

“In Jalita’s world, everyone is fair game, and she has a scheme for us all.
Andrea Blackstone brings a new voice to the literary world.”

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Baltimore, MD

“Emotionally forced to grow up fast and learn how to survive by any means necessary, Jalita La Shay Harrison is a prime example of how keeping your pockets “laced” is irrelevant when it comes to life’s most treasure blessings.”

—Monique Baldwin
founder of A Nu Twista Flavah

“The book’s main character Jalita has drama with a capital DRAMA. From the first page, the author sets you up for one of the quickest reads ever. The book is interesting and real life lessons linger well after your read is complete . . . Ms. Blackstone is sure to shake up the publishing game with her street fiction with a splash of morality debut novel.
I give this book a ten!”

—Kalico Jones
Author of When Gucci Came First

“Two thumbs up for Schemin’. I enjoyed Schemin’ from the beginning to the end. The characters are so magnetic they pull you into their lives to experience the drama with them . . . an absorbing page turner you won’t put down until the last page is read.”

—Regina Neequaye
Author of 360 Degrees . . . Life is a Full Circle

\$CHEMIN'

CONFESSIONS OF A GOLD DIGGER

A novel by
Andrea Blackstone

DREAM WEAVER PRESS

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DEDICATION

This novel is dedicated to young girls and women who grew up in adverse circumstances, anyone who has been seduced by the desire to live large at any cost, and anyone who is searching for the strength to become empowered and remain independent.

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SETTING IT UP

My name is Jalita La Shay Harrison, and I'd like to officially welcome you in to my jacked-up world. Me and my big mouth have been on this earth for almost twenty years, and for twenty years I've endured living a chaotic, dysfunctional life. The madness started when my irresponsible parents made a choice not to use condoms or some other form of birth control back in '83. As a result, my childhood memories include covering my ears with both hands while hiding in the nearest closet when my parents began cussing, fussing, fighting, and fucking to make up, then forgetting all about taking care of what should have been their first priority: me. That cycle was a daily occurrence until they got sick of living with responsibilities they created. My Black dad went his way and my White mom eventually went hers. The next thing I knew I was unpacking in foster home after foster home where I found out that no one caters to little abandoned Black girls. They cater to abandoned White infants. Rent-a-fathers saw fit to try to molest me and rent-a-mothers saw fit to beat and belittle me just because they could get away with it.

After I figured out that I was bound to end up in an overcrowded group home, and my pocketknife I began hiding as protection couldn't always assist me in keeping my privates off limits, I ran away at fifteen. I rolled out of the last rental home with no plan but not to go back to foster care; not to get tangled up with a drug dealer pushing a Mercedes, ruthless thugs, or criminals; and not to wear the teenage public assistance momma crown. My mission in life was to escape from poverty, street politics, and noisy squad cars in Baltimore City, and live in the suburbs with pretty trees, a nice yard, and work the kind of job that required wearing stockings, heels, and toting a briefcase someday. I wanted to become the kind of grounded adult who would shake off the dead weight of my past, reaping the benefits of adequate planning, and behaving like I had good sense. In a perfect world that plan would've had merit but the world is anything but perfect.

A snafu at college over Christmas break of 2003 started an avalanche of new drama I needed like a hole in my head. After being double-crossed one time too many, experience taught me that I need to

take my big head out of the clouds and accept that nice people are perceived as stupid pushovers—this ruthless world is no place for the honest, naive, passive, or financially deprived. I reevaluated how I approached life and decided to deal with the people in it as if no one could be trusted. In turn, I made a pact with myself that I would never play the fool again. I would always pink-slip someone who owns a penis first and also concluded that I couldn't trust anyone else with estrogen, which meant having zero home girls. It was all about me, my needs, and wants, only I expressed that to others in a sly way. Not one sucker would see I was the type of woman whom he should run from if I headed his way 'cause I hid my agenda behind my good looks, ability to use my silver tongue, and quit wit, all of which could keep a typical man easily distracted. I became my own business product and my own saleswoman to sell it—even to eccentric men with whom most women wouldn't consider spending time. I learned from observing drug dealers hustle that one should never discriminate against a paying customer: All money spends.

Using my best assets to raise petty cash was a temporary solution to get me through a rough spot—I was needy, not greedy—until I took one taste of schemin' and got hooked. Having easy access to dead presidents became an addiction since I'd been forced to go without basic necessities like food, shelter, clothes, and a decent health care plan at many turns in life. I started gold digging to survive without returning to the streets where I vowed I'd never end up again, if even for a short time. So when a once-in-a-lifetime kind of opportunity seemed to drop out of the sky when I was in dire need of paper, this greedy woman surfaced from within me that I didn't know existed. I developed an insatiable appetite for snatching any handout that was being offered by a duped man. At this point, I had a choice between returning to a situation where I was barely getting by or one in which I could live large if I kept ego stroking a man with long paper, so I did what most people would do—you fill in the blank.

Now I know that you snooty, judgmental females out there are ready to cop a righteous attitude, but you can't fathom what you

would do if you were nineteen years old and in my shoes with the background noise of growing up in a dysfunctional environment and along the way you met a handsome NBA player who said he'd take care of you if you kept the hook-up on the down low. You don't wear my shoes so don't lie about what you say you'd do until you know the whole story. And as for you men out there, too many of you pick the women who walk over you like sidewalks, not the ones who don't stress you out, legitimately treat you like you're someone special, and would still like your ass if you were broke. If you fit this description, zip your lips in the morality department. I just wanted to get all of that straight from jump.

Not too many groupies, actresses, and everyday women who messed with a basketball star or slept with a man for some ends are gonna put themselves on blast and tell their personal shit like I'm about to do. If they ran their mouths then you'd know what to do to get what they got, or men who care about their paper would know how to stay away from lady pimps who discretely flip the script. I'm qualified to testify that schemin' ain't all peaches and cream. What I thought was paradise turned out to be a big slice of hell that still leaves me shedding tears. After I take a deep breath, I'll be ready to explain why a few more folks and me took a trip to a separate corner of hell on Earth. Okay people, here it goes.

1

A ROUND OF MISBEHAVIN'

“Tony,” I say spiritedly.

“*Jalita?*” he answers with surprise.

“Yeah, it’s me all right.”

“What the fuck? It’s Christmas Eve.”

“I think I noticed. So, are you going to invite me over?”

“Over where?”

“To your crib. Where else, fool?” I peevishly remark.

“You haven’t called me, in what, a year?”

“And what about it?”

“So why are you dialing my digits now?”

“Why not holler at my boy now? You act like your phone number has an expiration date or something. Look, do you or don’t you want to see me live and in living color?”

Tony chuckles the way a man with a confirmed agenda does. Then he adds, “I’ve got plans.”

I challenge him by saying, “Undo them. I just rode seven hours and twenty minutes total on two crowded Greyhound buses, and I’m not feelin’ like chatting over the damn phone in twenty-degree weather. I can’t even feel my toes—they’re completely numb.” There’s a gap of silence for about ten seconds.

Tony clears his throat, then asks, “You want to see me, just like that? It’s not like I was expecting your call or any shit like that.”

“You’re the one who always told me to call you anytime. Plus, I’ve got something you’ve been wanting for years, so yes, just like that,” I say to tempt him.

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"Are you telling me you're down for a round of misbehavin'?" Tony's pitch changes. His voice loosens up.

To feel him out, I sit on the fence with my response, and reply, "Possibly. I'm legal now. I'm not a puny fifteen-year-old girl anymore."

"Well damn, what a Christmas present. Where you at, ma?"

"Me revealing information of that sort depends on your plans."

Tony loses no time responding, and asks, "What plans?"

I blurt out, "That's more like it. At the Popeyes over on West Fayette Street."

"Give me fifteen—no, better make that twenty," Tony says energetically, sounding like he took a swig of liquid ginseng and got an instant energy boost.

"Got some explaining to do, huh?"

"Uh, yeah. Something to that effect."

"Well hurry up. I'm cold and wet, and I'm not tryna have to knock somebody out on these streets tonight."

"Okay, okay."

"Don't take forever and carry me like a chump, Tony."

"Now that ain't gonna happen. Bye."

"It better not. Bye," I respond then hang up.

I let out a sigh of relief because I know Tony's word is as good as it gets. I don't care what he's gotta do, what plans he's gotta break, and who he's gotta lie to to get over here to rescue me from my personal hell because all I've got is \$5.14 in my purse, my best friend ditched me, and I wanna forget that I had that nasty run-in with Ebony, my R.A., even if it means I've gotta pay a price to do it. After all I've been through, having sex with a man I secretly care about can't be that complicated or traumatic.

When I ran away from my foster parents, the Rodells, Tony surely wasn't obligated to put food in my mouth or let me spend the night at his place on occasion until I got myself together enough to get a gig on the Harbor while working on getting my GED. He could've left me in Druid Hill Park where he first laid eyes on me tryna rest on a park bench when I balled up my jacket and used it for a pillow. When I confided in him about the abuse I'd endured, he gave me my share of you-can-make-it-Jalita speeches. Anytime a music producer with his own company tells you that he built his shit at twenty starting with a five-thousand-dollar small business loan, and you can accomplish something, too, you start believing like he's a damn prophet who said it's so. He even let me sit on a recording sessions with a famous singer a few times. That's why I look up Tony C. Jones, my one and only mentor. He's got it goin' on.

I know it's kinda freaky for a nineteen-year-old to contemplate laying up with her thirty-five-year-old mentor, but it is what it is. I'm legal now, plus, I developed a crush on him over the years. I use to get these vibes that he liked me back but wanted to respect the fact that I was under age. After looking at all of the facts, Tony is worthy to be my first, so there's no use holding on to my virginity one more day. There's no real soul mate waiting for an abused, emotionally battered half-breed with bad luck. I might as well use what I've got to get the comfort of having what I need, at least this once. I hope Tony handles his business promptly and comes correct 'cause this ma has never been the patient type. If his ass is molasses slow, I just may change my mind about my booty-call plans.



Tony looks and smells good, real good. Good enough for me to pretend he's my man, and I'm his woman, and we are about to make love for the very first time. He's rocking these ultra-neat cornrows that look like he had them done by some creative top stylist in New York. They barely touch his shoulders. Not too long, but not too short either. The Negro reminds me of a chocolate-dipped, rough-neck Fabio. So when he says, "Dance with me. Come on, boo" in a velvety smooth voice, and pulls me into the center of his chest, enveloping me within his heated warmth, I know that Jalita can't leave his crib a virgin. But me feelin' like we're on the cover of a romance novel is for me to know and his butt to figure out.

"I'm still wet from the shower, and my hair's all curly and nappy," I complain as I look up at him.

"Girl, you look even better than I remember. You've gotten PHAT in all caps! Those curls are sexy. The natural thing is in. I know if anyone can work it, it will be you. Two years has done you good. They say most people gain weight in college but your pounds fell just right, everywhere important."

"I know I've gotten thick, and I'm use to having more of me now. I'm tired of dealing with this head of mess though. Maybe by the time my hair grows out, I'll have enough funds to get some of those stylish Alicia Keys braids," I say. I'm fresh out of mousse or hair oil to make it act right. I freed myself from being a perm addict a year ago due to my lack of funds, so I've got to face what Mother Nature gave me. Tony's compliment makes me nervous, but flatters me at the same time.

"It looks great. Stop worrying about your wig. Hold on tight and

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just groove with me to prove I didn't break out my new Brian McKnight CD for nothing," Tony says, grinning and grabbing my waist.

"I'm cold. I don't have any night clothes."

I maintain a stone face, but Tony keeps working on my ego by saying, "Women like you don't need no clothes, just heat to keep you warm in a nigga's crib."

"Well I'm use to clothes, and in case you haven't noticed, it's winter and I got caught in the soaking rain."

"Let me go find you something, if it's that critical to you, Jalita. While I'm at it, I'll throw your clothes in the dryer. Give me a few. I'm going down the hall to the laundry room." Tony disappears from view. I hear change clank while it sounds like its sliding out of some jar.

In less than five minutes he returns. I can tell he's slightly annoyed that I'm being difficult while he's tryna set the mood for romance.

"How's this?" he asks, holding up a red silky, short nightie that is at least worth forty bucks.

"Nice stuff. Who does this belong to?" I ask while inspecting the garment.

"Do you want it or not, girl?"

"Answer my question first," I insist.

"Damn, you're just bent on trying to fuck shit up. You know you women are always leaving shit behind at a nigga's crib. Some old girlfriend left it a long time ago. Satisfied?" Tony snaps.

"Fine. Give it here," I say and slide into it.

"What about thank you, Tony?"

"Thanks, but dag, it's not mine."

"Now can we dance?"

"I'm standing here, aren't I?" I put my arms around him like we're deep in love.

"Mmm. Girl, I can't believe this is happening. So you turn nineteen and finally come to your senses," he says, bending and pressing his right cheek against mine. We begin to sway from side to side.

"How'd you get such a nice crib? The rent's gotta be at least a grand for one bedroom and knowing you you've got two bedrooms."

"Stop trying to ruin the romance. Will you stop this bogus shit? Same old Jalita," he says, kissing me behind my ear, then using his tongue to massage my canal.

"That feels so good."

"It's supposed to."

"Your phone is ringing. Aren't you going to answer it?" I tell him slow-

ly as I travel to some erotic zone where life only feels good and perfect.

"Fuck the phone. I'm not gonna let you go ever again. It's probably one of my boys checking in. I waited four years for this night, and I'm not trying to hear what he's got to say right now."

"Tony, I don't feel right. Make it stop ringing."

"Okay, okay," he says. He releases me, then goes over to touch a button on the side of the noisemaker.

"It's off. No more interruptions. Now where was I, for the tenth time?" Tony says sarcastically.

"I'm not sure," I say, laying my head on his shoulder.

"Well since you can't remember, go in the bedroom and let me give you something to jog that memory of yours."

"Maybe I will." I feel his eyes glued on my ass as I walk into the bedroom.

I slide between the satin sheets and close my eyes. It feels so good to be dry and warm, and I pretend Tony loves me. I could be content living in this moment for the rest of my life. Tony comes in, hits a dimmer switch on the wall, opens the blinds that cover two windows, and walks toward the bed with lust lighting up his dark brown eyes.

"Why'd you open the blinds?"

"Damn, Jalita, you act like you're still a virgin or something. It's romantic to make love under the moonlight, don't you think?" Tony asks.

"I guess so."

"Are you telling me you still haven't had any?" he questions. I don't answer and look away in silence.

Tony says, "Awww, boo. I'm sorry. I just assumed that one of those horny college niggas tapped this juicy ass by now."

"Well a horny college woman tried to tap this ass earlier today," I mumble.

"What?"

"Yeah, that's why I'm here. I finally get accepted into a Historically Black College only to be officially disrespected when I begin making some headway. The only thing I may have now is what I was able to carry out of the dorm."

"Slow down. What happened?"

"Well in a nutshell, Ebony Tyler, a resident assistant at my dorm, told me this Mr. Moore guy in charge of housing didn't give her the green light for me to staying the dorm over the Christmas break. I knew that I didn't have anywhere to lay my head so I requested that I stay and visited his office at least three times to confirm things. Ebony told me

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that I should've put my belongings in storage and gone back to whomever birthed or put up with me before enrolling in Bentley. She had plans to roll out to Brooklyn in the morning. The next thing I know Ebony implied that Sharon Diggs, my only friend, ditched me to get freaky with this woman in Washington, D.C. I began to feel that she was telling the truth 'cause naked pictures of Sharon were pasted in an album with other woman posing in the buff. I held the photo album while Ebony started telling me dick ain't nothing but a headache on layaway and women need to get liberated from the brothas that think they have it made treating us wrong."

