift change. *She must’ve went to lunch.* He rolled over in his bunk as the correction officer called his name again. “Richard Gary! Court call. You’ve got thirty minutes to get in the shower and shave.”

“I got you man,” Richard yelled from his cell, hopping down from his bunk. Turning towards the bottom bunk to grab his shoes off the ground, Richard noticed Bam bopping his head to the music on the mp3 player. “Nigga? You ain’t been to sleep yet?”

Bam pulled the headphones from his ears. “Fam, them’s some fire ass pills.” His jaw twitched as he spoke. “I don’t see how you went to sleep.”

Shaking his head, Richard pushed Bam's leg. "Go over," he said as he sat down on the edge of the bunk.

"Wuz good, fam?" Bam asked, sitting up the rest of the way. "I hope they let you out today."

Richard nodded his head and looked down at the ground. "Yeah, me too." His expression turned thoughtful as he tried to remember how long he'd been locked up. Unable to find the answer to his own question, he looked over at Bam. "How long we been locked up now anyway?"

Bam shrugged. "Bout three, four months now maybe." If he was completely honest with himself, he wasn't completely certain either.

Figuring it didn't really matter, Richard moved on to the reason he'd sat down on Bam's bunk in the first place. "Ay Raw." Elbowing Bam in the ribs, Richard lifted his bag of toiletries and personal items. "Hold this down 'til I get back."

“Where I suppose to put that at? I still got the shit you ordered for me yesterday in my drawer.” But Raw took the bag from Richard’s hand anyway.

“Just put this shit by your bunk until you get room.” Richard dug in his pocket, feeling for the little plastic bag of ecstasy. “Hold this shit down, too.”

Bam’s eyes widened. “Where you get all them from, fam?” His eyes were dancing between Richard and the bag he held in his hand.

“Just hold them.” Richard stood as the correction officer called his name again, notifying him that he had only twenty minutes left to shower. Grabbing his towel, soap and wash cloth, he headed towards the showers, calling back at Bam over his shoulder. “Be easy, nigga.”

Nearly done with his shower, Richard heard a female voice echoing in the bathroom. “Don’t let nobody in here.” He pulled back the curtain to find Kita standing outside his shower stall.

“Girl, you had me thinking a nigga was trying to get me.” He smiled jokingly.

“Naw,” she said, dismissing his comment with a wave of her hand. “It’s only me. I came to give you a good luck kiss.” She took an uncertain step closer to his stall.

Richard grabbed his towel. “A’ight, let me dry off first,” he said, already rubbing it over his head to dry his hair.

Kita looked behind her shoulder nervously. Afraid of losing her nerve or getting caught, she took another step forward. “Boy, we ain’t got all day. Give me a kiss now.”

Shrugging, Richard responded, “A’ight.”

The kiss, although short and rather plain, compared to her kisses with Skinny, caused her legs to buckle. His lips were intoxicating and the feel of his naked body against her uniform sent a heat straight into her inner thighs. “Good luck, daddy,” she whispered breathily as she pulled away, heady from the kiss.

“I hope so,” Richard replied, watching her as she turned and walked away.

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“Gary! Let’s go!”

Richard tucked four ecstasy pills, that he had taken out of the bag, into his cuff. “A’ight! I’m coming now.” He turned to Bam and gave him daps before turning to walk away.

Bam watched Richard walk towards the door of the cell, sad that Richard might not be returning but hopeful that things went well in court for him today. “Be easy, fam.”

“That’s all a nigga like me can do,” Richard called over his shoulder as he walked out of the cell door.

Corporal Smith was the officer responsible for preparing the inmates for “the long walk.” He shook his head when he saw Richard approaching. “Back already?”

Richard gave the Corporal a sly sideways grin. “Corp, you have to understand, them crackers keep kidnapping me.”

A short, loud snort came from the Corporal’s nose. He may have intended it to be a laugh, Richard thought. “Whatever. Just turn around and put your hands on the wall so I can pat you down.”

Richard complied and joined the tightly gathered group of fellow inmates next to the elevator. While waiting there, Richard heard his name being called by a familiar voice.

“Ay Rich Kid, what’s good nigga?” Rex sauntered over from the other side of the group. Another man followed behind him.

“Just chilling, nigga. I ain’t seen yo’ ass in a minute.” Richard raised his arms and grasped his chin in thought. “Rex, right?”

“Yeah, that’s me nigga.” The inmate standing next to Rex stood in utter disbelief as Rex turned to face him with a triumphant grin. “Told you I knew Rich Kid.”

Ignoring the inmate next to Rex, Richard asked, “So what them crackers got you fo?”

Rex rolled his eyes. “Some shit ‘bout some pills.”

“Yeah? What them crackers talking ‘bout?” Richard asked as the elevator doors opened.

