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The Dirty Five

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“The Dirty Five”

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Kenensaw State University

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Chapter One

“Don’t do this! I’m begging you!”

“You can beg all you want but I don’t have a choice. I need to find a way to pay these bills your father left and avoid jail time.”

“So you’re just going to sell our stuff in some tacky garage sale?”

“Not my first choice but I have to do what I have to do. Plus, having a barbeque garage sale is genius. I’ll sell my stuff and it’ll be a good time.”

“I can’t believe this is happening.”

“I’m done trying to save everything. These things are just *things*. It won’t bring him back. It won’t change where we are or how quick we’re drowning. I just have to face the truth.”

“What’s the truth? We’re broke? I can get a job.”

“Not fast enough to help this situation. I don’t think you understand. I’m almost a million dollars in debt, my business went under because of this crappy economy and my husband was murdered because he worked for a shady company. This garage sale barbeque won’t put a dent in this debt, but it buys me time to get myself together. Now if you’re not going to help me organize this shit, get out of my way.”

This was my life, chaos and poverty. Our house, like many people in 2008, was getting foreclosed. I finished college a year ago and couldn’t find a job. This year was supposed to be the year of new beginnings. We had our first Black president, people were looking forward to getting better paying jobs, and more people were going back to college. But it seemed like everything came to a head and was in ruin instead. The housing market crashed, unemployment rose like never before and almost every company had hiring freeze. People were getting laid off,

businesses, like my mom's, we shutting down and everyone I knew was sinking on the same ship.

I, like many students graduating from college, was still looking for a decent job. The result of going to the best school, graduating at the top of my class and finishing college on time was unemployment and debt. On top of this, I just lost my father.

My father was a mortgage broker. It took him almost 15 years to become one of the top brokers in this region. Before he could take my mother's advice and leave the company he worked for to branch off on his own, the company was subpoenaed for real estate and mortgage fraud. The day we all went to court to fight this case, some radical, who lost their house and blamed greedy real estate agents, mortgage brokers and banks for his troubles. He decided to even the score. This man shot my father, outside the courthouse, in front of me. You'd think because such a tragedy happened to his family the court would be lenient on the debts he owned but no, because he died, they passed it on to us.

Now in order to make ends meet, my mother let the house go and came up with an idea to sell her stuff at a garage sale. It was already humiliating being on the 10 o'clock news and having my business out there for the world to know but now my mother wanted to make a spectacle of it? Things couldn't get any worse. For the first time in my life, I really had no idea where I was headed.

After realizing my mother wasn't going to budge, I went back upstairs. I saw my laptop on my bed and decided to check my email in case I received any news from the jobs I applied to. Once I opened up my laptop, I spent the next few hours applying to jobs again.

"Hey," my mother walked in the room holding a moving box.

"Hey," I didn't look up from the computer.

“Put that laptop away.” She placed the box next to my bed. “Go downstairs and make yourself a plate.”

“I’m going out with Jordan,” I said.

“Fine, but you still need to get your face out of that computer. It’s gonna to give you a headache.”

“I’m fine.”

“Right.” She got up to leave. “Why don’t you start making your own business plan and run a consulting business, while you search for fulltime work. It was during the Great Depression-“

I was over her telling me to work for myself and be an entrepreneur. I didn’t have any start up money, her business recently shut down and our house was being foreclosed. I didn’t have time to start a business; I needed a job.

“Mom, I’m good.”

“I’m tired of you putting in application after application and getting upset when these jobs aren’t calling you back. How many applications do you send out each week?”

“Enough and I’ll get a job. I have a degree from a good school. Someone will hire me.”

“Well, take a break from looking for a job and clear your head for a minute.”

“No, I need to find a job. We still have few weeks before they take the house. When I get a job, and it will be soon, we’re going to be able to keep the house.”

She came back and sat on my bed.

“Ok, Easter, you don’t have to worry about that. Let me worry about the house.”

“Dad would want us to fight for the house.”

“Dad would want us to move on. I’m not about to pay a whole bunch of money to catch up on payments only to be back in this situation in a few months. I’m letting the house go.”

“Daddy worked so hard to get us this house.” I was annoyed. “You’re so quick to move away. He’s only been gone for a few months and you’re ready to let the house go and start a new life.”

“And what’s wrong with that?”

“This house was his blood, sweat and tears.”

“And look where that got him! Dead. Dead because he worked for a greedy company that screwed him over, threw his whole family in an insane amount of debt. He had nothing to show, nothing to leave us, nothing to be proud of. Just dead hopes and dead dreams.”