"So a gay woman was trying to pull you. So what, Jalita? If I were a gay woman I'd be interested in you, too," Tony says, laughing.

"Wait, there's more. Before I had a chance to blink, Ebony pulled out a strap-on and told me I could stay in the dorm if I bent my fat ass over and calmed down her throbbing pussy. Before it was all said and done I couldn't hold in my desire to retaliate when she squeezed my ass, stuck her tongue into my mouth, and started reaching for my punani. I punched her square in the jaw as hard as I could manage. She fell to the floor and slid across the room like her pants were lubed up with Crisco. She starting dialing up campus security. I ran up to my room, grabbed a few things that I stuffed into a duffel bag along with my book bag and got the hell out of dodge, so here I am." By the time I finish my story, Tony stops laughing.

He says, "Oh, damn. That was going too far. I've always heard gay women can be as aggressive as men. A strap-on, huh? Well I'm all man with real equipment who can make you forget all about the stunt Ebony tried to pull. I've got your back over the holiday. Now do you want the shades closed or the lights off?"

"No, I'm cool, but I have one more problem."

"What now?" Tony asks.

I blurt out, "My money is funny. I started out with eighty bucks. The cab from Bentley to the train station set me back eleven. The roundtrip Greyhound bus ticket set me back another fifty-nine. After the second transfer, I blew \$4.86 on some grub from Popeyes. Now all I've got is a measly \$5.14 in my purse."

"That's all, Jalita? I've got your back. Stop worrying and please stop busting the flow of what's happening between us now. I'm not Ebony, so leave that gay ma's drama back in Norfolk."

"Thanks, Tony. I knew I could count on you."

"It's no big thang, boo," he answers.

Tony lays down next to me, pushes the nightie up, and slides his fingers into my vagina. I feel it getting all slippery and wet as my nipples harden and rise toward the heavens. I feel like I'm in heaven, and maybe I've crossed over into the after-life.

Tony softly whispers in my ear, "You like that, don't you?"

"Maybe," I say as my heart begins to race. I know I do, but I try to play cool like I'm unfazed.

Tony climbs on top of me and rubs his penis close to my wet spot.

"Sweet love, you ready for me to love you?" he asks, looking so deeply into my eyes, I can barely think of a response.

Instead, I say, "Love me?"

"Yeah, love you."

"Tony, who's gonna love me?" I belt out with a sincere confidence that I have every right to know where he's coming from.

"I am," he assures me.

"No, Tony. I'm not talking about just tonight. Do you really love me? Are you gonna be there for me? Can we be partners in the end? If this doesn't have a future to it, this wouldn't be a good idea because—"

Tony interrupts me and says, "Shhhh, stop all of that bullshit. I don't have anyone special, and I'm not going anywhere. I hope we'll be a team for a very long time, if things go well. Trust me. I'm not out to hurt you one bit, and I'm not that kind of brother anyway, so just chill out. You know I've always liked you better than anyone else. Do you understand where I'm coming from, boo?" Tony kisses me gently on the forehead, then looks at me with tenderness in his eyes. The kind that every woman wants a man to show her when it counts the most.

"I think I hear what you're saying," I answer. Tony tears open the condom wrapper and covers his erect penis.

"Good. Just relax your muscles," he whispers softly as he strokes my face and hair.

"Oww, it hurts. This is what I waited to feel? I thought making love was supposed to be a good thing," I say as I flinch and close my eyes.

"Give it a little time. It'll go away. I'll push it in nice and easy."

"If you say so," I mutter, waiting for it to feel good.

In a few moments, it does. Before I know it, I'm moaning and making erotic sounds I've never released from my vocal cords. I can't believe my romance novel fantasy is coming true, but it is. Tony is rhythmically thrusting his powerful hips against me, and we're both drenched in hot, lusty sweat. Hours pass, and I've grown use to the shadows dancin' on the opposite wall. I've heard about one-minute men, but Tony sure-

ly isn't a member of that club. He's still lovin' me up, and I finally experience my first orgasm in life, drinking the feelin' of the intense physical release. I hear the front door lock click, then open. My body shuts down as quickly as the incredibly good feelin' rose up.

"Did you hear something?" I ask, flinching again.

"No," he says, still grinding on top of me.

"Shhh. I think somebody's in here," I say as I tense up.

"Look, this is my place, and I run this. Nobody's in here, and nobody's got a key to my crib. If you didn't notice, this is a controlled-access building. Now let's finished what we started, boo," Tony says in a cocky tone, still working his hips.

"It may be controlled access, nigga, but somebody's in here all right."

"Who's that, Tony?" I say, pulling the sheets on top of Tony's naked body. He hops up like a bolt of lightning. I pull down the nightie and sit up in the bed.

The woman hits the dimmer switch on the wall. With revenge in her eyes, she moves toward me, asking, "Who are you, bitch, is more like it, and why are you wearing my lingerie?"

"Your lingerie? Tony gave it on me to put on because I was cold. I hope I don't catch crabs or somethin' fatal," I say to taunt her.

"Now, Charlene, I can explain," Tony says, throwing himself between us.

She spits back, "Fast, nigga. It better be lightning fast!"

"Who are you?" I interject with much attitude.

"His damn fiancée who pays half the rent. His baby's momma, bitch. Now what you got to say about all of that?"

"What?" I scream as I inch into a corner of the room.

"So this is your sick aunt, nigga? I came to bring you some damn homemade sweet potato pie so you'd have something good to come home to, after worrying over your aunt who's supposed to be laying up in ICU after having a heart attack, and you're in here getting laid by some freak of the week? You had me thinking I needed to drive all the way to Capitol Heights to take our son to my momma's house tonight so I could console your ass, when you were supposed to come back tired and in need of a fucking good night's sleep? And where's the baby's picture and my picture? Oh, so you think your black ass is slick, I see," Charlene says.

"I don't know where the pictures are, baby. Maybe they fell over when I was cleaning or something," Tony lies, nervously scratching between his cornrows.

"You know good and well your ass don't clean. I'm sure they fell over all right while you were banging this barely legal bitch on my Downy fresh sheets. Aww naaaaw. Charlene Margaret Daniels don't play this shit!" she says, taking off her gold rings, bracelets, and large hoop earrings. "Where's my damn Vaseline? Niggas be tryin' to run game. No-good motherfucking players. I've got something for you. I can get down your way, if that's how you want to roll," she mumbles.

"Whhhahaaat you need Vaseline for, baby? I told you I can explain," Tony says.

"I'm 'bout to whip some ass and tear your shit up. The hell if I'm gettin' scars doin' it."

"Hey sista, I'm not even in this mess. I didn't know he was in a relationship," I tell her, running across the room, tryna put a bid in for my ass to be spared from whatever brutal act was running through her mind.

Charlene turns to me, and says, "But did you just ask?"

I look her dead in the eyes, and reply, "I asked several questions, and he said he didn't have anyone special, if you must know, Ms. Daniels." At this point we both have our hands on our hips like we're having a standoff at high noon in a Clint Eastwood western movie.

Charlene nods to the left and says, "Did you bother to push the damn bedroom closet door open or check under the bathroom cabinet for signs of another bitch? If you had, your ass would have seen everything from clothes to tampons and douche bottles."

I'm beginning to become hypnotized by her fake dancin' ponytail, and tell her, "Shut up your clucking, you chicken head. I had no reason to snoop in someone else's goods. I'm no ghetto bitch. How was I supposed to know Tony goes around sharing his pinky-sized dick? I took Tony's word for what he said, and what he said was that he had no one special. Don't blame me because you've got a weak-ass fake negro on your hands who you made a baby with and are stuck dealing with until your little Ray Ray or whatever the kid's name is grows up. And look, you took off all of your other jewelry, aren't you going to take off that \$99.95 cubic zirconia engagement ring, girl? I know he's taken, now, so there's no need to cock block by flashing some fake ice," I fire back.

"Oh, so now you talkin' trash about me, my ring, my man, and makin' fun of my baby boo?"

"It appears he's not your man, just your part-time piece when you come home, announced. No, my fault, I take that back 'cause I'm supposed to be the dumb bitch, and your genius ass knows everything. Let the record speak for itself. He was kissing this body right here and shar-

ing my sexual energy when you reminded him he forgot all about your ass. What you got to say about all of that, Charlene?”

“Stop. Stop. Both of you,” Tony interjects, blocking Charlene from walking toward me. She acts like a woman scorned, and is operating with the attention span of a kid with attention deficit disorder. Charlene drops our conversation, looks Tony up and down, smacks him like he’s a cheap trick who didn’t bring a pimp enough cash, spits in his face, walks over to his stereo, then kicks it like she’s determined to break it on her first attempt. She grabs an African wooden statue of a warrior and throws it at the dresser mirror. Glass falls and crashes, then she flings open a top drawer and starts grabbing jewelry.

“No, not my sound system and bedroom set. Please Charlene, stop. I’m sorry. I’ll never do this again. Please baby, please,” Tony pleads, ignoring the large glob of spit streaming down his nose and rubbing his cheek.

“Since you jumped in my way to protect the bitch, I’m gonna take this out on everything I can get my hands on that your selfish ass values. You better not hit me back neither ’cause I’d love to call the police on your unfaithful ass on Christmas Eve,” she informs him.

“Come on now. We can work this out, and you know I don’t hit on no women,” Tony says as he follows Charlene out of the bedroom and into the bathroom. “Can’t we have a civil conversation about this, Charlene?” Tony pleads, standing in the doorway of the bathroom. I hear her grabbing things, then returning to the bedroom with a bottle of Clorox. I scan the room for an exit, but I know I’m not tryna jump off nobody’s balcony. I work as hard as I can to tie the strings of my pleather sneakers, in a bona fide hurry. I’m still wearing Charlene’s nightie but my clothes are in some laundry room, so all I can do is throw on my coat. I begin to swear to myself.

“Oh, so now you want to talk and give a bitch conversation? Oh no, fuck the come-lately shit,” Charlene says. She flings the metal closet doors open, throws Tony’s clothes on the bed, and pours bleach all over the pile. Charlene lets the plastic jug fall to the floor, opens the balcony door, returns to the closet, grabs an assortment of shoes, then hurls enough over the balcony to cause Tony to have to work barefoot until he shoe shops. The drops of bleach have already begun to make these white craters on the tan carpet, and I’m thinking they can kiss their security deposit good-bye, but that was Charlene’s doing, not mine.

“How could you do that to my work clothes and shoes? And look at this carpet. Shit, Charlene. Would you please calm down?” Tony says,

holding his head with both hands like he's grown a migraine headache.

"Shut up. Your ass is gonna pay for gettin' with a Happy Meal kind of bitch when you've got a Big Mac kind of a woman right up in here. And the clothes bleaching was for Little Tony," she shrieks.

"I do love you and Little Tony. I do, baby. You and Little Man are my world. I just made a dumb mistake. She don't mean shit to me. I barely even know this ho," Tony responds, pointing at me.

Charlene storms into the kitchen and removes something flat from a paper bag. I peep around the corner. Then I hear a high-pitched, "See this, nigga?"

"See what, Charlene?"

"This is what I think of you, your lying, and your dick sharing," she shouts and whops Tony in the face with a large sweet potato pie. He's struggling to see, wiping two holes from his eyes to view what he's in for next. By this time, Charlene has reached into a plastic bag, grabbed a handful of walnuts, and begins throwing them in Tony's direction.

As Tony is ducking and shrinking back, I throw my book bag on my back, grab my duffel bag and take one look around the room. My eyes halt on Charlene's purse. While they're arguing at the top of their lungs and are engaged in a walnut chase, I find her wallet, grab all of her cash, which amounts to four one-hundred-dollar bills and five ones and snatch a small bag sitting next to her purse. I tiptoe out of the apartment door and decide to take the stairwell instead of the elevator. Once I'm around the corner, I spot Tony running after Charlene who's screaming about how much damage she's going to do to his Escalade.

"You better get back in the apartment, you naked dog," she screams at Tony. I notice her weapons have been upgraded to toting a snow shovel in her left hand and a canned good in the right.

"Baby, please, not my ride. Pleease! I'll do anything. Don't hurt the truck!"

"Get your ass out of my way, Tony!" Charlene says, pushing him across the hallway.

"What are you gonna do with the shovel and the canned good?"

"There ain't no snow to shovel, so I must be getting ready to put them to good use, nigga! And expect trouble from child support as soon as the damn office reopens after the holiday! This is what I get for being too easy on your ass," she says. She heads for the elevator, mumbling to herself and still cussing up a storm.

I hear Tony change paths, so I ease into the laundry room where it's dark. I look out of the small window and see him covered in pie, wear-

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ing nothing but his birthday suit and a dead erection, tryin' his best to save his ride from Charlene's psychotic wrath.

For the first time in too long, I feel like cheesing and even giggling like I heard the funniest Bernie Mac joke of all times. I stroke my breasts, close my eyes, and figure out that I like misbehavin'. When I open them, I turn on the light long enough to find out what kind of clothes are drying in a dryer that's throwing heat. Not wanting to risk running in to Charlene while searching out my own, I let Charlene's garment hit the floor and slide into some woman's brown terry cloth jumpsuit.

I grab my stuff, haul ass outside, and quietly easing past the scene where Charlene is goin' to work on Tony's silver Escalade. I walk down the street, then a hack rolls up in one of those old unmarked police cars that anyone can own if they bid right at an auction. I'm glad too see the bootleg taxi driver come my way 'cause I know I can save a few bucks on my fare.

A man with a toothpick hanging out of the side of his mouth pulls up next to me and asks, "Need a ride?"

"Yeah, unless you're not a hack," I answer.

"Where to, miss?" he asks. I pause.

After I think things over I reply, "My mamma's house." I give him the address. He nods and begins chewing on his toothpick, causing it to move up and down. I hop in the car, throwing my bags in at the same time.

We pull off and I'm about fifteen minutes away from ringing my mamma's holiday doorbell. Last year I found out where she is. I think I let Kate off the hook long enough, so the bitch who abandoned me better get ready to serve Jalita some piping-hot turkey and jellied cranberries.

2

MY MOMMA'S THICK, THICK DRAMA

Just as I cram five dollars into the hack's hand, it starts raining again. I guess he doesn't have the courtesy to help me unload my stuff 'cause I felt I could only spare a dollar tip. He pulls off. I grab my bags, walk up to Kate's door and press the doorbell.

"Yes?" a White man with an enormous, nine-month-pregnant-looking belly covered by a T-shirt with a hole in it says to me.

"I want to talk to Kate," I say rudely, noticing the green-and-red tattooed dragon on the top of his right arm.

"About what?"

"You tell her Jalita's out here to see her, or I'm coming in. It's cold out here, mister, so don't play with me right now."

"I don't know what your problem is, but I don't have to tell her a damn thing."

"No you don't, but I suggest you do. Why don't you mind your own business and just go get her if she's in there, okay?"

"You can't come around my house telling me what to do. Who do you think you are? That's so typical of *you people*."

"And just who would *you people* be?"

"Niggers."

"I'll tell you one thing, Jethro. You better not say that too loud in this town. Someone's liable to rip your balls off, you racist piece of shit! You have no right to insult me this way," I say without taking a breath. I feel my heart quicken again.

"I'll say it three times, if I have to. Niggers, niggers, niggers," he says,

throwing around the “n” word like there’s nothing dangerous to it.