The correction officer directed the inmates forward into the elevator. Scrunched like sardines, the men headed down to the basement. Grumbles and groans filled the small area. Rex continued the conversation. “Like fifteen years, but I got that shit beat,” he lied.

The doors opened to the elevator and the men were now being directed into a long underground tunnel: “the long walk.” Rex and Richard walked together, side by side. The inmate that had accompanied Rex upstairs continued to follow behind. After just a few moments of trudging down the long corridor, the new inmate spoke up, addressing Richard directly. “Ay Rich Kid, that shit true ‘bout all them guns and coke you supposed to got jammed with?”

Richard shot Rex a look of disbelief before turning around to meet the other inmates gaze. “Ay buddy, I don’t know you,” Richard said, walking backwards. “Don’t be asking me no questions.” Richard returned to his forward walking position.

“Chill, Rich Kid,” Rex said, defending his friend. “Lil’ fool straight.” Rex looked over his shoulder and glared at the other inmate, silently signaling for him to keep quiet.

“I don’t know that nigga to be asking me no questions,” Richard said as they continued forward. “You know how a nigga is.”



“Shit, only reason I ain’t say nothing ‘bout him questioning you is cause I was just about to ask you the same shit,” Rex replied, figuring this was as good a time as any to ask.

“Man, y’all heard the story,” Richard tried to bring the conversation to a close. “Y’all already know from what he said.”

After a moment of silence, Rex continued. “Who you think put them crackers on your trail?”

Richard’s gaze went steely and his jaw set in anger. He still hadn’t found the rat and the thought of that snake still being on the loose made his blood boil. “I don’t even know man,” he replied, trying to keep his tone calm. “But I hope they get killed with a rat in they ass.”

Now halfway through “the long walk,” another inmate called from behind them. “Ay Rex!” Rex, Richard and the other inmate turned their heads to find another inmate jogging, trying to catch up.

“Wuz good, Malow” Rex asked the new inmate when he’d finally reached their little group.

“Damn, you still locked up from when you got caught with them pills at the bar?” Malow asked, surprised to see Rex still in prison.

“Yeah man, these crackers trying to give a nigga 15 years,” Rex replied.

But Richard hadn’t heard Rex’s reply. He was still focusing on Malow’s comment, particularly the word “bar.” That one word had sent the wheels spinning in Richard’s head. He decided to test his theory. “Ay Rex, you know Cash?”

Rex nodded. “Yeah, I know that nigga. Why?”

“That nigga Cash scary as fuck,” Richard said, testing the waters.

“Why you say that?”

Richard laughed. "I went to get some pills from that nigga one day and them crackers tried to rope us off." Discreetly, Richard analyzed Rex's facial expressions as he spoke. "You know I ride with that hater, so I hit the gas on them crackers. That fuck nigga talking 'bout let him out the car..."

"What kind of car you was in?" Malow interrupted.

"I was in one of them Dodge Charger Hemi's," Richard replied, not bothering to look at Malow. He was still watching Rex carefully. "Why?"

"What color was it?" Malow asked.

"Blue." Rex sputtered out in reply, instantly realizing he'd made a huge mistake. "I-I think I saw that shit." He stuttered, trying to cover his tracks, but he was already too late.

"I heard about that chase. Rex, aint you got locked up two days before that," Malow said, his brow furrowed in confusion.

“That must not be the one I saw,” Rex answered quickly, turning his head towards the concrete walls of the tunnel, hoping that Richard hadn’t noticed his mistake. Slowly, Rex turned his gaze back to meet Richard’s but found only Malow and his fellow inmate. Richard was several steps ahead, walking alongside three other inmates that Rex had never met.

## ***Chapter 20***

“Why you ain’t take that uniform off before you got here?” Skinny asked as she approached Kita. The crowd pulsed around them, every person filing in or out of the courthouse for one reason or another.

Kita rolled her eyes and dismissed the question with a swat of the air. “You think they give a fuck about me wearing this?”

Skinny laughed and wrapped her arm around Kita’s shoulders. “That’s why I name you, Kat. ‘Cause you wild as

fuck.” Releasing Kita’s shoulders, Skinny grabbed Kita’s hand and pulled her towards the courtroom doors. “Come on, girl. He might be in the courtroom when we get there.” As she stepped forward, Skinny glanced behind her, signaling to E and Lil’ B that it was time to go inside.

After finishing security checks, the group went into the large courtroom and took a set of seats as close to the front as they could find. Kita sat on one side of Skinny and Lil’ B sat on the other. E sat on the other side of Lil’ B.

“You think Paw gone be mad ‘cause we came?” Lil’ B whispered to Skinny, his lips turned downward in a worried frown.

“Boy, he gone be happy to see ya’ll,” Skinny said as she patted Lil’ B’s knee. “So stop worrying.”