I couldn’t even respond to her. The grieving widow phase was pissing me off. She made it seemed like my father forced her in this situation. It was almost like she was bitter about and wanted to blame him. My father was doing what everyone else in this world was doing, trying to get buy.

“I see it like this. If your father has listened to me instead of getting comfortable working for someone else, knowing his talents, he’d be alive today. You’re sitting there following in his footsteps, waiting for someone to validate your worth with a crappy salary and some benefits.” Her voice was raised in a high pitch. “Your fancy degree from MIT, Ivy League hasn’t taught you how to live since you got out of college, a year ago.”

“That’s why I’m trying to find a job now,” I slammed my laptop shut. I wasn’t going to get anything done tonight. I just grabbed my phone and texted my best friend Jordan to come pick me up immediately.

“If you had put in the same amount of effort into building your own business, getting clients and marketing your brand, you wouldn’t be begging closed doors to open for you now.” She looked over at my Bachelor of Science in Internet Security degree, which was on the floor, and smirked. “You’re black, inexperienced in their eyes, and hungry. The best job you’ll get is enough to forever pay the interest off those student loans and live an average life. Nothing spectacular, just basic.”

She got up and left my bedroom. I rubbed my temples to keep from going after her and cursing her out. I looked over at the picture of me sitting on my Dad’s BMW that was recently repossessed. He worked so hard to have everything only for it all to be taken away. Now our family has nothing to show because of court fees, lawsuits and funeral cost. My mother’s only solution to everything was to get rid of everything and move. That left me with a week to pack my stuff, get an apartment and find a job.

I got alert from my cell phone indicating two of the millions of jobs I applied to email me back. I took a deep breath and opened them. After reading the first line and seeing they didn’t even bother to greet me via name, I deleted the job rejections that started with *Dear Applicant*.

My phone rang.

“I’m outside.”

“Thank God. I’m coming.”

I got up and ran downstairs. I heard my mother ask where I was going but I ignored her. I grabbed my keys, purse and headed out. I was so happy to leave the house. Jordan was sitting in her car looking at her nails when I got in. Her bright red hair had clearly just been dyed and her once pale skin now glowed with a tan.

“Where the fire?” she said when I slammed the car door shut.

“Just drive. The widow only wants to focus on her barbeque garage sale crap and she’s giving me shit about getting a job.”

“She still thinks you should go into business for yourself?”

“You already know.”

“That’s not a bad suggestion.”

“I don’t want to talk about it tonight. Let’s just get some drinks.”

“Cool.”

Jordan and I went to one of our favorite chain restaurants. I knew she had to go into work the next day, so I knew we needed to call it a night early. We were sitting at the bar, eating appetizers and sipping on our drinks.

“I know you don’t want to hear this but your mom is still grieving. You are too. Cut her some slack. She’s worried about you,” Jordan said.

“Not that worried. She’s moving in a week.”

“I get that. But she’s got to start over. She spent the last, what? 30 years with a man and now he’s gone. That’s rough.” Jordan sipped her drink.

“She’s not the only one who lost someone. It’s like she resents me trying to be like him.”

“It just could be her grieving process. Let her have that. Plus, we are about to be roomies. I’m excited.”

“Yeah, I know. I just wish she would get off my back. What time is it?”

“Time for me to go to bed. I got the tab.” She pulled out her wallet and started talking to the bartender about giving her a discount.

A man, who was sitting next to us, got up to leave. I noticed he left his wallet on the seat.

“Hey, I’ll be right back,” I said.

“Ok cool,” Jordan said and kept talking to the bartender. “Dude, you’ll get the same tip. Just discount the food. The wings were all cold and shit.”

I laughed and picked up the wallet. I went to the back to see if he went to the bathroom. As I waited outside the men’s bathroom, I opened the wallet to make sure the driver’s license matched the man. When I looked at the ID, I saw it wasn’t him. It was a completely different person on the ID and the name matched the credit cards. The man, who was sitting next to us, came out the bathroom when I put the wallet in my purse.

“Can I help you?” he said burping in my face.

“No,” I stepped back and went into the ladies room.

I went in the stall and saw there was money in the wallet. The man’s wallet, whose name was Steve, had all kinds of credit cards, AMEX, Visa Platinum, and Master Card. A bunch of twenties, indicating he went to the ATM before coming into the restaurant. He actually banked with the company Jordan work for. I looked at what year he was born and realized he was only a year older than us. How was it possible that he had this kind of money and we didn’t?

“Idiot left his social in his wallet right behind his driver’s license. Dummy.” I said to myself.