“I guess the Klan ran out of robes to fit your ass. Shouldn’t you be keeping your face covered like the rest of the cowards with the cone-head hats?”

“You’re the one who knocked on my front door, giving orders, so I’ll call you whatever I see fit. I’m sick of biting my tongue around you people. I make it known that I don’t like your kind.”

“Look, all I want you to do is go in your house, tap Kate on the shoulder, and send her out here. This has nothing to do with your racist butt,” I insist.

“You people don’t have any manners to save your lives. Didn’t your mother teach you any better? I’m sure you don’t know who your father is. All of them unwed mothers causing my taxes to go down the drain with all of them special benefits they get is ridiculous.”

“My objective is to take all that up with Kate. In fact, I’m wondering if she ever collected the kind of benefits you’re referring to.”

“And why would that be?”

“I’m her daughter, that’s why. Now go get her, and you can just kiss my biracial ass all up in my crack,” I say.

“Look, you crazy nigger, get off of my step before I call the cops. Yeah, right. Her daughter. My wife wouldn’t sleep with a nigger if her life depended on it, and she’s been married to me and only me,” he says, half chuckling between sips of beer. He reminds me of trailer park trash that gets arrested on *Cops*. The nerve of him.

“I don’t know if her life depended on it, but I’m not moving until I see Kate’s face. Call the cops if you want.” Doors begin to fly open, and neighbors begin to stand on their steps to get a closer look at the action.

“I bet your welfare check ran out, and you’re trying to pull a stunt before Christmas so you can buy your five kids some toys and a holiday meal. I know your type, always wanting a handout or coming around here trying to sell us stolen goods. Go get a damn job. Why don’t you do that since you’ve got so much mouth?”

“For your information, I don’t have any kids. I attend Bentley University in Virginia, and I’m just tryna have some words with my momma, you ignorant asshole!”

“College? Yeah right. You probably can’t even read on a sixth-grade level. Go back to smoking your crack in the alley around the corner. It’s a left turn that way,” he says, bending and pointing.

“No you didn’t go there. What’s this look like?” I say, unzipping my book bag and throwing one of my thick books on his step. My seventy-

dollar book makes a thump as loud as a firecracker.

"Well even if you are in college, you probably got there by affirmative action. You people expect special treatment for everything. After all the help you get, you still blame the White man. We're the real victims; White people catch all the hell. You people walk around here with that nappy hair standing all over your heads, talking about racial pride, Kwanzaa, and slavery, shoving the way you believe down our throats, and you expect us to like you? I wish every one of you would hop a ship and sail back to Africa," the man says. More lights turn on. I'm guessing that Jethro's neighbors mistook my falling book for a gunshot. The entire block is lit up like a heavily decorated Christmas tree. Before I know it, an audience has assembled.

"And I wish you would go back to your trailer park with the little wheels," I spit back with defiance.

"Kate. Get out here, *now*," he yells. I rub my hands together for warmth. I'm drenched in this soaking rain, my nose is running, and I can't stop sniffing. I feel like a five-foot-six ice sculpture that's about to be displayed in Time Square, and I don't appreciate Kate taking her time to greet me.

"What you want? I'm trying to get this turkey stuffed. Damn, can't I cook without someone bothering me every five minutes? I can't get anything done like that," she yells back.

"Shut up your back talk and just get over here, woman," he says. I hear heavy steps and a female voice cussing with each one. I feel the row house shake, and I'm confused. Last time I saw her, four years ago Kate had model-good looks, and was barely 110 pounds wringing wet after a heavy meal.

"What is so damn important?" she asks, looking at him with stuffing on her hands, facing the sea of confused faces. I watch her wipe them off on a red-and-white checkered towel, noticing that her features are a lot like mine, only her nose is sharper and longer. She looks worn by a troubled mind, joyless, has obviously let her figure go, but still she's my momma and I want her to love me just the same. Although she looks torn up from the floor up, I'll still take her as she is. I want my blond-hair, blue-eyed momma who's dressed just like I'd expect a 250-pound woman to be, to invite me in and beg me to put my two legs under her table for Christmas dinner. The man points, turns and looks at me, then yells, "*Her*, that's what!"

"Hi, Kate. I'm your daughter. Remember giving me up when I was ten years old? I'm Jalita," I say in a trembling voice.

"I don't know what she's talking about," she says, digging her nails into flesh inside of her loose top.

"Did you sleep with a nigger? I swear I'll kick your ass out of here right tonight if it's true," he says, rubbing the gray stubble of the right side of his face.

"How dare you insult me like that. You know better. I've never seen her before in my life. Where did she come from?" Kate asks. She turns to her husband. He shrugs.

Kate turns toward me and says, "Lady, you must be mistaken, and I don't appreciate you upsetting my husband and causing problems in our neighborhood. Maybe you have the wrong address." I see the truth in her eyes. She recognizes me as her daughter, but refuses to put reality into words. It's obvious that it would unmask too many secrets that will turn her new life upside down.

"No, I've got the right Kate all right. How about *this* then?" I say, holding up a small, rusting locket with her picture in it against the screen. Jethro and Kate are speechless, but I keep talking to let them know I've got cold, hard facts that will solidify my little evidentiary hearing.

I sniff loudly, then say, "Your mother's name was Betty, and her husband's name was Tom. Tom worked at a lumberyard. You were originally from Charleston, West Virginia, and came to Baltimore when you were seven. Is your amnesia cured yet, Mom?" I ask Kate. Her mouth seems to be glued shut. She struggles to find the next row of words.

Jethro breaks the silence, and says, "She knows an awful lot about you and your family. You better explain quick 'cause something funny's goin' on."

"She did it. Those White women love brothas, especially the big fat ones," a black face says, then turns to walk in the opposite direction.

Kate answers, "I don't know how she knows those things. I never had no Black kid. Why are you trying to ruin our Christmas? Is this some kind of sick game? We don't got no money, so try this shit somewhere else, and let me finish making our holiday dinner. I've got a family to feed and cleaning to do. I don't have time for this shit." I watch her nervously scratch her greasy-looking hair. I think that if I were after money, I definitely wouldn't be hitting them up for some. Kate could think of a better one than that.

I dig down deep within my soul and suddenly feel more empowered and less intimidated. In a crystal-clear, powerful voice, I say, "This is hardly about money, Mom. This is about the choice you made to abandon me and rob me of a normal childhood. The kind of mother that

abandons her child in a welfare office isn't a real mother, but you're what I was stuck with until you rolled out. I ended up becoming a ward of the state and packing and repacking a total of seven times in one year thanks to you. I've been fondled, abused, lived on the street with crack addicts, eaten out of pollution-coated trash cans, and have worn drawers I grabbed from church freebie tables. That was no way for me to have to live. Why didn't you use condoms to keep me from coming here if you didn't want me?" I ask.

"I said I don't know you!" Kate screams.

"Since it doesn't look like you'll be inviting me in for turkey, I just want to ask you, who's gonna love me? Who is going to make up this hard life of having no mother or father to me? I've waited all of these years to find out if you ever regretted the pain you've caused me, and I won't wait one second longer. Admit what you did to me. Just be a woman and admit it to my face."

"I told you I'm not your damn momma," she yells back. Out of nowhere, a loud boom of thunder cracks. Just like an omen that Kate is lying her ass off, the sky opens up, and it rains like it will never rain again. While lightning brightens the sky, a soaking rain chills me, and the crowd is sent running in a frenzy, but they're determined not to let go of their nosiness. Most of them stand in front of their windows and screened doors, still eager to eavesdrop.

"How old are you?" the man asks.

I lean forward and scream at him, "Nineteen, Jethro." I'm cold and wet, but I ignore the fact that I've become a soggy mess and continue to stand on the steps.

"Hmmm. Well, about nineteen years ago I was away in Germany for a year. Kate? Are you sure you've told me the whole story?"

"What? She's lyin'. I told you. That's it. Who you gonna believe? Her or your wife?" she asks.

"Looks like Kate shacked up with my dad on McCulloh Street until he cut out and left us while you were away, Mr. Stepdad," I instigate because I see Kate's not gonna admit a sliver of the truth.

"Leave, and don't you eva come back here again. The next time we'll call the police. Got that? Then you can call your Black momma to bail your hustling ass out!" Kate yells as she slams the door in my face. I stand alone and abandoned, just like old times. The observers turn off their lights and shut their doors. I want to cry, but I can't make the tears form and fall. I can hear Kate and Jethro arguing behind the door. A baby starts screaming, then I hear wrestling like two WWE opponents are goin' for

the championship title. Kate screams and pleads for her husband to leave her alone about what this Black face standing on their steps just stirred up. I don't feel sorry for Kate. Really, I don't. She can lie her way out all she wants to. We share the same bloodlines, and that's how it is.

Now that I asked my question and see that she doesn't give half a damn about who's gonna love me, I stand directly in front of my mother's steps, bend my elbows, and hold my hands out to my sides while spreading my fingers. I tilt my head backward and look upward into the face of the sky, letting rain drench me all over my brown face, dulling my senses for at least two minutes. As I slowly turn around and around, breathing heavily and feelin' my heart pound, I promise myself that I'm gonna figure out who I am, what I need, and who's gonna love me and give me attention, all by damn self. When I snap out of my trance, I let my arms fall against my drenched coat, and my feet stop moving. I conclude that I don't need a momma or daddy because they don't need me either, and that's just stale, tough biscuits for me. Shit, no one ever said life was perfect or easy. The thing that I don't understand is why it's got to be so damn unmerciful when you try to live right.

I walk across the dirty sidewalk full of pink and white gum wads, glass, and smelly trash, then continue until I find a bus stop about a block up near a roller skating rink and bowling center called Shake and Bake. My back is hurting from carrying all of those heavy books and my duffel bag. My feet are too tired to keep doing their job, thanks to my buy-one, get-one-half-off Payless pleather shoes, which are rubbing my pretty feet the wrong way. I stand at the bus stop shifting my weight from foot to foot thinking that I just can't bear to sleep on the streets tonight.

The number 320 bus pulls up. I don't care where it's goin' 'cause I wanna get off my feet and get as far away from Kate as these bus wheels will roll. I step on it and ask the driver how much it's gonna set me back to go to the next destination.

When he replies, "That'll be \$ 4.25 to get to Laurel," I twist up my face, wondering if he's tryna rip me off.

I ask, "You're not bullshitting me, are you? I just want a one-way fare."

He replies, "Miss, \$4.25 is the commuter fare I must charge 'cause of the zone I'm going to. Look, this is the last bus running tonight and none will be on the road on Christmas Day, but you can take it or leave it...don't make me no difference, my check stays the same whether you get on or not."

I wish I could smack his smart ass, but instead I suck my teeth, drop four dollar bills and a quarter into the money collector and sit my ass down on the plastic blue bus seat.

3

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER

The bus driver and I roll out to Laurel solo. Apparently, it's not a jumping hot spot. That's okay though 'cause as I'm stepping off the bus with my belongings I spot a Motel 6. I ain't here for nothing exciting, more like sleeping in peace. Now I know where I'm gonna be for Christmas. Mystery solved. After I check in and get my room, I pop two extra-strength Tylenol, minus the water, and crawl between the itchy, cheap sheets that don't feel half as good as Tony and Charlene's. I know I'll be safe at this Motel 6 and look forward to sleeping the rest of the wee morning hours of Christmas away. I can feel the medicine moving down my throat too slowly, like I swallowed two peach pits whole, but the discomfort doesn't motivate me to locate and pour some chlorine-smelly water.

I'm thinking that I'm so numb with disgust over every direction I turn in my life leading to a damn negative experience, that I see no use in bothering to show back up for spring semester. Now that my head is out of the clouds, I can get real and face the funk. That Barbara Walters mixed with Oprah vibe I was tryna hone and craft won't get me anywhere in life but another fat disappointment. Girls like me will never have it goin' on. You can educate ones like me, but you can't take the nitty-gritty essence of what I'm made of out of me. I can never have pride 'cause my momma nor my daddy taught me how to own it. Who am I foolin'? I'm not college material. Jalita Harrison ain't shit, just busting her ass pretending. Fuck it. Time to face facts. The education game is over. A mind can't be a terrible thing to waste if it's all fucked up, and mine is definitely fucked up.

The curtains are so concealing, I can't see a sliver of daylight peeking through any corners from around the motel window. My internal clock tells me that it's time to budge, so I stumble out of bed, sleepily walk toward the bathroom and pee. I wash my hands, then wrap a towel around myself. I unlock both locks and open the door enough to see a sliver of light. My stomach is growling like a baby lion, so I search out the small cake of complimentary soap, lather up the abrasive washcloth, and listen to the hypnotizing flow of water hit my skin.

I finally feel clean, like my life isn't bad, and I'm here because I'm on some business trip or it's a pit stop for my family who's been pinned up in a motor home all summer. I drink these fantasies so long that my fingers begin to wrinkle like old prunes. I consider drumming up some anger over what Tony's trifling butt pulled to hit this, but it's not worth my time, nor does it put me in the mood to feel like singing no deck the halls or fa la la la la la la la shit. Instead I step out of the shower, remembering to look in the small plastic bag I stole from Charlene and am pleased to find a Tweezerman Eye Care Kit, Crest Whitestrips, and Dr. Scholl's Pedicure Essentials Foot Bath Salts. I laugh to myself, deciding I'll try out these things when I feel like focusing on my looks. I know one thing, now is not the time.

I dry off quickly, slide on my jeans, throw on a T-shirt minus a bra, grab my purse, cover myself in my powder blue stadium coat, and sniff around for some food. I spot a Citgo across the street and head in that direction. I'm feelin' so worthless, I don't even look before I cross and risk getting hit, but all I hear are horns and one expletive fly in my direction. I shrug and open the glass door of the convenience shop. I discover a microwavable sausage biscuit and a half-rotten banana, and grab a tall carton of watered-down orange juice from the fridge. I nuke my micro meal while I'm wandering around the store looking for more processed grub to add to my breakfast stash. I spot a super size bag of Doritos and a large glazed doughnut, so I grab those, too.

All of the sudden, I hear, "Meeerry Christmas!"

"What? Who said that?" I respond.

"Over here, ma," the man says as he emerges from a back room. His chocolate-colored dark skin makes his teeth seem gleaming white. He's about five-five with these strange eyes—his pupils are brown and the perimeter is grayish blue. Despite his height, his exotic attractiveness still stands out.

"Oh, whatever, merry freaking Christmas to you, too," I say, rolling my eyes.

“What’s your problem? Not in the spirit, I see.”

“Did I say I have a problem? Who are you to tell me all about what’s on my mind?”

“Well, you seem like something’s bothering you. Damn, you sure are uptight.”

“I’m tired of people telling me I’m uptight. I’m not uptight. I just want to be left the hell alone, that’s all. I just came in here to get some breakfast, and maybe some lunch and dinner, since I don’t feel like bothering to find some fast food that’s open and in walking distance in this town.”

“That don’t sound like no way to start off Christmas.”

“Well maybe it’s not, but that’s how it’s gonna be for me, myself, and I in my motel room.”

“Damn. So what’s your name, ma?”

“What’s it to you? I guess you just want to hit it like all the rest. Well I’ve got news for you, I’m not interested in getting felt on the ass or poked, so there’s no need to try to mack. Try it on another customer,” I say, collecting my plastic-wrapped breakfast.

“Girl, you are *mean*. I was just trying to be nice. I don’t have no motive up my sleeve, and I ain’t trying to poke nothing, so there’s no need to jump to no conclusions.”

“Whatever. I didn’t ask you to like me. Like I care what you think. Here, ring this stuff up so I can get out of here,” I say, half irritated.