Sitting back in his seat, Lil’ B let out nervous sigh and looked up at the ceiling and waited anxiously. Kita pulled at the white fuzz balls on her slacks with one hand and held one

of Skinny's hands with the other, desperately trying to ignore the knot growing in her stomach. E stared down at the ground, tapping his foot. They were all waiting for Richard to appear, but only Skinny noticed him when he walked into the room, hands cuffed to five other inmates. Skinny squeezed Kita's hand tighter. Gently, she elbowed Lil' B. E took notice quickly of everyone else's anxious expressions and looked around the front of the room. His eyes found Richard in only a matter of seconds. They all waited in silence for the proceedings to start.

A deep, loud voice came from the very front of the crowd. "Your Honor, I'd like to speak with my client in jury room, please." Skinny looked to the front of the room, but couldn't see who was speaking.

"And who's your client, Mr. Black?" the judge asked, seemingly more interested in the papers in front of him.

"Mr. Gary, your Honor."

Skinny shot straight up in her seat. She listened and watched intently, curious as to what it was Mr. Black wanted to talk to Richard in private about.

“Bailiff?” The judge turned his glance over towards the correction officer standing with the inmates. “Is there a Mr. Gary there?”

“Yes, he’s right here your Honor.”

“Send him with his lawyer, please,” the judge replied, returning to the papers in front of him.

The officer unlatched Richard from the other inmates and replaced the former chains with a plain pair of handcuffs. Silently, Richard walked alongside the correction officer to the jury room. Mr. Black followed behind.

For the next fifteen minutes, Skinny waited nervously. She kept eyeing the door to the jury room, waiting for Richard to emerge, but she only saw the correction officer standing there, staring blankly ahead. *Could he hear what was going on inside*



*the room.* Just as the suspense level had finally reached a point that she thought she might scream, the door to the jury room opened.

Richard was the first to exit the room. Skinny saw the downtrodden look on his face and her heart sunk. Watery pools formed in the corners of her eyes. But just before the first tear fell, she saw something. Quickly, she looked around, trying to determine if anyone else had noticed. No, she didn't think they had. They all seemed to have had their attention focused on Mr. Black.

Standing at the judge's pulpit, Mr. Black leaned forward. The conversation was inaudible. The judge nodded his head. Mr. Black nodded his and then walked away. Shuffling his papers and shoving them to the side, the judge looked over at Richard. "Mr. Gary, your case has been continued to June 28<sup>th</sup>." Then, averting his gaze back to something on his desk, he called out, "Next case!"

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Bam sat on his bunk, a little sad knowing that he might have lost his bunkmate. He'd really enjoyed sharing a cell with Richard. While he was sure Richard would keep to his promise, Bam had no idea how long he would have to wait to see Richard again. Kicking his shoes off, he lay back on his bunk and stared at the bottom of the empty bunk above him. A sigh of boredom and exasperation escaped his lungs. He closed his eyes, toying with the idea of taking a nap, but a scuffing of shoes brought him out of his depressed daze.

Quickly, his eyes shot open, darting to where he'd heard the sound. "Fam!" A smile crossed Bam's lips. "What happened at court?"

"They reset me for two weeks," Richard replied evenly.

Glad to have Richard back, but sad that Richard hadn't been successful at getting out, Bam sat up. "That's cause them crackers ain't got shit."

"Yeah," Richard replied, looking over to the phone.

Bam noticed Richard's distracted demeanor, but chalked it up to disappointment. "You want me to put your stuff by your bed?"

"Naw, just hold it," Richard replied absentmindedly. "Ay, I'm 'bout to get on this phone real quick." He took a step back towards the exit of the cell and motioned to the phone with his thumb.

Bam nodded his head and settled back down in his bunk. "A'ight, fam. I'm gone let you clear yo' mind," he replied, adding, "I'm here if you need me."

## ***Chapter 21***

“Ay Unc,” Lil’ B called E from the kitchen. “This some good coke. We drop twenty-six grams and still brought back twenty-eight. I think we found us a plug.” Lil’ B placed one of the cookies back on the scale for the fourth time. He’d measured it himself three times already, but he knew that E would want to see the results for himself. just as Lil’ B had expected, E approached the table to check the scales for himself.

E hoped Lil' B was right. With Richard in prison for at least two more weeks, the pressure to find a new connection had intensified tremendously. This was the last of the product they had to sell and their regular business was already going to other sources. E leaned down and examined the scale closer. He peered up at Lil' B. "You sure?"

Lil' B nodded his head in confirmation. "Unc, this is the fourth time I put this shit on the scale."

Straightening himself, E released a small sigh of relief. "A'ight then, hit Cherry up on the phone. Tell her to let her people go get that ready for us." He walked out of the room smiling.

In a little hotel not too far away, Cherry's cell phone rang. "Hello?" she answered.

"Ay Cherry, this Lil' B. Tell yo' people I want that." Lil' B said.

“A’ight,” she replied, looking up at Ben and Jay. “I’ll call you right back.”

“I’m gone be waiting on yo’ call,” Lil’ B responded.

But Cherry hadn’t heard him. She had already removed the cell phone from her ear to snap it shut. She grinned smugly at Ben and Jay. “I told y’all they’d call.” She stood up from the little hotel table and headed over to the mirror on the wall.

“So, what they talking ‘bout?” Ben asked impatiently. He watched Cherry apply a new coat of lipstick with irritation.

Cherry rolled her eyes at Ben in the mirror. “They want the half a brick of coke I told you they wanted.” She replaced the cap to her lipstick and turned to face the two men.

“Where we gone get them at?” Jay asked, speaking for the first time since the conversation had started.

Ben shrugged. “I say we get them round the corner from Take One.”

“No!” Cherry cut in. “Y’all aint gone do that shit by my job!”

Ben raised his hands in defense. “A’ight, a’ight. So where?”

“I know!” Jay said, trying to dissolve the tension. “Let’s just do it over there by I-95. You know, the street right there when you coming from Lil’ Haiti.”

Ben dropped his head in his hands, considering carefully the pros and cons of meeting there, his head bobbing back and forth as he thought. Cherry and Jay stared and waited anxiously for his decision. It definitely seemed like the best place. Finally, certain that there wasn’t any where better to meet, he picked up Cherry’s cell phone from the table and handed it to her. “A’ight,” he said, a maniacal grin pulling at his lips. “It’s show time.”

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“You say they was gone be in a black Impala, right?” E asked as he turned the corner on Sixth Ave.

“Yeah,” Lil’ B answered, looking out his window for the car. Just a block down the road, he spotted the one he was looking for. “There they go right there.” He pointed just in front of them with one hand and tapped on E’s shoulder with the other.

E pulled their car into the closest open spot. There were a few cars in between them, but the distance wasn’t too far. Cherry and another man stepped out of the Impala onto the street as he put his car into park.

Lil’ B was already out of the car and standing on the street. He focused his gaze on Cherry and the other man approaching. A strange feeling pulled at his gut the pair walk towards them.



Not wanting them to get any closer, he called out, “Y’all got what I asked for?”

Still walking forward, the tall man answered, “Yeah. We got ours. You got that money?” He was now no more than ten feet away.

E walked up behind Lil’ B, slowly. He suddenly felt on edge, too, but couldn’t explain why. All he knew was that Lil’ B looked just as tense as he felt. E held his hand up to signal to Cherry and the tall man that they weren’t to come any closer. “Let me see the coke first.” Keeping his eyes on the pair in front of them, Lil’ B gave a single head nod to communicate to E that he was feeling the same vibe.

Ben kept his gaze fixed on E and Lil’ B. Ben was certain that they knew something was about to happen. The tension loomed in the air and he could feel it all the way from where he stood. The last thing they needed was panic right now. Swiping his arm in the air, Ben told Cherry, “Go get that shit out the car.” He spoke much louder than necessary.

Cherry turned and made her way back to the car. Opening the back driver's side door, she leaned in as though she was grabbing the coke, but everyone who had arrived in the Impala knew there was nothing there. With her head poked in the car, she waited and listened for the sound of Jay's voice. Three...two...one...

“Y'all fuck niggas put yo' hands up!”

The voice came from behind E and Lil' B. Lil' B focused an accusing glare at Ben. “What's this? A robbery, homeboy?”

Ben had already drawn his 9mm and was now aiming it directly at Lil' B's head. “Yeah, nigga. Where the money at?”

Without hesitation, E answered, “The cash in the back seat.” He knew that losing a few thousand dollars was better than losing a life. He also knew that these fools weren't going to make it far with his money.

“Go get the money,” Ben barked.

Jay turned to grab the money from the back of E's car and Ben glanced back to make sure Cherry was already in the Impala. The last thing they needed was that hoe tying them up and slowing them down because she hadn't followed the plan.

That quick glance was all Lil' B needed to grab his gun, but Ben had turned around before Lil' B had had a chance to aim. Ben yelled to Jay for help. The sound of a shot fired. Instantly, a hot, crippling pain pierced Lil' B's lower back. His legs buckled and he fell to the ground. Sitting up as much as his body would allow, he raised his gun and fired shots towards Ben, who was already retreating to the Impala. He missed. E turned and fired shots at Jay as he climbed into E and Lil' B's car.