“Ma, how long you plan on stayin’ in that motel room?”

“Did anyone ever tell you you ask too many questions? Can’t you tell when you need to mind your own business? Damn!” I snap.

“Give me a break, shortie.”

“First I’m ma, now I’m shortie. Make up your damn mind. I should be calling you shortie. Why should I give you a break? No one sure ’nuff gives my ass one,” I complain.

“Look, I told you I was just trying to be nice, and I meant that. No more, no less.”

“Be nice to someone else who gives a rat’s butt. Now how much is it?”

“That’ll be nine dollars and twelve cents, and you didn’t have to cut me down about my height, either.”

“If you’re short, you’re short. Don’t stress about it. Here,” I say, letting a hundred-dollar bill float onto the counter.

“Dag, you’re cold. You don’t even want to put the money in my hand?”

“I don’t want to touch you, and I see no reason to pretend I do.”

"Well I don't want to touch you either. I'm just doin' my job."

"Your job sucks, doesn't it, shortie?"

"I may pump gas and wait on people in here, but it keeps my probation officer happy. Look, please don't call me that, okay?"

"Whatever. You did time?" I say with a new interest.

"Just something stupid that I'll never do again. Now I'm paying the price."

"My name's Jalita."

"I'm Shawn."

"All right, Shawn. Now that I've got a name, I won't have to call you shortie." I hear an unfamiliar sound. Then I ask, "What's that noise?"

"My two-way pager."

"Your what?"

"Two-way. Where you been, girl? People type messages and send them. I can type them back."

"Like an electronic phone?"

"Sort of."

"That's tight."

"Yeah. Damn, I can't believe this shit," he says, looking at his pager.

"What's wrong with you?"

"I can't believe this shit! Motha—"

"What?" I say. Shawn walks from behind the counter and starts pacing, pumping the air, cursing so much that I'm reminded of being on the streets of Baltimore, on the worst side of town. Then he returns to his spot behind the counter and bangs his fist down so hard, I think he's gonna break every bone in his hand.

"What is it, Shawn?"

While Shawn shakes his stinging hand, he explains, "My fiancée typed me. I can't believe this. I talked to the woman just this morning, and everything was fine between us."

"So what's the problem?" I ask, nibbling on my nuked sausage biscuit.

"She says she's moved out, left town, and is gonna marry her ex. I been taking care of her ass...winning her and dining her for the last six months. She had *my* engagement ring on her damn finger, that I paid for at nineteen percent interest!"

"Damn," I say while steadily eating.

"If I weren't on probation, I'd *kill* that punk ass!"

"But you are on probation, baby boy," I remind him.

"I know. I know. She won't tell me where he lives, but I could find him if I really wanted to tell him I just spent six hundred dollars on her

Christmas shit and just paid off the last payment of her damn three-thousand-dollar ring last week. *Motha fuck!*” he says as he slams the lid of the pager shut then crams it into his jeans pocket.

“Oh well, life is a bitch, then you die,” I say as I throw my tightly balled up sausage biscuit wrapper in the trash.

“You act like this is nothin’. Oh well, you say?” he screeches.

“I’ve been through worse. Get the freak over it already,” I say.

“Shit, I can’t just get over it. She went from telling me two weeks ago she’s excited about the wedding to whispering on the phone with the bathroom fan on this week, and doing a disappearing act. Shawn turns to me and remarks, “How am I gonna go to dinner with my cousin and boys tonight like nothin’s wrong?”

“Two-way them and tell them what issues you’ve got and show up anyway. They’ll understand. They’re your peoples.”

“You’re right. I like you, Jalita. You keep things real.”

“Don’t make the mistake of liking me too much.”

“Not like that, aaight. I just got dumped. I’m not tryin’ to holler, but you are a dime.”

“Good, because if you were tryna holla, I’d have to school you on what I think of all men.”

“You wanna come to dinner with me? I mean, Jackie fucked shit up, and it appears you’re here ready to eat up everything. Tonight is gonna be crunk.”

“I don’t know,” I say, throwing half of the rotten banana in the trash.

“Look at that shit, Jalita. That’s no Christmas breakfast.”

“Yeah, I know, but I’m over it.”

“All I’m trying to do is help you out.”

Shawn cracks a slight smile, then I face him and say, “You did remember my name. I’m staying at the Motel 6. My room number is 416. And you better not try to chop me up in little pieces or anything, ’cause I’ve got plenty of street in me, and I’ll give you a run for your money,” I inform him.

“I knew that a long time ago. I don’t want nothing but some company.”

“Hurry up, too. I’m not big on patience or waiting on negroes.”

“I’ll be off soon.”

“If you want to get penciled in, you better tell me what soon is and give me my change. Are you tryna keep a commission or something?” I joke.

“My bad. Noon,” Shawn says as I collect my change from him.

"Okay, well after 12:10, I don't unlock the door . . . I go deaf."

"You are trippin', Jalita."

"Maybe so, but I meant what I said, and when I speak, I make my words count."

Shawn smirks as a man walks up. He's a red negro, about three hundred pounds, six-two, refrigerator wide, and fit to be on someone's football roster.

"Hold up, let me ring this brother's things up." Shawn says.

"You better work fast," I tease.

"That will be three dollars and seventy-five cents, please," Shawn says.

"Three dollars and seventy-five cents, my ass," the NFL look-alike says to Shawn while holding him up by his shirt collar with one hand.

"What's your problem, man? I don't even know you. Would you put me down?"

"Don't be calling Jackie no more. She don't want your pint-sized punk ass, so let it go, my man."

"And what's it to you?" Shawn asks. I gulp hard.

"Don't you worry about all that. You just stop pressing the issue because she finally made up her mind, and she wants to be with Jerome," he says, releasing Shawn who coughs from halfway choking and massages his neck with his left hand.

"And thanks for the powdered doughnuts and super-size bottle of Sprite. If I didn't already have a full tank of gas, that would be on you, too. Consider this your first and last friendly warning. If you need me to translate, let me say it to you straight: Chill the fuck out," he reminds Shawn. He kicks the door open and pulls off in a black Lincoln Navigator. The mystery of who he is remains.

"You let him carry you like that, Shawn?" I ask.

"You saw the size of him? What was I supposed to do?"

"He was a big dude. That was a cross breed between that Brawny paper towel man and Mr. Clean. You don't see them built like that every day. He coulda crushed you like a fly."

"I can't believe this is happening to my ass. The ex-playa who wrote the book," Shawn says, reaching in his wallet and filling the register with three ones and seventy-five cents in change.

"Believe it, ex-playa playa."

"Her damn ex, I know he's behind this," Shawn says while gritting his teeth again.

"Shawn."

“What?”

“Don’t go off tryna kill nobody. I’m not big on bloody hands.”

“I’m cool. I’m just ventin’. I was dumb to think things would be fine since she’d been acting a fool this week. What could I expect?”

“It’s called dealing with mixed emotions during a holiday. That’s never easy, so don’t be so hard on yourself. The thing is, you’ve gotta reach your limit with this woman at some point.”

“Thanks for your words of wisdom. I agree with everything you just said. Later, Jalita.”

“That’s right. Say my name,” I say as I wink.

“You are a mess.”

“You tellin’ me? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I’ve got an idea.”

“What?”

“Let’s give you a makeover for tonight. I want you to give some stuck-up women a run for their money.”

“What in the heck are you talking about?” I say as he disappears into the back room again. He returns with two large shopping bags.

“This is yours, if you want it. Look inside.”

“For real? You don’t even know me and are willing to give me all this fly gear?” I say, checking out the items.

“Obviously, Jackie ain’t thinkin’ about Christmas with me. Because of her, I almost got an ass whippin’ I don’t deserve. So could you use this stuff or what, Jalita?”

“You aight, Shawn. Thanks. I’ll put it to good use,” I say, looking down into the bag. I glance up and smile.

“At least someone appreciates it,” he announces like he’s expecting a consolation prize.

“What’s the hair color, blow dryer, and curling iron about?”

“Jackie asked me to pick that stuff from the Sally’s Beauty Supply so she could throw some highlights up in her hair and style it some way she had in mind. She likes to keep up with fashion and is always watching music videos or that cable channel Style.”

“That’s slick. I do like this golden color. A whole lot of sisters have been rocking light hair lately. Maybe they think blondes have more fun, like the White sisters have always sworn.”

“So find out and be one of them.”

“I never did this before. I hope I don’t burn it out of my head with these chemicals.”

“I know you can read. Follow the directions, that’s all.”

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"I think I will."

"Here, take these, too. I think these clothes and shoes will fit."

"Thanks," I tell Shawn while halfway smiling.

"Go have fun."

"Now you stop trippin' over Jackie. Enough about that moody chick. She isn't worth sweating and risking an ass whippin' from Big Boy. She lost a good man. Merry Christmas. By the way, you're a cutie, and it's not all about the height, but how you work what you got," I say, pushing the door open with my rear, happy that Santa Claus just gave me a reason to think that it just may turn out to be a Merry Christmas after all for little ol' forgotten, bad-luck-havin' me.

4

BIG TIMIN' IN MITCHELLVILLE

“Why are you stopping at this funny-looking gate?” I ask Shawn.

“I’ve got to give my name to homeboy.”

“Why? What’s that all about?”

“It’s a gated community. You know, it weeds the unwanted, uninvited people out.”

“I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

“Well welcome to Mitchellville, Jalita.”

“What?” I utter, wrinkling my forehead.

“The town we’re in,” Shawn tells me like I’m a simpleton.

“The people up in here must be rolling in piles of ends.”

“Something like that. At least the ones who aren’t perpetrating. You’d be surprised. Some are struggling to keep furniture in their cribs,” he says as we pass mini-mansions and sprawling homes with perfectly manicured lawns.

“We’re goin’ in *there*?” I say as I look at Shawn. His car halts in a semicircular driveway at the largest home on the block. The crib has these columns in front as big as the White House.

“Yeah,” he answers casually.

“How come the gate keeper didn’t weed me out? I don’t think I’ll fit in,” I say, watching a tall man dressed to the nines step out of a black Bentley.

“Oh, yes you will. Trust me on that,” Shawn assures me.

“Whose mansion is this?”

“My cousin’s.”

"Shawn, I don't know about this. Your cousin must not be on the perpetrating list."

"He's not. You got your hair did, you have that fly gear on, and look like the price of this house. There's no reason why you shouldn't meet one of Prince George's County's most famous. Just relax 'cause you're going in."

"If you say so," I say as the door opens. A Japanese woman dressed in a multicolored kimono bows with her palms pressed together, asks for our shoes, then leads us up to a room to the left of the breezeway.

"Shawn, what's she doing?"

"Getting ready to wash our feet and give us robes."

"What kind of crib is this? You've got to be kidding me."

"Actually, I'm serious. My cousin is a clean freak. He can't stand smelly feet, and I should say he lends robes because he's got Persian rugs and all kinds of exclusive furniture he doesn't want dirty shoes and street clothes to touch. Everyone's got to do this to come in to a party or a dinner. I didn't tell you, but both are about to go down tonight."

"This is weird and almost too strange to be real. I don't think I'm going to like this."

"Come on, now, cooperate. It's all good. Don't you trust my judgment?"

"I don't know you enough to trust anything."

"Well you can," Shawn insists.

"I've never been in a mansion before. What does your cousin do?"

"Sports."

"What?"

"You'll recognize him, if you own a television set."

"Don't you mean if I *watch* television? I can't say I have much time in my life for sitcoms. Those people are paid. I still have mine to get," I say as the woman dries my feet and hands me a robe.

"Girl, you need to let the stress go. Go in that room and change. Hang your street clothes up on one of those hooks."

"Now wait a minute, Shawn. First you rant and rave about me needing a makeover and now you're telling me all this dressing up in new clothes and primping was unnecessary?"

"I never said it was unnecessary," Shawn answers.

"Apparently it was. I also didn't even have to bother to shower and wash my own stinking feet."

"Will you let it go? We're going to try to get you to loosen up tonight," Shawn tells me.

“Good luck tryin’,” I answer, wondering how Jackie could leave this man if he had access to all of this legitimately good life. Most women would kill for an open invitation to hang around an athlete’s private crib.

When I meet back up with Shawn, I feel like a complete idiot. I haven’t even met his cousin yet and I’m leaving my new clothes on a hook. Part of me wants to notify the owner that I’ll walk barefoot in his crib, but that’s my limit. I consider it, but decide I won’t embarrass Shawn since he’s the one who gave me the clothes to hang on the hook in the first place.

I cut the brotha some slack and go along with the charade. I look at Shawn decked out in a rust-colored robe that stops around his calves and say, “Oh, you’re dressed—or should I say undressed—already?”

“Yep,” he answers.

“So let’s go meet the mystery man.”

“Let’s,” he says, motioning to me to follow.

We walk up a marble staircase, and my eyes grab and hold the sight of a crystal chandelier that’s as elegant as the ones they have in those houses on *MTV Crips*. When we reach the top of the steps, I hear smooth jazz spilling out of somewhere I can’t see. An extremely tall, brown-faced famous man with a sparkling diamond in his left ear approaches Shawn. He’s lean, leggy, chiseled, and the ideal piece of six-foot-plus chocolate eye candy.

“Give me some dap, boy. Give it up!” Mr. Mysterious says with the cutest dimpled smile.

“Wes, it’s good to see ya,” Shawn says, pulling his arm away, after their fingertips lock.

“Who is *this*?”

“A new friend.”

Wes turns to me seductively, and asks, “And you are?”

“Jalita,” I reply.

“Ahhh, Jalita, the pleasure is all mine, beautiful. Welcome to my home,” he says. He grabs my hand and kisses it so sensually that it gives me goose bumps. I can tell he likes showing off by the way he announces it’s his spot. Truthfully, I’m wondering if all of this living in the lap of luxury is paid for in full, or if he’s in debt up to his neck. Around my way, you only hear about drug kingpins in Miami or somewhere doing the damn thing like this. I had no idea Black people live like this not far from pissy-smelling hallways in high-rise buildings in the projects and spots where people loiter and guzzle liquor on corners ’cause life ain’t taking them any place better. Damn. This is a shock to see from the inside view.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, too."

Our eyes lock, then Wes replies, "I know." Then I realize that I do recognize him from television.

"Don't you, umm, play for the—"

"Blitzers? Yes, that would be me, the point guard who earned two All-Star MVP Awards. I'm everything the press says I am and more," Wes answers smugly.

I feel like feeding Wes's ego, and say, "It's such an honor to meet you."

"Thank you. It usually is." He kisses my other hand the same way. He adds, "Would you like a tour?"

"Sure, I'd love one," I answer, looking around.

"I'll give it to her then," a new voice says, interrupting quickly. A woman peeks from Wes's side, physically pushes her way between us, and breaks up our conversation.

"I'm Tomi, his woman. Welcome to *our* home."

"Nice to meet you, too," I say, sticking out my right hand to shake hers while noticing her perfectly clear skin, fresh french manicured nails, and the good size ice in her ears. I'd guess she's standing about five-nine, has a model-thin frame, and is about two shades darker than Mariah Carey.

"Mmm-hmm," Tomi grunts, giving me a bitchy grin, then hugs all up on her man. She never bothers to shake my hand, so I withdraw it, and gently let it hang next to my side.

Tomi puts me on the spot, telling me, "I noticed that you neglected to drop your business card into the crystal bowl near the front door. Why don't you remove a card from your wallet and run down to put yourself in my networking mix."