The sound of shattering glass filled Jay's ears as he put the car into reverse. Glass shards flew at his face. Ducking his head into the dash, he wheeled the car around. Tires squealing loudly, smoke filling the air, Jay sped away in E and Lil' B's car. Quickly looking over his shoulder, Jay could see the tail

lights of the Impala fading off into the distance. They'd pulled it off, and even better than they'd expected.

E bent down, putting his face directly above Lil' B's. "You a'ight?" His eyes bounced wildly around the street, looking for any sign of help. Seeing none, he wrapped the crook of his arms into Lil' B's. "Lil' one, we got to go," he grunted as he tried to lift Lil' B off the ground. Lil' B's body remained limp.

"Unc, this shit hot." Involuntary tears of pain welled in his eyes. "I can't move. Just get the guns and leave."

E shook his head furiously. "I ain't leaving you here! You done gone crazy!" He tried pulling Lil' B up again.

"You gone hurt that boy," a female voice came from just a few feet away.

E jerked his head up; his gun instinctively came with it. Just in front of them stood a young, pretty little thing with cornrows.

The girl closed her eyes. “Please don’t shoot me.” Her empty palms slowly raised level with her shoulders.

Seeing that the girl was unarmed, E dropped his gun and turned his attention back to Lil’ B. “What am I gone do?”

Lil’ B looked over at the girl standing a few feet away. He didn’t really understand it, but looking at her seemed to help ease his pain. “Just leave me here with her.” He spoke to E, but his gaze still focused on the young woman.

E nodded, but a conflicted feeling flooded over him. How could he just leave Lil’ B? His eyes shot back over to the guns. He had to get them away from here. His gaze then returned to the young woman standing in front of them, her eyes were still filled with fear. Letting out a deep sigh, he decided that he didn’t have much of a choice. “A’ight, hold up.” E stood and took a slow step towards the girl. “Lil’ mama, check this out.” he motioned for her to come closer.

“Okay, but please don’t shoot me.” She took a few hesitant steps forward. She somehow felt pulled in the direction of the man lying on the ground, but she stopped walking as she reached the place where E was now standing, afraid to go any further.

“Look,” E said, digging in his pocket. “I’ll pay you to stay here with him until the police come.”

Warily, she glanced at the money in E’s hand. He nodded at her and shoved it at her, signaling for her to take it. Without another word, she grabbed the money and knelt down on the ground. “You better hurry up,” she said, looking up at E. “I know one of these old people done called the police after hearing all them gun shots.”

Grabbing the guns, E looked over at Lil’ B again. That same conflicted feeling swept over him. Fear and worry creased his brow and tears tried to flood his eyes. “A’ight Lil’ one, I’m gonna go to yo’ gramma’s house.” And with that, he took off running down the street. He focused his gaze forward,

refusing to look back, for fear that he would turn back and risk it all.

The girl's face hovered over Lil' B's. He heard her angelic voice tinkling in his ears. "You gone be a'ight. Just hold on. I hear them coming now."

Her braids danced around her head as she glanced down the street towards the approaching sirens. The sun seemed to form a halo around her head. Lil' B thought to himself, if her face were the last he ever saw, he would die a happy man. "Am I looking at an angel or are you just that beautiful?" he asked.

Heat rose to the girl's cheeks. She'd been hit on hundreds of times, but never by a man that was dying. "Boy, you out here fighting for your life and you trying to run game on me?" She had to admit, he was cute and rather charming. And she couldn't shake this feeling that meeting him was somehow fated.

“Shit, if I die out here, at least I got the chance to meet my soul mate.” A cough sputtered from Lil’ B’s lips as he spoke.

The girl giggled and shook her head. “Boy, you too much.” She grasped his hand and squeezed.

“What’s yo’ name?” Lil’ B asked, pleading with his eyes, hoping she would answer before he passed out. He could feel his consciousness fading.

“Shawntay. But my friends call me Shawn.”

Lil’ B tried to smile. *A beautiful name for such a beautiful girl*, he thought. “Shawn.” His eyelids drooped as he spoke. His voice was barely louder than a whisper. “If I make it through this, I’m gone make you my girl.”

Tears filled Shawn’s eyes. He had to be okay. Meeting him couldn’t be an accident. Behind her, the commotion of men climbing from the ambulance surrounded her, but she barely heard.



“Miss...” a deep male voice pulled her from the face in front of her. “Please step back.”

In shock, Shawn stood up and took several steps back. Tears streamed down her face as she watched the paramedics work over the man on the ground – a man she’d just met but somehow felt connected to.

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“What are we gone do now?” Cherry screamed as she paced the small hotel room, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“What you crying for?” Ben asked, irritated.

“They gone find us!” Her hands flailed wildly as she spoke. “I’m telling you, I know they are.”

Jay stepped forward and tried to comfort her. “Just chill, baby girl. We out of here. We gone leave in the morning.”

Ignoring Jay, Cherry's pacing increased in speed. "Ya'll should have killed them. Out of all the robberies we did, them niggas are the ones y'all should have killed."

"Them niggas bleed just like us," Ben said, dismissing Cherry's concern. *Just like her to overreact.* "Look, we just hit for thirteen g's and an AK and you round here worried 'bout some niggas coming back." He pointed to the loot on the table.

Cherry stopped pacing, slowly turning towards Ben, her eyes wide with fear. "Look, if Rich Kid was out, I would have never put y'all on them." She returned to her pacing, mumbling as she walked circles in the tiny room.

"Cuz, you need to calm down!" Ben yelled. Her pacing and ranting was starting to make him nervous now.

Cherry stormed towards the hotel restroom. Just before entering, she turned back towards Jay and Ben. She screamed with such intensity that her body bent at the waist and her face scrunched. "I ain't leaving this hotel 'til we're ready to get out

of here!” Turning on her heel, she stormed into the restroom. She slammed the door, locking it behind her as Jay and Ben exchanged a nervous look.

## ***Chapter 22***

Still half-asleep, Skinny brought her cell phone to her ear.

“Hello?” Her voice was groggy with sleep.

“Girl, get up!” It was Alicia.

Skinny glanced over at her alarm clock and wondered what Alicia could possibly need at this hour. “What you talking about?” She rolled over onto her back and started to rub the sleep from her eyes.

“Balle got shot tonight.” The struggle to choke back tears made Alicia’s voice weak and throaty. “He at the hospital.”

Skinny shot straight up in bed, all traces of sleepiness now gone. “Where at?” She kicked the covers to the floor. “And where E at?”

“We going to get him from Sue’s house now,” Alicia answered. A lone sob found its way out of her throat and into the phone. To prevent any more from escaping, Alicia held her breath as she waited for Skinny’s response.

“Tell him to call me when y’all get there.” Skinny wriggled into a pair of jeans as she held the phone in the crook of her neck. “And you ain’t told me which hospital.”

“Jackson.” Alicia squeaked out. She couldn’t hold her sobs much longer.

“A’ight,” Skinny replied, snapping her phone shut. Now fully dressed, she snatched her keys and purse from the dresser and sprinted towards the door.

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Skinny paced back and forth between the waiting room chairs mumbling to herself. Every so often, she would flail her arms. She looked as though she'd gone mad. The behavior was making everyone, especially Alicia, more nervous.

“Skinny! Please sit down,” Alicia pleaded, but Skinny showed no sign of having heard her.

“Sis, just let her be,” E said, patting Alicia on the knee.

“But she making me more nervous!”

The ringing of a cell phone filled the waiting room. E, Alicia, Skinny and Sue all checked their phones. Everyone except Skinny returned their cell phones to their original locations.

“Hello?” Skinny answered. She walked towards the mechanical glass doors and stepped outside.

With Skinny now outside, everyone could breathe a little easier. To pass the time, Sue and Alicia watched the silent news broadcast in the waiting room. E glanced around the room at the other people in the waiting room. Over at the far end, he thought he noticed someone he knew, but he couldn't tell for certain. The girl had her face slightly turned away from him, and it obscured his ability to see who she was. After watching the girl twist a tissue in her hand over and over for about five minutes, he finally decided that she probably wasn't going to turn around.

Skinny rushed back into the glass doors and looked around frantically, worried that the phone call had caused her to miss the doctor. After spotting E, Alicia and Sue, her heart rate dropped closer to normal. Now a little calmer than she had been before the phone call, she took a seat on the other side of E. Placing her elbows on her knees and her head in her hands, she fought the urge to cry.

“Here come the doctor,” Alicia said.

“Are you the family of Balle Williams?” the doctor now standing in front of them asked.

Everyone stood and nodded. Unbeknownst to anyone in the group, another family member had joined them as the straight-faced doctor delivered the news. “We’ve removed the bullet, but it wasn’t easy. It was located just inches from his spine. He has also lost a lot of blood from the wound itself. We’re giving him some donated blood now. The next twenty-four hours are crucial in his prognosis, so we’re just going to have to see how he does.”

The heart of everyone standing there sunk. Sue’s loud, uncontrollable sobs filled the waiting room as she ran away to the restroom, holding a tissue to her face. E wrapped his arm around Alicia as she quietly sobbed. Skinny stiffened her body and stood up straight. “Can we see him?” she asked.

“Yes,” the doctor nodded. “But only two at a time, and not for long. We need to concentrate on getting him some rest. I’ll send someone down when he’s ready.” With that, the doctor



disappeared behind the swinging metal doors into the inner depths of the hospital.

Turning to face E and Alicia, Skinny suddenly noticed the silent intruder. Her eyes narrowed and her fists balled. “What the fuck you want?” She was ready to pounce.