"Actually, I don't have a card to drop in the bowl. That's why I didn't do it," I tell Tomi. Wes looks cross-eyed at Shawn who returns the same look to Wes. The air is so tense, I could have cut it with my trusty knife . . . had I brought the blade with me.

Tomi adds, "I figured that whatever it is that you do doesn't require a card. Let's proceed with the tour then, so you won't tie up Wes. I don't mind taking over from here." Now I detect she's a stuck-up pain in the ass who's convinced her shit don't stink. I already don't like her, and if you ask me, she ain't all that with her B-cup titties and her miniature booty. She's got a gorgeous face, but if she turns sideways, she will disappear. She needs to go look in the mirror to discover that and also remember this Wes dude is the one with the real ends. I can't stand no perpetrators, and I'm looking at one.

“Well, I think it’s time for me to tend to our other guests,” Wes says just like his Tomi is listening for any indication to get on his hide for flirting. He is careful and escapes without having to defend himself for bumping gums with me. I’m thinking he’s had a lot of practice making these kinds of sudden departures.

“I’ll come with you, cuz. I’ll see you in a bit, Jalita,” Shawn says as Tomi quickly disappears to the right.

“This here is the living room. I decorated it myself, down to the family pictures. Notice the large ones of Wes and me sitting on the front side of each end table,” Tomi tells me.

“Nice touch,” I say to play along with her.

“Just a hair down this way is the den. I decorated that myself, too. My favorite thing in here is building a library that our children will inherit someday. Reading *is* fundamental. I tell the poor kids that all of the time.”

“You two have kids?”

“Not just yet. Now come along, dear, and stop being such a chatterbox. You tend to walk slowly, don’t you?”

“Not really,” I say.

“This is my private lounge. A wife needs her own space, if she wants to keep a healthy marriage. Won’t you come in and sit down for a moment?”

“Well, if you insist, but I did want to see the house. How long have you and Wes been married?” I ask, sitting across from her on a soft black leather sofa.

“We’ll be newlyweds soon, and technically speaking this is a mansion. It’s rude to ask so many personal questions, don’t you think? And to you, he’s Mr. Montgomery. Don’t let it go to your head, just because he gave you a few one-liners!” Tomi snaps at me.

I wrinkle my forehead, and tell her, “I don’t know how this conversation took this ugly turn, but can we not go wherever it is you’re tryna take me because I’m not interested.”

“No, we will take this turn and get all up into the curve because my man likes you. I see it. I’ve been through this damn shit before and I’m tired of sharing him. For once in this relationship, I’m making some noise this season. No more walking over Tomi. Those days are over!” Tomi announces, pointing to me like I’ve committed a crime.

“All he said was—”

“Shut up. I’m talking here,” she yells. Tomi’s got game, I see. Her pitch is sounding a bit like Tony’s girl, Charlene.

"Umm, what's your problem, Tomi? I'm tryna respect your house—I mean mansion—but you're making it hard for me to keep biting my tongue."

"Well, let me tell you one damn thing. I'm going to hurry up and correct this little situation, *right now*. I put up with all kinds of you groupies, 24/7, 365 days of the year. I'm not having it from a big behinded one on Christmas Day. You all are like cockroaches—I get rid of one, and you still multiply and find your way to Wes. I hate to break it to you, but you've just met your most lethal can of Raid."

"I'm not a groupie. I don't even watch basketball. As a matter of fact, I find watching men fight over which way to run the ball boring. I just recognized his face, that's all. There's no need to get nasty, sister. I've told you several times that you are barking up the wrong tree," I explain. I really want to instruct the chick not to hate on Wes, just play the game and be thankful she's in the mix.

"Mmm-hmm. Let me tell you something. An athlete of Wes's caliber wants a woman he can show off, like me. They like White women, or ones close to it, like me. If I so much as catch you breathing in my man's direction while you're here, or at any point in time in life, you'll be sorry, *sister*. You just keep your distance, and stay in your place, which is five hundred feet behind me. He's going to church now and trying to do better by me so don't you dare get in the way of progress."

"Girl, you've got some issues dancin' around in that head. I'm not here on a dick hunt."

"It's still early. You'll see how the ballers roll, but when you do, remember what I said. I may have attended boarding school in London, then earned prestigious degrees from Duke and Yale, but I know all about nasty little hos from the wrong side of the tracks."

"Are you threatening me?" I ask her bluntly.

"Just making a pushy request," she says, making her fingers form the shape of a gun.

I've been exposed to a lot of wackos in my day, and something tells me to keep my tongue still when it comes to firing back my typical wise-cracks at Ms. Tomi who ain't all there upstairs. "I see," I say calmly.

"Good. I'm the queen bee around here, and I will become Mrs. Montgomery. The whole world will know it thanks to this ring that makes the one Ben gave J.Lo look like something for a Little Leaguer. And to be sure Wes stays put, I'll seal the deal with a rugrat, and own half of what he's got in his bank account, pocket, and coming in the future. I worked hard to land him, and no one is going to get in my way of being

able to travel around the world with all expenses paid. No one else's ass is ever going to sit on back of that BMW bike and put on my Furla helmet. No one else is going to ever sit in the driver's seat of my black Mercedes 320 SLK and have their buns warmed by my heated seat. And no one else is *ever* going to attend NBA All-Star Weekend events with Wes. He's mine, before and after taxes . . . basketball season or not. That's how it is, permanently."

"I don't want your man. As a matter of fact, I don't want *any* man," I say half irritated.

"Mmm-hmm. I've heard it all before," she mumbles like she doesn't believe one word I've said.

"Really, Tomi. That's the truth, straight up. Your agenda has nothing to do with me."

She has the feel like she's a detective interviewing me in one of those little rooms when criminals get picked up for questioning after a crime. Tomi blurts out, "You ever been around people with money?"

"Can't say that I have."

"They buy everything they want. Remember that. I was groomed, bred, and educated for a man like this. I wear suits that cost more than most people's first cars. It's a tradition that I intend to pass on to my daughter. She will grow up privileged. Wes will give daddy's girl the moon. I've already picked out her name. It's Isabella Alexis Montgomery. I don't want my princess having some Black sounding name, and if she takes after my genes, she can pass for something else someday."

"So what's that got to do with me?" I ask Tomi, thinking that name sounded like a drunk woman came up with it.

"Jachita?" she says as she smooths down the fabric on her lilac-colored silk robe, then stands.

"What?"

"I've already explained my position. Now this girl talk was a private conversation. Capeesh?"

"Of course. It's your house. You make the house rules, Ms. Queen Bee."

"Don't be funny, Jachita. I think we understand each other now. By the way, if you're thinking I stole the queen bee thing from Lil' Kim, I was saying that ten years ago. There are no carbon copies of who is gracing your presence, and don't you forget it. And speaking of stealing, if anything is missing, I know who to come looking for. I'll be watching you like a hawk."

“My name is Jalita, *not* Jachita, and I don’t steal,” I correct her promptly.

“Same thing. It doesn’t change my impression of you. I haven’t met one of you who isn’t capable of having sticky fingers. Some of the last kleptomaniacs walked their scheming asses into the downstairs guest bathroom and stole anything they could get their hands on. Just because I have a lot doesn’t mean I don’t know what I have around here. My best towels, Origins Salt Butter, Molasses Hair Mask, and of all things, my used, cheap Victoria’s Secret drawers that read PAMPERED CHIC in fake rhinestones were gone. I told you, I know what you are, so drop the act.”

“And just what would that be?” I ask.

Tomi looks over her shoulder while smiling, then says, “Your name says it all. A trashy, low-class bitch.” I hold back the same kind of words that were waiting for Ebony, the R.A., as Tomi turns back around and proceeds to give me the rest of the tour. I wonder how long I’m going to manage to stand and be the bigger person as Tomi’s voice returns to one of a gracious hostess, switching back to Ms. Etiquette from refined baby girl from the hood. I wonder if Wes knows what a nutcase he’s got on his hands, but it isn’t my place to ask or care.

Tomi and I walk downstairs in silence. I draw my own conclusions about what I’m seeing as we pass various rooms with themes. In one room men are smoking what I assume are imported cigars while shooting craps with stacks on money riding on bets. Other men and women are playing cards and Twister in the buff. The next room that holds my attention is a spot decorated with candles, throw pillows, and Arabian costumed women delivering full-body massages to a few dudes on massage tables. I raise my eyebrows and keep walking. As we pass the last room I peep a well-known local newscaster being whipped by an Oriental woman dressed in leather fetish attire. By the time Tomi and I reach the spot where the tour began, my gracious host disappears and I’m thinking that this party, which is already off the damn hook, is just getting started.



The buffet-style dinner was the best meal I’ve ever had. Since I didn’t even peep one person watching how much I piled on my dang plate, I stuffed myself like a holiday turkey and even managed to wrap up some cheese balls, garnishing, and bite size hors d’oeuvres. I don’t know where my next meal is gonna come from so I don’t see shit wrong with hiding

my stash somewhere until I hit the road. These rich fucks will probably throw out the leftovers anyway. Half of these luses are spending more time keeping the three bartenders busy than bothering to eat what's on their plates. I would've given my left arm to eat what they're throwing away when I was sleeping with hunger in my belly on cold nights in abandoned row homes. Having been here for four plus hours, getting my grub on, watching a movie in Wes's personal movie theater, munching on popcorn with a few other guests, playing some video games without having to put in quarters, and feeding his ducks in the back pond, I could suddenly understand why Tomi is a possessive, raging nutcase.

Most people in this world think they're living good when they're making a little something like my mentor Tony, have a slick ride, and the ability to pay their bills on time, but this right here is some Cinderella shit. Even the owner of the b-ball team swung by to rub elbows with Wes and drink apple cider. Like they say, money talks, and I'm beginning to sense how loudly it says what it's got to say. Life to me was never about having money, but now I want some dead presidents. Now the faces on the bills are what I call fine-ass men.

The guests dwindle to about a good thirty, although some may still be hidden in theme rooms. Everyone's chillin', looking half buzzed from expensive wine and liquor poured from elegant-looking bottles, listening to Walter Beasley. I'm halfway falling asleep, 'cause the turkey and smooth jazz is bringing on niggeritis, until I hear someone breathing in my ear. Without opening my eyes, I assume it's Shawn and tell him to stop goofing off.

"No, it's Wes," the voice says softly.

"Hi, Wes. Where's Tomi?" I inquire cautiously. I'm not tryna get smoked while my back is turned.

"I don't keep tabs on her. She's around here somewhere," Wes remarks nonchalantly.

"Oh. I'm not trying to be funny, but could you back up off me?" I request.

"If I were on you, you'd know it, and this isn't it, beautiful," Wes says.

"Why are you such a flirt? You need to check yourself."

"I like the feisty ones like you, baby. A challenge is a turn-on since it doesn't happen too often," he tells me.

"Yeah right, so where's Shawn?" I ask, rolling my eyes and pushing him away.

"Shawn is indisposed," Wes answers, moving backward.

"What do you mean indisposed?" I parrot back.

"Go in the bathroom down the hall and find out," he says, pulling my wrist toward him and kissing my hand again. I'm surprised that he knows how to use a large word like *indisposed*, but I don't have the energy to harp on that. My heart is pounding much too hard. The niggeritis leaves, and I make it my business to find out where my ride is and why he's busy. The bathroom door is shut, so I knock three times until I hear a response.

"What!"

"Shawn, is that you in there? It's me, Jalita."

"Yeah," he answers, sounding despondent.

"Are you okay?" I ask in a confused tone.

"I guess so. I'm still breathing."

"You're not in there crying over what's her name are you?" I ask sarcastically.

"Naw. She's history after I mourn tonight."

"How are you gonna mourn?"

"Open the door if you really want to know."

"You won't pull anything slick, will you?"

"I told you, I'm not trying to hit it."

"Okay," I say. I push the door open to find Shawn sitting on the toilet lid, sniffing a powder that is perfectly organized in a long line on a mirror-looking contraption. He sniffs, then smiles like a girl would, completely zoned out, holding his head back like he is looking up at the sun.

"What in the fuck?" I mutter.

"Want some, Jalita?" he asks slowly. I observe his dilated pupils.

"You use blow? I can't believe this. I thought you were on probation. What are you thinking, man?"

"You think I'm the first to do a line of coke in this bathroom or anywhere in this mansion? Please, girl. As far as the cops, they ain't bothering no one. You just ate with the damn chief of police. Welcome to this world, Jalita," he says, extending his legs.

"Man, this is not the way to deal with problems. Just say no to drugs before they grab you and kick your butt with big-time addiction. Come on now, you know all about the chaos written in fine print. The shit is trouble."

"Maybe I need an addiction. No one cares about Shawn. Shawn is there to support, not be supported. Shawn is there to do right, then get dissed. Shawn is just the favorite doormat. Shawn is just tired of being Shawn," he blurts out.

"I'm not exactly cared about my damn self, but there's no use in making a drug boy's boss rich."

"I know all about your life, Jalita. I'm good at reading eyes, and I see your sadness. How long you been hurtin', too? How long you been wantin' people to do you right? How long you been wantin' to erase your past?"

"You're way off base," I say to divert him from confirming the accuracy of his intuition.

"No, I'm not, I've been around the block. I just tried to explain that to you."

"Well unless you want to go back to the block, I suggest you use your head, Shawn."

"I slept on a few park benches after people turned their backs on me myself, Jalita. Ain't no one sympathetic to my goals. Ain't no one even give me a damn Christmas card who should be thanking me."

I gulp, then tell Shawn, "Well you and Wes seem like you're tight. He must care about your butt, even though he never said it with a Hallmark. Men aren't into that card-giving shit, so cut the brotha some slack."

"It's more than that. Wes got signed; I didn't get signed. He ain't the sharing type, if you don't wear a skirt," he says all dreamy eyed. I sigh. He reaches for my hand. He's been right about everything, and my walls of defense crumble. He knows some of my pain, and I suddenly want to bond with him 'cause I catch his drift that he's in a lot of pain, too.

"Do this line. Don't leave me. Just tell me you understand, Jalita."

"I do understand, but I can't do that," I announce, staring at it with wide eyes. I've seen cocaine, but I've never considered putting it inside of my body. I considered indulging nothing short of a death sentence.

"Yes, you can. We're in the same boat. No one cares about our feelings. Shit, no one cares about us, period. This is what cares about us," Shawn says, then reaches down to take a long sniff.

He raises his head and says, "I did one for my no-good ex. Who you gonna do one for?" His words stick and grow. Kate's face flashes before me. My hope that anyone is ever gonna love me is destroyed. I suddenly don't care about my body being a temple, and I accept his offer.

"My White momma who don't love me. I'll start with that heartless bitch," I blurt out as his arm wraps around me, like I'm being held together. I impulsively roll up my sleeves, bend down to the white powdered trail, then inhale deeply, until I'm higher than a kite in the park. I feel good. I feel loved. Everything wrong doesn't matter anymore.

I've escaped the hurt, the pain, the lies, and the years of rejection in one long snort. I sit on the floor, smiling just like Shawn, and I'm thankful that I've taken my first trip into the high life.

A while later, the door opens slowly. Shawn and I are still half high, but manage to turn our heads to find Wes standing in the doorway.

"Well, I see Ms. Jalita got with the program around here. Come on out, you two," he says, helping me up off the marble floor.