The girl took a step back. She looked like a frightened little child. It was that moment that something clicked inside E’s memory. “Sis! She’s good,” he said, thrusting his arm in front of Skinny.

Skinny turned her narrowed eyes towards E. “What the fuck you mean?”

“This the girl I told to stay with Lil’ one,” E replied, keeping his tone calm and quiet to help ease Skinny back down.

“I-I’m Shawn,” the young girl stuttered, her eyes still teary pools of fear. She took a nervous step forward and extended

her hand towards E. In it, she held the money he had given her just hours before. “Here’s your money.”

E dismissed her with a swat of the air. “Keep it, it’s yours,” he replied before turning and walking back towards his seat.

Skinny relaxed back to her new state of normalcy, which was really quite far from her regular normal, but she knew she had to hold it together right now. Everyone needed her to be strong, especially Balle. Looking around at the worried faces that surrounded her, she decided it was time for a food run. She needed to get away from all of this, even if for just a moment. And food might help improve everyone’s morale. “Y’all want something to eat from McDonald’s?” she asked.

Everyone spoke up and gave their orders, everyone except Shawn. Skinny looked over at Shawn and asked, “What? You don’t want nothing?”

Shawn looked over at Skinny and then at everyone sitting around her. “You talking to me?” she asked, pointing a finger at her chest.

“Yeah.” Skinny raised a hand slowly in acceptance of Shawn’s presence. “You good. Matter fact. You can come help me bring the food back.”

Shawn looked nervously over at E, silently asking him if accompanying Skinny was safe.

E cocked a sideways smile. “She good. That’s my sister and Lil’ one’s old girl.” But Shawn stayed planted in her spot.

Rolling her eyes, Skinny charged forward, took a hold of Shawn’s hand and pulled her up from her seat. “Come on, girl. I ain’t gonna do nothing to you.” Reluctantly, Shawn followed.

As the elevator doors closed Shawn and Skinny inside, Skinny turned and faced the young girl standing next to her. “What do you think of our Family?”

Shawn bit her lower lip, unsure of how to answer. Hesitantly, she replied, “You seem cool...why you ask me that?”

Skinny smiled. “Cause I know my son. He ain’t gone let nothing as fine as you pass him by.” She then turned back towards the elevator doors.

Shawn quietly considered Skinny’s statement for a moment. “So you telling me he really was trying to run game on me while he was lying there fighting for his life?”

The elevator dinged and the doors opened. Stepping forward, Skinny shrugged. “Depends on what he told you.”

Shawn followed a few steps behind Skinny. “What if he told me I was his soul mate?”

Skinny grinned, stopped, turned and faced Shawn. “Welcome to the family.”

“What you talking about?” Shawn asked, again following Skinny as she walked down the long hallway.

Skinny laughed loudly. The sound echoed against the corridor walls. “He ain’t run no game on you. He meant what he said,” Skinny answered, talking over her shoulder. Shawn picked up her pace to catch up. “Come on,” Skinny said. “I got some clean clothes in the car. Let’s get them bloody clothes off you.”

“Thanks for everything,” Shawn said as she and Skinny passed through the doors out into the parking lot. She pulled the money from her pocket again. “And give your brother back his money,” she said, shoving it towards Skinny. “He won’t take it from me.”

Skinny shook her head. “Shawn, look. Anybody that works gets paid in the family. E paid you to stay with Lil’ one, so that was your job at the time. That’s yo’ money. He ain’t gone take it back from you, not through me or anybody else.”

“Can I ask you another question?” Shawn asked as she and Skinny climbed into the Charger.

“Yeah, wuz up?”

Shawn’s brow creased in confusion. “How is Balle your son if y’all look the same age?”

Skinny chuckled. “It’s a long story. If you want to know, you gone have to ask Lil’ one ‘cause I don’t know if he wants you to know all that yet.”

Even more confused than she was when she’d started the conversation, Shawn silently watched the city lights pass by through the passenger window as they made their way to the closest McDonald’s.

After Shawn changed inside of the car, she and Skinny went into McDonald’s to order before heading back to the hospital. The wait back at the hospital was excruciating. Everyone ate in silence. It seemed as though they had waited

for hours, but just ten minutes after everyone had finished eating, a nurse came and met them in the waiting room.

“Are you the family of Balle Williams?”

“Yes,” Skinny answered as she stood. Shawn also stood. Everyone had agreed that they would be the first two to visit Lil’ B.

After sitting with him for fifteen minutes, Skinny and Shawn headed back down to the waiting room so that Sue and Alicia could go for their turn. E would go last.

While waiting for E to return from his time with Lil’ B, the women discussed who would stay with Lil’ B overnight; the nurse had informed them that only one could stay.