Wes doesn't let go of my hand, and this time I'm too high to know that I should be watching my back for Tomi. We walk into a pool room, halfway stumbling. The water is fuzzy looking, but I can make out that the pool is shaped like a huge C. There's lots of room around the water to chill out in lounge chairs or creep into a corner. Wes leads me to a reclining chair and tells me to rest for a while. Loud, thumping go-go music is being played by a D.C. band whose name I can't recall, although the leader hitting a cowbell while other band members drum should make it impossible for me to forget. I lay back, waiting to see where this is goin', looking out through eyes that feel heavy and in need of two toothpicks to hold them open.

"Hold up, wait a minute. Ain't no party like a Wes Montgomery party, and a Wes Montgomery party don't stop, so let's paaaaarty!" Wes screams on beat. He throws off his robe like he's anything but a clean freak, then dives into the pool. He's swimming around like a fish, naked just like his momma birthed him. The crowd screams "paaaaarty" and mimics the host. Everyone is in the buff, splashing water, laughing, just plain acting wild and freaky. I want to keep watching, but my eyes completely shut. I can hear everything clear as a bell, so I listen intently.

After a few moments, I regain all of my faculties. My head is aching from the buzz I've had, but it's tolerable. I spot a naked Tomi sitting on top of Wes's shoulders, playing chicken in the water with another couple. I recognize the man's face, but I can't place it until a swimsuit model and video ho not doing a good job of whispering that he's the center for the Blitzers who just got his divorce papers help jog my memory that he's Travis Russell. I know the women's claim to fame 'cause they start talking about how a baby could ruin their figure, but not modeling for the magazine or shaking it in videos could be worth it if they could get ten thousand dollars a month to be a baby's momma to this legend who has no idea one of them is plotting to hook him into having an illegitimate rugrat. The shorter one claims she'll get him in bed before dawn and says she will demand twenty thousand dollars a month plus hush money.

This bit of gossip leads me to look around the rest of the room and observe White chicks, Black chicks, and a few foreigners pawing over dudes whose height tells me that they must take it to the hoop for a living. I finally spot Shawn as he pops up from under the water. He waves, then I wave in return. I decide to loosen up and stop judging this private freak festival, and give a sigh of relaxation.

“Come on in!” a lightly tanned woman screams at me.

“I don’t swim,” I scream back.

“You do now!” she says, chasing me into the water. I jump in the shallow end, and laugh. The water is warm. It feels as good as the line of coke I had. I’m a little self-conscious that everyone is nude, but decide to look at faces, not body parts.

I back up against the wall on the shallow end as I listen to what I recognize to be a Chuck Brown cut. I listen to the pulsating beat, beginning to bob my head and bounce my shoulders. I’m not alone—many other guests catch the vibe, too. The go-go funkster retires the cowbell then strips down to his sweaty undershirt and boxer shorts. He spits lyrics that make the crowd go wild, as the drumbeats kick in. I feel like I’m at some type of live summer concert at the Pier Six Concert Pavilion on the Inner Harbor.

The energy of the partygoers and hypnotic music arouses me, and I can feel my nipples harden the same way as when Tony gave me my first dose of lovin’. I continue to sway back and forth, until the song ends. I open my eyes and discover I’m being watched. Wes is looking over his shoulder and winking at me while sliding his tongue across his sexy, plump brown lips. Tomi holds on to the edge of the pool, thinking that everyone’s laughing at the scenery of Wes fucking her doggy style, when they’re really laughing at him flirting with me while Tomi is busy bouncing off his dick, unable to see a damn thing. The water makes these huge ripples as she moans with pleasure, sounding happy that she has an audience. The devil in me makes me lick my lips and grab my nipples, returning the same intense gaze to Wes. His hips begin to move faster as Tomi moans louder. Peer pressure gets to me, and I laugh heartily along with the crowd.

A few seconds later, I suddenly feel more ripples of gentle waves. The laughing turns into a sea of soft, sensual moans. It seems like everyone’s fucking but me and Shawn. I know it’s not that kind of party goin’ on with us, so I tune Wes out. I close my eyes, pretend I’m being touched and loved, and concentrate on the next cut, until things get so heated that I feel completely out of place. Shawn follows my lead, and we are like two

voyeurs, both just as aroused, watching a live porn flick at his cousin's house. By this time, a few guests make it out of the pool. I watch one woman openly suck a man's dick while kneeling. He lays back in a lounge chair with this shit-eating grin on his face.

Shawn says, "You wanna go to bed? I'm getting tired of just watching these freaks."

"Me, too," I reply.

"Who would've ever though that Wes spoke to a youth group yesterday about abstinence and morals. If you've seen it once, you've seen it fifty times, down to the president of basketball operations getting head on Christmas Day. Now what kind of example is he? I wish the owner hadn't left. He needs to see this shit. Come on, Jalita. I think we've both seen enough of Wes's party," he says, leading me out of the pool by the hand. Shawn and I dry ourselves off, shower around the corner, then walk into another wing of the house that Tomi didn't bother to show me. I'm sure she intentionally kept me away from seeing the bedrooms and private quarters.

"You wanna sleep in bed with me or by yourself? It's up to you," Shawn says, stretching and yawning.

"Excuse me?" I say.

"How many times do I have to tell you? I'm not trying to hit it. Why can't you realize you don't have to worry about that with me?" he snaps.

"Because a man will be a man. People are always tryna get in my pants."

"Well you won't have to worry about me trying to unzip them. I don't have an agenda."

"You're one of few. What planet are you from again?" I joke.

"Earth, and like I said I just think you're cool. I may even like you for you. So what's it gonna be?"

"I'm use to sleepin' alone," I reply.

"I'll put you in here and lock the door behind you. I'll be just across the hall. If you need anything, holla."

"Just as Shawn and I are about to part, six naked women I remember from the pool trail behind two extremely tall men who have to be Blitzers. We hear, "Y'all bitches got to be quiet until we get into the room. Our wives think we're watching a movie in the theater. They're around the corner playing cards."

"Shhh, Tammy. The man said quiet. Stop laughing, you drunk ass. I told you liquor goes straight to your big head," a woman says then giggles.

The tall White player asks, "You girls are over eighteen, right?" Before I hear the answers, the door shuts to a room. I hear faint giggling.

I turn to Shawn and say, "Don't worry. You don't have to tell me to lock the door with all these freaky-deaky people wandering around this joint."

"I hear that. Night."

"Night, Shawn," I say, locking the door, wondering what kind of bizarre dream I'd conjure up.

5

THE MORNING AFTER

It's 5:30 a.m. I walk over to the window 'cause I hear a rhythmic swooshing noise like someone's raking dry leaves, but I can't see from where my source of irritation is coming. This is a strange-ass neighborhood, that's for sure. Who in the world gets up 5:30 on a Sunday morning after Christmas to tend to yard work? I bet Wes and Tomi don't hear shit since the last stragglers Blitzers stumbled out of here at about four o'clock. Well, actually three wives came looking for their husbands at 3:30. Wes lied and said they'd left for home already, when really they were passed out in bed with the women I heard giggling the night before. I heard movement, I woke up, looked at a clock in the room, and put my ear to the wall. I heard Wes next door waking them up, explaining that his crib ain't no hotel and throwing the groupies out around 3:45. Actually, the groupies were all but pushed out of the door with their eyes still halfway shut, but I know Wes wanted them out of his spot so the wives wouldn't come back and pin his ass down. I guess since Wes's teammates had their fun there was no need to be polite to their "fans." As for Shawn, he's in there sawing wood like he hasn't had sleep in a hundred years. I know he, too, will continue doing an impression of Rip Van Winkle and won't be getting from underneath of those covers any time soon.

Since that just leaves yours truly, I don't see why I shouldn't go visit the fish in the back pond and get some fresh air. While I'm out there I can see who in the fuck woke me up when this bed slept way better than I had when Kate had me sleeping on a mattress on the floor, until she gave me up. My own mother didn't see fit to buy me a real bed, so instead I

slept on a piece of crap with no sheet that had a split down the middle, the stuffing falling out and metal broken springs scratching my legs if I slept wild enough to make them stick out. Enough of that though. I refuse to allow any more thoughts of Kate to ruin my day. I know these people have all kinds of alarms around here and I hope a motion detector isn't on 'cause I'm goin' downstairs to the room where my clothes are hanging on that hook so I can dress and slip outside. I can always redress and slip this robe back on like I was never missing. Sounds like a plan; that's exactly what I'll do 'cause I'm grown.

Damn. Look at him—he's fine. This brotha can wake my ass up anytime. So this is who disturbed my rest. On a scale of one to ten, I give him a ten on the body, a ten on the face, and a ten on the sex appeal. I can see he has a nice body although he's wearing sweat clothes that look like he saves them for chore-filled mornings like these. You've got to be a fine-ass motherfucker if you're wearing dirty work boots and garden gloves, have dirt on the knees of your pants and can still turn my head. I can tell this man is mixed with something but I have no idea what races are floating around in his gene pool. I'm not into men with really long hair or light skin, but this time I'm willing to make an exception for this honey the color of roasted cashews. Some people have all the nerve and others have none. Me, I have enough to put an end to talking to myself 'cause I'm about to get good and up close to get real personal with homeboy.

The man is still raking away, but I ask, "Excuse me, can you tell me where the grocery store is? I'm visiting my cousin and I'd like to surprise her before she gets up and make breakfast for her and her fiancé." He takes one last heavy breath, then pauses.

He looks up, then replies, "Yes. When you get to the main road coming in to the development, make a right, drive one mile, and you can't miss the Safeway sitting on the left hand side of the road."

"Thank you so much. I'm sorry to have interrupted you," I say. I can't see his hands but I know they're large enough to palm a basketball like Wes and his friends do from the way he wraps his big gloves around the top part of the rake and sets it in front of him.

"It's all right," he answers. I notice his yard and house is smaller than Wes's, but they're still nothing to sneeze at. I guess Wes's house is worth about four million, while his might have a market value of about one. I know my shit, including not to let this man off the hook since he isn't sporting a wedding ring and has no tan line on his finger either. His red, shiny Porsche sitting in the driveway with the vanity tag that reads LIVN-LARGE tells me he's materialistic—that make's him more interesting since

meeting people who are very paid is brand new to me.

"On second thought, I don't think I'll go to the store. I'm not sure where my cousin keeps her keys, and I don't want to wake her. I just have a thing about being a helpful guest. I wait on her when she comes to my place so I guess I'll have to call this one even."

"Well it was nice of you to be thoughtful, just the same," he says. The man takes off his gloves and wipes his hands on a rag that's lying on top of a pile of something in bags, then walks closer to me.

"Where are my manners? I'm Seth," he says, extending his long arm for a handshake.

"I'm Jalita," I say, wanting to add, "and I wish I had your money. Speaking of money, how and where do you make it?" Instead, I say, "It looks like you're up early to put in a full day's work."

"That was a good guess. I've got to rake, bag leaves, put some mulch down, and take down these Christmas lights," he answers.

"A man who's not afraid to get his hands dirty is a good thing."

"I'm definitely not afraid to do that," he explains. I wonder why he won't hire someone else to get dirt under his nails. I'm figuring out that most people in this neighborhood wouldn't be caught dead buying a rake, let alone using one. Using their logic I'd say that's what landscapers are for. Then again, maybe this Seth is a little thrifty so getting sweat funky is no big deal to him. Then he adds, "I think my ancestors had it right to have been content with getting close to Mother Earth. It does something good for the spirit."

"May I ask you a personal question?" I ask.

"Ask away."

"What race are you?"

"My mom is Lumbi Indian, and my dad was Creole and Irish."

"Interesting. That mixture doesn't happen every day."

"I know. I was the brunt of many a joke growing up in Oklahoma. How about yourself?" he asks. I wonder why. It's like he has this sixth sense. Hardly anyone ever picks up on the fact that I'm mixed. Most just think I'm plain fine and phat butted! How does Seth see past my looks? He hasn't looked at me like he wanted to hit it yet. This never happens.

"I'm biracial. My mother is White, and my father is Black. Plain and simple."

"I thought so."

"How did you know? I'm far from high yellow or a redbone."

"I'm very intuitive. I just don't speak out loud right off," he says. He bends down to tear open one of the plastic bags. When he stands back up

he lets his arms hang to his sides. It makes me notice his broad, square shoulders. All I can do is stare at him and all he seems to do is to be able to stare at me, too. In my case, I hope it's not 'cause I have something hanging out of my nose since I was dumb enough to skip looking in the mirror before hightailing it out here to be nosy. I guess that's not it 'cause Seth says, "I hope I'm not being too forward but I'd like to talk to you later."

"Not at all," I answer before realizing what I've said.

"Good. As you can see I don't have anything to write my number down but—"

I cut him off and finish his sentence, "If I have a good memory, will you tell me what it is?" We both smile. I feel a natural energy flowing between us. I find myself wishing he'd invite me inside.

"Yes. It's 443—" he pauses. My eyes follow his to a woman standing in the doorway wearing a robe, house shoes, a face full of green masque, and a head full of yellow magnetic rollers. She looks like her chain has been yanked too hard. I can tell she's eavesdropping, too. Seth looks startled, like he knows flapping his gums with me was off limits. I feel betrayed. His sex appeal dwindles and dries up.

"Jalita, I've got to go. It was a pleasure chatting with you though," Seth says. He runs to the doorway. I begin walking toward Wes's place but I hear low rumbling conversation and can tell the woman is chewing him out for some reason. I don't know if she's ugly or cute 'cause all that shit she has on makes it impossible to tell. If that is his woman, why did Seth allow me to be all up in his grill? If he had a live-in pussy like Wes, all he had to do was keep raking and give me the cold shoulder. If Seth had time to tell me it was a pleasure chatting with him, he just could've finished giving the kid the digits. See, this is why I can't catch any more feelings for men. I'll be better off sticking to hating on people with penises—especially the pretty boys 'cause their asses are always taken. Like Tony's baby's momma says, "No-good motherfucking players."



"Good morning!" Tomi says, bright eyed and a million times friendlier than I recall.

"Good morning," I repeat.

"How do you like your eggs?"

"Scrambled please."

"Scrambled it is. Mary is off on Sundays, so I'll be whippin' up

breakfast. I hope it's up to par, and you can do more than stare at it, Jachita," Tomi says, giggling. I don't bother to correct her about my name because I know it's not worth the trouble of making me look stupid in front of people who had no idea of what was said during our previous conversation.

"That's fine with me," I say, waving at Shawn who emerges with a fresh robe. I return to watching the unexpected cook to ensure she doesn't poison my butt accidentally on purpose.

"Good morning," he says in a scratchy, bass voice.

"Good morning," I repeat again.

"Gooooood morning!" Tomi says, extra chipper. "I think the stereo's already tuned in to gospel on WHUR. Hit the power button on the silver remote, would you, Shawn? It's Sunday, and we've got to praise the Lord around here on His day," Tomi says. I wonder if she's sincere, after her triple X performance last night, but she doesn't flinch or make the corners of her mouth form a smile. Serious as a heart attack, yes she is. I can't hold in the irony of events and nearly choke on my pulp-filled orange juice. I begin to cough.

"You okay?" Shawn asks.

"Yeah, thanks," I tell him, just as Wes walks in decked out in lounge wear and a light-colored silk robe.

"Shawn."

"Yes, Tomi," he answers.

"I've got another box of things to be donated to those people."

"What people, Tomi?" Shawn asks.

"I mean the poor people you took the last boxes to for me. I know they're plenty who live on your side of town, so could you please take it with you? I need my space. You know Wes nor I can stand clutter. The Salvation Army takes too long to pick it up," Tomi explains.

"Sure thing," Shawn responds. I roll my eyes, but no one catches me.

"Gooooood morning, people," Wes says, kissing Tomi on the back of the neck. We all answer. I'm wondering when last night will be the topic of discussion, but the moment never comes.

"Here's your *Washington Post*, honey," Tomi says to Wes.

"Thanks," he replies.

"Two scrambled eggs for you, Shawn, and three for you, honey, right?" Tomi asks. They both nod.

"Coffee's up," Tomi announces. I'm so nervous from these folks acting like they're full-time conservatives. I can't just sit around and pretend I'm at ease. I pitch in and won't allow Tomi to take no for an answer.

“You’re so sweet to help, Jachita. Thanks,” Tomi says. I grow goose bumps as I reminisce over her threat and ability to grip the side of a pool something fierce.

“No problem,” I say, pouring some gourmet brew into three mugs. I’m not a caffeine addict, but I feel the need to pretend this morning. I watch Wes from the corner of my eye. His legs are crossed, he’s freshly shaven, and looks well rested. I feel like I imagined everything I’d seen and experienced but I know better than that. Tomi walks over to the table with hot eggs, a stack of bacon and toast on a serving tray. She and I sit down.

Let’s say grace,” Wes says sternly as we all join hands. I’m the first one to begin eating. Then Shawn and Tomi follow suit.

After about two or three gospel numbers, the radio host says, “We just heard selections by The Southern Hummingbirds and Mahalia Jackson. Now family, hearing those songs brings back some down-home memories for me, and I’m wondering if it does for you. Can anyone remember the day God became real to you and turned your life around?”

Tomi lets her fork fall and puts in her two cents’ worth, hollering, “Yes, I do. Praise God. Hallelujah. Hallelujah.” After I watch Tomi throw up her right hand in affirmation, I can’t contain my laughter, and the bacon I’m chewing catapults from my mouth. Thankfully, no one sees it fly into the side of the counter, but Tomi does detect that I’m humored about something.

She asks, “Jachita, is something funny?”

Just as I begin to browse through my Rolodex of possible responses, Shawn takes me off the hook when he announces, “Hey people, Jackie paged me! She says she’s sorry, and she’s waiting for me at the crib. I knew she’d be back. Who’s the man now? Yeah, booooy!” Shawn stares and grins at his two-way.

Wes rustles his paper, and says, “No, not again. Brother, you need to let it go. What is this, like the fifth time this month?”

“You can do much better, Shawn,” Tomi agrees.

“I know, I know, but I really love that girl,” Shawn admits. I want to remind him that he was lovin’ coke the night before when he was reminded how little she loved him, but I keep my jaws locked tight.

“Man, you’re on your own with that. I wash my hands,” Wes says from behind the paper.

“Honey, put down that paper so that you can eat. We don’t want to be late for church. I hate it when we can’t get a seat in the front. I can never see around all of those heads and wide-brimmed hats the elders

wear. What a nuisance. They really should have to sit in the back if they just have to wear those awful flying saucer-size things," Tomi tells Wes, rolling her eyes.

"I know, but age takes precedence over logic," he answers.

We all hear someone walking down the hall toward the kitchen. I can smell whoever it is before they turn the corner since they reek so bad it smells like they bathed in liquor. When a man appears he looks as if he has something personal against getting a fresh shave and haircut. His hat is turned backward, but some of his uncombed hair is peeking out of the sides and his quarter-length leather coat is buttoned crooked. Tomi scrunches up her nose. Shawn looks blank. Wes looks like he's ready to let the man who looks like his double have a dose of something that's gonna start some serious static.

Wes says, "What's wrong with you? You know better than to come up in my place stinking like a liquor distillery and not taking off your shoes and changing into a robe."

He stumbles over to Wes and says, "Come on now, bro. It's Malik—your peoples. Why you gotta be like that to blood?"

"Just because we're twins doesn't give you a right to disrespect my place. In case you need reminding, my name's on the title to this crib, not yours."

"Well good fucking morning to you, too, bro," Malik answers. The man unbuttons his coat, lets it drop on to the floor then picks up a slice of bacon off Wes's plate.

While the muscular man is standing in the floor chewing and spilling bacon crumbs, Wes asks, "What do you want, Malik? As you can see we're in the middle of breakfast. You're making a mess on my floor."

After he finishes chewing Malik says, "Pardon me. Hi, y'all. Bro, I need you to spot me some funds. You know I wouldn't be asking if I didn't really need it. So can you help a brother out, Wes?" Tomi and Shawn don't bother to reply to his greeting. They both stare.

"Do you think I'm the Federal Reserve 'cause I play ball? And pick up the crumbs you spilled on my floor. You know I don't play that up in here."

"You know it's not like that. How was I supposed to know I was gonna blow out my hitting shoulder? I wish I could pick them up but I can't bend down."

"Instead of throwing away your money when you were on the football field, you should've saved and invested, Malik. You've got a pension coming, so spend it wisely. Now is not the time for this. Can't you see we have company?"

Malik looks at me like he doesn't care if I'm company or not. The volume of his words increases like his emotions are getting heated up. He continues, "You know I was a rookie and only got to play a few games this season before shit went wrong. I'm popping perkasets 'cause I have to, not 'cause I want to. The specialist said my rotator cuff is torn and I need to get my shoulder operated on, so that's what they got planned for me next week. Whether I like it or not they pulled me from the roster. Pension? After all is said and done I may not be worth enough to be an NFL to veteran who can collect one." He pulls a fifth of whiskey from his pocket, throws his head back, and drains the small brown bottle. When his head returns to its normal position, I notice his bloodshot red eyes as he crams the bottle in his pocket.

"Stop your whining. You should be grateful you made it as far as you did since only three hundred and ten of nine thousand college players make it to the scouting combine. You're old to be getting started, and you may have raw talent but not enough to beat out the draft picks. Instead of trying to be like me, you should've come up with alternative plans when this little charade ended because it was guaranteed to come to an end, Malik."

"I can't believe you just said that shit, Wes," Malik says, slurring his speech.

"Don't be using profanity and drinking in my home on Sunday. That's it. Give me my key back. Get out. And go clean your funky self up somewhere. You can't be representing my family name looking and smelling like you're homeless. I don't want to see you again until you make a decision to be a man and straighten out your life," Wes explains.

His twin takes off his hat and pushes it down on top of Wes's head. Then he answers, "Whether I'm in a slump or not, I'll say what I want, motherfucker. One injury could ruin your career. I hope your cartilage wears out and your knees go bad so you see how it feels when the crowd's not screaming your name. You'll see how it feels when you can't come out of the tunnel or do those damn reverse dunks, just one last time. You don't feel my pain—all you see is you washed-up twin brother. I heard about the Christmas party you had last night that you didn't even invite me to. Every since I lost my contract, niggas been carrying me, acting like they don't even know me. My own brother don't wanna see me no more 'cause we can't go out flossing and get spotted as the powerhouse Montgomery brothers who had football and basketball on lockdown. Excuse my French, ladies, but fuck you, dawg. Take your damn key and kiss my black ass once on each cheek. I don't need you

anyway, Wes.” Wes smacks Malik’s hat off his head and snatches the key. Malik kicks one of Wes’s kitchen chairs and stumbles out of the house. No one says a word about the incident, but Shawn is looking at his two-way like he wants me to hurry and finish eating so we can roll out.

I shamelessly devour my meal and decide that Shawn and Wes’s lives are their business. I concentrate on being thankful that I didn’t have to pay a dime for a hot morning grub, wondering if I can break away for two minutes to collect my food stash from under the couch in Tomi’s lounge. After seeing how Malik was dissed although he was in need, it scared me into telling a tale about having to use the rest room so I could collect my grub.

About a half an hour later, Shawn and I are dressed, Tomi is hugging me like she’s my big sister and really bonded with me, Wes is shaking my hand good-bye like he’d never suffered a major case of the wandering eyeballs, and I’m trailing to follow Shawn who I anticipate will be driving like a speed demon to meet up with the love of his life who doesn’t even deserve him giving her the time of day. Now I’ve seen a whole lot of shit out on the streets, but big timin’ in Mitchellville is one strange experience that can scare my curly naps permanently straight!

6

DEHYDRATION

“Are you going to be all right?” Shawn asks me.

“Of course. Big girls born and bred in Baltimore City always hold it down,” I tell Shawn as he puts his Olds in park in front of my motel room. I manage to squeeze out a smile.

“Need some change?”

“No, Shawn. I’m good but thanks for looking out for a sista.”

“I would stay for a while, but, you know, Jackie’s waitin’ and all.”

“I know. Do you want her presents back? I’ll understand if you do.”

“No way. You enjoy them. That’s what she gets for actin’ a fool,” he says. I grin.

“You watch yourself, here?” I caution him.

“I will. If you ever come this way again, this is the 1-800 number to my two-way.”

“I don’t think Jackie will be allowing any calls from people she doesn’t know,” I tease. Shawn drops his head and confirms my suspicion that she controls his every move and thought.

“Well you know where I work. And oh yeah, Wes said to give you this.” He hands me a piece of paper that is folded over several times.

“Jalita?”

I carelessly shove the paper into my pocket, then say, “What is it, Shawn?”

“Don’t mention last night to anyone. What happened stays inside of those walls. It’s sort of an unspoken rule.”

“I’m a quick study. The kid already figured that out hours ago.”

"I knew you weren't lying about those street smarts you said you had, ma. The thing is there's a hell of a lot more to you than the outside piece, so don't let Wes get you all wrapped up in some dysfunctional shit. There are hundreds of cons that go along with Wes being able to test-drive a car for a whole weekend or sleep with as many freaks as his king-size bed can hold when he's on the road. As you saw last night, even the married ones can't keep their attention on one woman."

"You're aight, Shawn, but I'm grown. I know what the deal is. I don't need convincing to stay away," I say, playfully punching him in the arm.

"I can't tell a grown woman what to do, but I know you don't need any drama, so watch it. As you can see by the way Wes treated Malik, he's not exactly the nicest guy in the world."

"Drama is my middle name, but I won't be adding any more by tryna get thick with Wes, so save your worries, Shawn. It won't and can't be like that, and you're *not* my keeper."

"I remember what you said in the bathroom about your moms. It's not your fault. None of your life. Drama doesn't have to be your middle name anymore."

"That goes for you, too, Shawn."

"Maybe or maybe not, but that's another story that's too long to explain. Peace, ma."

"Oh no, you don't," I tell Shawn.

"No I don't what? What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about you forgetting to hand me that snob's box of things. I know whatever Tomi's got in there can't be all that bad." Shawn laughs. I grin.

Then he adds, "Tomi's gonna question me about what became of her old goods, so I've gotta think of how to manage to stay out of the middle of this one. Last time it was two boxes of belts. This time of year she changes all of her purses."

I open Shawn's back door, slide the box off the seat, then announce, "That figures, but I'll still take it off her greedy little hands. You better not rat me out, either. Now I'm ready to roll out. And you didn't have to offer to carry nothing."

Shawn looks astonished, then replies, "My bad. I'm coming to help you, Jalita."

I balance the box on my knee and open the mint-green motel door, telling Shawn, "Don't bother getting out of the car. I know you've got some other things on your mind, like Jackie. Peace, Shortie Shawn."

When I turn around and look Shawn in the eyes for the last time, I read the hurt in them. For the first time in my life, I'm missing someone who deserves to be missed by me. All Shortie wanted to know was who was gonna love him. Unfortunately Jackie was the last one to be able to give him reciprocity, compassion, and the ability to help him shed the fears of his past.



Tomi's stash was exactly as I'd expected. I've never seen authentic Coach bags up close before, but I know these are it. The writing on the knockoff purses is crooked, but these words are straight as a line. So what if everything is in perfect shape though? To hell with accessories, I need clothes and drawers before I think about matching one of the phat Coach bags. After pulling through one of the large bags from Shawn, I locate a pair of sexy, fresh panties that were meant for Jackie, but I have the pleasure of removing the tags to put them on my backside. Thank God Shawn thought of everything that a woman could possibly want on her gear wish list.

Although someone's made it into this sucker to change the sheets, the second set is as abrasive as the first. I can't complain though because bad could always be worse. I fold my hands behind my head and stare at the poorly painted, chipping motel ceiling. I feel like I'm hollow inside and crave someone or something to fill me up. There's nothing. There's no one. I feign for more drugs, but don't know where to get any. Even if I did, I'm not about to waste one dollar bill on a habit I can't support. My mind drifts back to that wonderful sniff, and I fall asleep to R&B music I pretend is jazz 'cause all this cheap motel clock radio can receive is a weak signal of something I really don't want to hear on HOT 99.5.

A few hours later, my stomach is growling, and I hate to do it, but I put on my gear so that I can make the hike to that Chic-fil-A Shawn passed on our way back. If I had a dime for every time I had to walk somewhere, I'd be rolling in ends, but I'm not a pampered Tomi type, so I make that hump until I see the red-roofed building that's got a hot, greasy chicken sandwich waiting inside, just for me.

I say, "Give me a number one meal plus a large lemonade and a small side of fries."

"That's a number four meal, a large lemonade, and one large fry? That'll be \$5.10 please," the boy says, then looks up at me.

"No, I said a number one meal, plus a small side of fries and a large

lemonade. Don't you hear good? I said plus, meaning in addition to the number one meal."

"That's a number one meal, a small order of fries, and a large lemonade."

"It's about time you got it right. How much?"

"Ahhhh, \$7.10," he replies. I give him the money and watch him turn his back, cough over my fries, scratch his left cheek, then put them in the bag.

"Oh no you didn't. I don't play that. Get the manager."

"What?"

"Do it, shortie," I demand. I see a pair of eyes peep between the divider, then they disappear. I know they belong to some employee, so I don't give a fuck. I want the head cheese of the establishment to take notice.

About thirty seconds later, a woman who is taking drive-through orders in the corner area walks in my direction.

"Yes, what seems to be the problem?" the manager asks. She's large and looks like she hasn't washed her uniform in at least seven days. I don't expect her to agree with me that she's got a nasty, funky little work-er on her hands.

"First your employee got my order wrong twice, then his nasty butt coughed on my food and he scratched his gross-looking red, pimply face, too. I want my money back."

"They're learning, and it's hard to get good help."

"That's not my fault. Let them learn for free then. I want my money back."

"I tell you what, miss, how about a sandwich on the house?"

"No. I want all of my money back, and I asked for a freaking number one, plus a side of fries, and a large lemonade. I didn't ask for a free sandwich," I say even more irritated.

"Okay, so the original order is on the house."

"Fine, as long as I get my money back, and I don't want that boy to touch my food. I might need to call the health department."

"Look, don't do that. I'll dump the fries, cook fresh ones and have him do some mopping."

"Whatever. That part's your choice."

"Thank you for your cooperation."

I taunt the manager and say, "If you really want to thank me, hire clean help who can just punch pictures right. It's not rocket science."

"Well, until I get more help, this is the crew I've got," she answers.

Before I know it, I shoot off my mouth and say, “ I can do better with my eyes closed.”

“Are you interested in a position?”

“Maybe, if you give me another free order for my troubles.”

“You drive a hard bargain.”

“No, I’ll just turn out to be your best employee and make you look good to the franchise owner and corporate,” I announce with a cocky smile.

“Junior, one extra number one! John, you’ve got floors.”

“So what time you want me here?” I ask, sipping on my first lemonade.

“Night shift. Five P.M. I’ll get you an application and uniform before you leave.”

“And you will be paying me how much?”

“It’s \$6.25 to start.”

“I told you that I can work fast food with my eyes closed. I’ve got experience. Is that all your best worker is worth to you?”

“Okay, eight dollars, and that’s as high as I can go. If you don’t turn out to be what you say you are, it’s back to \$6.25.”