“I’ll stay with him,” Shawn said. Alicia looked over at Skinny, her mouth hung open in shock.

“I’m gone stay with my baby,” Sue said firmly. She stood up, head shaking and hands on her hips.

“Ma,” E’s voice came from behind them. He’d entered the waiting room just in time to hear the end of the conversation. “Let Shawn stay. She proving her loyalty.”

Sue pouted and threw her body back into the chair heavily. “A’ight. But I’m gone be out here tomorrow.” Her arms remained crossed over her chest.

Skinny handed Shawn a small piece of paper. “It’s on you Shawn. If you get ready to leave, just call this number and let us know.” Releasing a loud sigh, she turned towards Sue and signaled with her arm that it was time for them to go.

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“Man, Raw, something ain’t right,” Richard said, rolling over on his bunk. The movement sent a sharp pain through his lower back.



“What you mean, fam?” Bam called up from his own bunk.

“I just feel it.” Richard pulled himself into a seated position. That only intensified the pain further. “My back been fucking with me all night.”

“What? You got back problems?”

“Naw, man.” Richard slowly climbed down from his bunk. Holding his lower back with one hand, he turned to face Bam. “Something done happened to one of my niggas. This how I felt when my big brother got hit up.”

Richard’s noticeable pain was a little unnerving to Bam – his color was paler than normal and grimaces of pain would cross his face every few seconds, particularly when he shifted tried to move.

“Go jump on the phone,” Bam replied, wondering if he should help Richard walk over to the phone. “Go see if everything cool.”

“I know what I’m going to do.” Pulling himself into an upright standing position, Richard fought through the stabbing pain and walked towards the correction officer’s desk. “Ms. Jackson, call baby girl. See if everything okay.”

Kita stood up from her seat and picked her cell phone up off her desk. “A’ight,” she replied, looking a little confused. “Let me go to the bathroom. I’ll call her in there.”

As she walked away, the pain in Richard’s back intensified. He tried to wait patiently for her to return, but the pain was now almost unbearable. After ten minutes that, to Richard, felt more like an hour, he finally saw her walking towards him from the bathroom. “What happened?” he asked before she’d even reached him.

“She say Lil’ one got shot in the back tonight.” Tears filled Kita’s eyes. “They at the hospital now.”

The moment the news hit his ears, the pain in his back stopped. “I knew it. I knew something wasn’t right. I felt that

shit!” Richard began to pace the floor in front of Kita. Every few seconds, he would grab his ear between his thumb and forefinger. His breathing started to pick up and he could feel his heart racing in his chest. He couldn’t remember ever struggling this much to control his emotions. Turning to a worried, frightened Kita, Richard held out his hand. “Let me hold your phone. I got to call somebody.” He fought to keep his voice under control, but his tone still more closely resembled the low growl of an animal.

Seeing the fear in Kita’s eyes, Richard forced a smile to his face. He thought how scary that smile must look right now, but he hoped it was enough to calm her, at least a little. He wasn’t angry with her, but he was, most definitely angry.

Kita nodded and handed over her cell phone. “A’ight.” She couldn’t really understand why she felt so afraid. She knew she had no reason to fear Richard. Watching Richard walk away, she suddenly realized that her uneasiness wasn’t a fear of him,

but a fear of what he was going to do to the poor soul that had shot Lil' B.









Richard A Robinson, pseudonym R.A. Robinson, born January 24 1985 in Miami, Florida is an expert in personal branding for the crime-fiction audience, e-book author, and contributor to a locally recognized Blog. Richard wrote most of the Thuggin In Miami series while serving a four-year sentence within the Florida prison system. Born, raised, and currently living in Liberty City, he has first-hand experience in the events, livelihood, and lifestyle of the “hood”. His motion-picture method of writing places the reader in the passenger seat, while he drives them through the storyline.





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**-R.A. Robinson**



## Message from the Author

I wrote this novel under duress; it was written while sitting in the “box” for weeks on end. Writing calmed my rowdiness, and was the only thing that felt natural, and real to me. I needed something to do, to keep my sanity, and my sanity lied within the pen. Now, I have learned that there is a greater purpose for my writing.

I wrote this novel to impose a story to the children, young adults, and adults within all classes, and communities. In my past, I lived a wild and reckless lifestyle. I have a gift, and prison allowed me to find my gift. Today I think to myself that if I had just spent more time studying, spent a little more time working on my education, just a little more time out of the streets, and inside of my books, maybe I would have ran down a different path to end up at this same point in my life, my destiny.

I believe that everyone on this earth has his and her own purpose, everyone has a gift, and everyone has a destiny. My message to the world is, “Don’t let your peers, or your environment lead you astray. Follow the lit path, and it will guide you on your way, TOWARDS YOUR DESTINY.”

***-R.A. Robinson***