“That’ll work. I’m Jalita, and I’ll see you tomorrow, boss,” I say, reaching out to shake her hand. I own so much pent-up frustration over being constantly dissed and broke that I want to squeeze her hand to death, but I don’t. I keep my grip light and pretend like I’m happily gonna make frying chicken my career. The dumb broad who probably has an IQ of a mop is clueless that Jalita Harrison can run her ship real tight, but is only willing to stick around long enough to get a little something something more in her purse.

\$

I’m so tired of pretending I’ve got my stuff together and so sick of having no one or nothing stable in my life that I give in to my urge to smoke and drink until I fall asleep in my lonely, cheap hotel room. I spot a place called the Starting Gate Lounge. I want to make sure I don’t get hit tryna cross the street while lusting after Newport, which I’ve never had the pleasure of puffing and some kind of cooler that I’ve seen the college kids get a buzz off, so I remember to look both ways and proceed with caution this time. I open the door that’s begging for a wash so badly that I can’t see through the dirty film and scan the store for the fridge. I pull out a box of Smirnoff Ice coolers, then set them on the counter so

hard they make a rattling, clunking sound.

"I'd like a pack of Newports, please," I say, tryna sound like I've been puffing on cigarettes for years.

"I need to see some ID," the man with an Indian accent says.

"For what?" I ask, beginning my ploy to get my way.

"Read the sign," he says, pointing to it.

"I'm old enough. I've been old enough for a minute," I say, smiling at him and leaning on the counter.

"I've got to make sure I abide by the law, miss."

"Mmm-hmm, I feel you," I say. I slowly unzip my stadium coat and my sweat suit jacket just enough to advertise my two fleshy mounds of size D breasts.

"Now where did I put that driver's license? Maybe I dropped it. I know I had the damn thing when I came in here," I mumble, bending over and putting my rear in clear view, pretending to scour the floor. Just as I finish my snake charmer routine, I come up and see two familiar faces.

"Well, well, look who's here. Sharon Diggs, and in Laurel of *all* places. I thought you would be in Boston watching your mom get out the old pots and pans right about now," I tell Sharon, my former friend from Bentley.

"Jalita. Oh, I uhh . . . Hi," she stutters with embarrassment.

"Lost your words and your ticket home, huh? Now that's bad luck for ya," I say.

"My mom is still tripping over me changing my major from political science to theater. She says they won't pay for next semester if I don't change my mind about choosing a starving profession. You know the drill from home. What are you doing here?"

"The same thing you are . . . save it, Sharon. I guess you've forgotten you told me your mom supported you fully and got over you not wanting to join your dad's law practice. You said you have personal issues with your dad, not your mom. If you're gonna lie, remember your script, because I do listen . . . *even to my so-called friends*," I tell her.

"You remember my boyfriend, Darren, right?" she asks to change the subject.

"Yeah. Hi, Darren. Nice to see you again," I say, throwing up my hand unenthusiastically.

"What's up?" he answers. Darren has an attractive face, but is about ten pounds overweight.

"Oh, that's his sister, Chante, over there with her head stuck in the fridge."

“Can you believe someone put pictures of paper liquor up in the refrigerator? You’d think they’d want to keep stuff stocked. Man, you can get whatever you’re looking for in D.C., including a good funeral procession,” she complains. Chante is sporting the kind of look where you can’t tell which way she swings.

“You can’t even buy liquor on Sunday up in D.C., so you need to check yourself on that,” Darren reminds his sister, while turning in her direction.

“Whatever. I guess this will have to do then,” she mumbles, pulling something out of the fridge.

“Oh, so you live in D.C., Chante?” I press casually.

“Yeah, I love it. I’m smack dab in the middle of everything worth being around. That new convention center is the bomb, too,” she answers. I notice her tongue ring, but try not to stare at the tiny silver ball.

“Stop talking about my hood,” Darren says.

“You’ll get sick of it one day, baby brother. Thirty years of this small town was enough for me. Someone turned up floating in Laurel Lake last week. The crime is getting as bad as in the city.”

Darren turns to her and says, “So why you visiting me then?”

“That’s a good point. I do have better places I could be,” she teases.

“Who are you here visiting, Jalita?” Chante inquires.

“No one. I’ve got a room for the night. No big deal,” I answer.

Darren chimes in and says, “So why don’t you come over to the crib and chill with us? It’s just me, Sharon, Chante, and her man.”

“Thank you, but no thanks. I don’t want to be the tagalong. It’s obvious that Sharon wanted some time away from me,” I say, looking at Sharon dead into her eyes.

“Oh, I didn’t mean it like that,” Sharon interjects.

“Well from what Ebony said, you had plans up in North West last night. How did you mean it then, since you plain lied to me about leaving town?” I say.

Darren gives a confused look, pauses then says, “Chante lives in North West. I thought she and Maxwell did some last-minute shopping together. Sharon told me she was getting food baskets together for that community service project at school. How could that be?” Sharon doesn’t answer Darren. Chante giggles.

“What’s up with that, Sharon?” he asks again. Chante giggles louder.

“I-I well . . . I’m busted, all right. I was out buying the gift I gave you. I needed an alibi,” she lies. Chante sets the bottles down on the counter, then does a slow jog around the store. I feel the tension

building between Darren and Sharon. I want to crack a smile, but I keep wearing my poker face.

"I thought we said we weren't doing gifts this year until the after-Christmas sales to save money. I was confused about why you gave me something so fast. I'm not being ungrateful, Sharon, but come to think of it, you had that Lagerfield Photo cologne in your closet three months ago. You said you were saving it to give to your dad for his birthday," Darren says.

"You know you're always making me account for every second of my time, and I'm sick of it. I have one daddy, and you ain't him!" Sharon snaps. I give myself permission to smirk because I know why Chante has been a giggle box.

"You don't give her much space, Darren. Give the woman a fucking break, boy," Chante says.

Darren snaps, "Why don't you mind your own business? What do you know about our relationship? And I'm all man, I'm not a boy."

"More than you think, *boy*," she says to her brother defensively. All signs of the giggles leave.

"Can't we just let this drop? It's the day after Christmas, y'all. Shouldn't we just be satisfied with spending the holiday together?" Sharon says, tryna skirt the issue.

"Hell no. You've been acting funny all semester. I'm going to get to the bottom of this right now. And what's Chante doing knowing where you are when I can't even get the truth?" Darren presses.

"None of your business. You don't own me, nigga. Who you tryin' to keep on a leash? Ain't no ring on this finger right here," Sharon says, holding up her fingers in his face.

Darren sighs and tells her, "I don't know what just happened here, but I don't like it. I've never seen you trip like this. You're hiding something."

"She sure is. Just tell him about your creeping and be done with it, Sharon," Chante says, turning to Sharon and rolling her eyes.

"Will you stay out of this?" Sharon snaps.

"Oh, I've been deep in it," Chante comments.

"I said shut up," Sharon snaps again.

"What is going on here? Tell me what about creeping?" Darren asks.

"Nothing, Darren. Just mind your business and let this drop, that's all," Sharon tells him.

"Well my girl and my sister are arguing, so it is my business."

"The problem is you aren't taking care of business, so your woman creeps through the day and night," Chante blurts out, then laughs. I

finally lose my poker face, and I feel my cheeks moving upward to form a smile.

“Excuse me?” Darren says. “I’ve got her back at all times, down to buying her books every semester and keeping her freezer full. I work hard to take good care of my Sharon. That’s my boo. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Let’s buy the drinks and just leave, please,” Sharon says, walking toward the counter.

“Well, nice seeing you all. The pictures Ebony took of you, Sharon, were off the damn hook. I imagine Darren will enjoy looking at them as interesting as they are,” I say.

“What pictures, Jalita?” Darren asks.

“Oh, you haven’t seen them? Oops, my bad. Creeping, creeping, through the day and night,” I mutter.

“Bitch, you need to mind your own business, too!” Sharon yells at me.

“I would say ‘your momma,’ but that would just be too ghetto for my style. Any time a woman has her ass hanging out for the camera, I assume it’s to turn her man on, but now I know what I heard about you being confused is true,” I spit back.

“I can’t take it anymore,” Chante announces.

“Don’t do it, Chante, please!” Sharon pleads with puppy dog eyes, then shakes her head.

Chante turns to her brother, clears her throat, and says, “Darren, Sharon and I are lovers. She was with me Christmas Eve. Now, that it’s out in the open, can we just move on? Damn, Sharon, I’ve been telling you this could happen if you didn’t break up with him.” Chante shakes her head, too. She walks to the counter, pays for the Moet minis and Coronas, then watches the Indian man bag the bottles.

“What did she just say?” Darren asks Sharon.

“You know she has a sick sense of humor, baby. She’s always messing around and doesn’t know when to stop. Let’s go. Don’t pay her any attention. She’s just trying to upset you,” Sharon says, pulling on his arm.

“No, no, no. See one of my boys who’s a bouncer told me he saw you two all hugged up in a gay club last month during that Gay and Lesbian Pride Festival Weekend in D.C. I told him he was mistaken since he met you both just that one time I threw the New Year’s Eve party last year. I swore to him it was a case of mistaken identity. I insisted that neither one of you would betray me like that,” Darren says, nodding like everything has come together.

“I’ve never been in a gay club in my life. You know I was raised strict.

I could never be seen walking around with some proud gays and lesbians. Someone might mistake me for being funny. How ridiculous is that?" Sharon insists.

"Please! Just stand up to my brother. He ain't nobody. Your ass had a blast that weekend. I'm tired of this shit. This is why I don't like creeping with other bisexuals. Y'all always want to be all secretive. I'm going to the car. Don't take all day. I'm ready to get my drink and eat on, so hurry your asses up," Chante says, holding the bag in her left hand.

"Me, too. I'm not putting my business out in the street," Sharon says with no sorrow in her voice.

"You haven't been breaking me off too much either. Damn. It is true. This is the worst day of my life," Darren says, standing on the sidewalk.

"All right, fine, nigga. Since you wouldn't leave it alone, I'm gonna give you the 411. I like the way Chante makes me feel. She listens when I need her to. She takes me out when you want to run the street with your boys," Sharon belts out, then pauses.

Darren asks, "So what, now I'm not good in bed?"

Sharon explains, "Me cheating on you started out as a convenient sexual thing. I love you, Darren, but what I feel for Chante is a stronger sexual desire. She even isn't afraid to lick my pussy. That's more than I can say for your missionary-man ass."

Darren angrily blurts out, "What are you saying? I let you get on top. I handle my business." He balls up his fist and bumps his chest three times.

"Chante's twice the man you are. I didn't want to say anything before, but getting on top of you is like floating on a waterbed. You stink like a toxic garbage dump when you come home from work. My future is standing over there. I'm her freak and her whore, so just live with it already and accept that you're history, honey."

Chante tells her brother, "Face it, she gets on her knees begging for it. I provide for her in ways your ass can't. See this ring I'm sporting, boy? It's a promise ring from my future life partner, Sharon," Chante explains while holding out her left hand.

"I looked up to you. How could you do this to your own brother?" Darren asks Chante. His eyes begin to glisten.

"You never looked up to me. Mom and Dad are paying for your college. No one sent me. You think you're better than me? Now I've got something you don't and never will have."

"It was never like that. You didn't want to go to college. You ran off and got married at eighteen, and got divorced by twenty. That's not

my fault you chose a different life path. So this is about getting back at me, I see.”

“I really do like Sharon. She likes me better than you even though I work at the post office and never saw a day of college, Mr. Honor Society, Mr. Momma and Daddy Has Every Trophy You’ve Ever Gotten for the Debate Team Up On the Shelf.”

“Okay, my sister hates me, and my girl betrayed me. Ain’t this a bitch?” Darren says, crying.

“Don’t blame Chante; now that’s a damn good woman,” Sharon says.

“The only thing I have to say to you, Sharon, is you didn’t take the time to talk to me,” Darren shouts, pointing at her, then letting his arm fall. Sharon turns away.

“And you two sick-ass bitches can walk. Don’t find your way to my crib, so have dinner somewhere else. Maxwell and I are going to have a talk, Chante. If y’all want to be together, you can put your two Judas heads together and find a fucking ride. As of right now, I don’t have a sister or a girl. You trifling asses need to forget that I exist. I am through with the both of you for this—and I mean for life. I hope it was worth it to the both of you.” Darren slams the door to his green Mustang. He speeds off, throwing his middle finger up at both of them.

“That boy is trippin’, but he’ll get over it. My cell was on his back-seat. Shit. How are we going to get back to D.C.? I have no communication right about now, and I just spent all my money on this liquor,” Chante mumbles.

“See what you did, Jalita. I hate your ass!” Sharon yells at me with tears in her eyes.

“Oh, so now you know me or something? I don’t think so. In fact, I’ve never seen you a day in my life. It must be a case of mistaken identity,” I say then walk past her, smirking.

“I’m going to ruin you for this. You just wait until school starts!” Sharon says with a thick cloud of snot dripping from her nose.

“Ebony already laid that groundwork. I ain’t coming back anyway. Get yourself a Kleenex or something, baby girl. That snot is nasty as shit,” I shout.

“Jalita, you’re on foot, so you must be staying somewhere close by. You think you can help us out?” Chante asks.

“I would if I could, but no can do when two heads are better than one. Now I can say I want no part of mistaken identity of being like y’all. I’m sure the two of you will figure out something. Now that Darren’s out of the way, Sharon can get a matching tongue ring. Bye, freaks and hos.

Have fun creeping, now that you both can be open about it.” I walk into the store. I turn around one last time and shake my head. I see Sharon bury her head in Chante’s chest. Just like she said, Chante is busy listening to her, comforting her just like a man would do a woman. If I were a betting sista, I’d take my money to Vegas and plunk it all down to bet they’ll be sucking each other’s toes and licking holes.

“Now I know I need a drink,” I say out loud, looking for some liquor.

“I’ll buy the coolers for you. I’m old enough,” the store owner says, picking up where he and I left off. His fingers fly to ring up the merchandise as I hold his gaze, playing with his head, arousing him into an idiotic zone until he pushes the brown paper bag toward me. I’ve forgotten that my breasts are still hanging halfway out.

“Thanks for helping me out,” I say as I wink at him.

“What’s your name?” he asks.

“If you really cared, you’d know from making it a point to eavesdrop when the others gave away the clue you’re asking for,” I tell him, grinning flirtatiously.

“Were those your friends?”

“Not hardly. I wouldn’t claim them if someone paid me.”

“Those ladies were wrong to do what they did. I guess they never heard of karma. In my country, you don’t do things like that and not expect bad to come back to you.”

“I hear you, Mr. Sexy. Well I’m about to get out of here and mind my own business ’cause I’ve got my own problems to contend with,” I say, stuffing my breasts out of sight, then winking at him.

“Good-bye, miss. Come back and see me. Maybe you’ll tell me your name next time,” he says.

I chuckle as the door closes behind me, thinking that getting what I wanted to numb my pain was easier than I thought. I was finding out that I had the power to turn completely intelligent men to mush and sometime soon, that might come in even more handy than an accidental talent. And since that’s the case, I may not be showing up to sling chicken parts around for a few dead presidents the next day. My circumstances leave me dehydrated enough, and it’s a mandatory thing that I work my way up to hydration before I wither up like a dead leaf and die. There are three ways to get what is needed: earn it, steal it, or have it given as a gift. It’s time for me to contemplate feelin’ the groove of option three. With a little fine-tuning, I bet that I can collect cash and a stash of shit that will revive my ass and bring me back to life, good as new.