I decided to mail him back his stuff. His address was clearly on the driver’s license, so in the morning I’d stop by the post office. If I gave the wallet to the bartender, this Steve character’s identity could get stolen. More than likely the cards would be cancelled by the next morning, once he realized it was missing. As I was going to put the wallet in my pocket, I changed my mind and decided to take the cash out and mail everything else. I needed the cash more than he did; plus, he was going to blow it anyway.

I came back to the bar and tapped Jordan on the shoulder.

“Oh there you are,” she smiled and tossed her red hair over her shoulder. “Ready to go?”

“Yup.” I clutched my purse.

“Oh, wait. Have you seen a wallet?” she said.

“A wallet?”

“Yeah. That guy over there,” she pointed to a skinny guy, who was talking to a hostess.

“He said he left his wallet at the bar.”

The wallet felt like a brick in my purse. I knew I should have just pulled it out my purse and hand it over to the guy. But when I looked at him, I knew he was well off. From his shoes, to the way he was leaning over the hostess stand smiling in the waitress’s face; he didn’t look worried. Most people, who lost their wallet, would be panicking and looking for it under tables. This guy was just chilling.

“No, I didn’t see anything.”

“Oh ok. Well, let’s go.”

I don’t know why, when we passed the guy, I felt like I was about to get busted. I moved out the restaurant quick and didn’t look him in the eye. I knew he would be fine. I needed this more than he did.

Chapter Two

It was early in the morning when Jordan was rushing in the bank with a cup of coffee looking at the clock. It was ten minutes before the hour. The pouring rain felt like it took hours to get to work. She felt slightly nauseated as she made her way through the lobby to head upstairs. Just as she was about to head up, one of the tellers called her name.

“Jordan!”

“Hey Mark! Gotta run. See you at lunch!”

“No Jordan, come here! I need to talk to you.” He rushed from behind the counter and ran up to her.

“Love, hold the gossip till lunch. I need coffee, have to set up a conference call and-”

“They’re going to fire you.”

“Whatever, I,” Jordan paused for a minute. “What?”

“Yes, the gossip is about you. Something is going on upstairs and you’re being let go. Do not go up there unprepared, child!” He snapped his fingers in her face.

Jordan’s stomach immediately started twisting. She picked the wrong day to have a hangover.

“Who’s upstairs right now?”

“Mrs. Nash.”

“Mrs. Nash alone?”

“Yes, honey and you know she don’t come in here unless she ready to curse someone out or fire them.”

“You’re not bullshitting me?”

“Girl, it’s too early for that. What I’m trying to figure out is why they’re firing you.”

“I have no idea.” Jordan turned around and headed up the stairs. She tried to be as calm as possible. She kept running different conversations in her head over and over again. When she walked in, her boss’s door was closed. Leaning over her desk, she saw an envelope and an empty box next to her desk. Taking a deep breath she went over to knock on the door.

“Come in!” Mrs. Nash said in an upbeat tone.

Jordan walked in and shut the door behind her. Jordan saw Mrs. Nash sitting at the computer and staring at it intensely. Jordan cleared her throat; her heart started to pound. She hated confrontation.

“What’s up?” Mrs. Nash said still avoiding eye contact.

“I’m guessing this envelope isn’t a bonus.”

“Oh it is. Well for me.” She smirked and finally looked up at Jordan.

“You can’t just fire me,” Jordan tried to control the tone of her voice.

“Oh, I can’t?”

“I mean, you can but-”

“Jordan, you’re too stupid for your own sake.”

“Excuse me?”

“I called you stupid.”

Jordan looked at her trying to think of something to say. She needed this job and it was clear Mrs. Nash didn’t want to hear any reason as to why to keep Jordan on.

“I’ve worked hard at everything I do for this bank. You can’t just throw me out for no reason.”

“You really think this is for no reason? Like I woke up this morning and said, it’s time to lay people off.”

“No, but I think you certainly owe me an explanation as to why you’re letting me go.”

“Have a seat.” She pointed at the chair facing the desk.

“No, I’m good right here. Why are you firing me?”

“The better question is what is going on between you and my husband?” She leaned back and looked at Jordan waiting for an answer.

Jordan didn’t say anything. She felt like the air in the room stop circulating. She couldn’t think of a response. She knew exactly what was going on with her and Mr. Nash. The second her mind went blank; she knew she should have walked out the room with whatever dignity she had left and moved on.

“I thought so.” Mrs. Nash went back to the computer.

“It’s not what you think.”

“Oh no?” She slid a folder over to Jordan.

Jordan opened the folder and saw conversation after conversation of text messages and instant messenger conversations between her and Mr. Nash, her boss. The man she was sleeping with when she first started working for the bank.

“We stopped messing around when I found out he wasn’t going to leave you and I didn’t want things to-” Jordan said.

“Am I supposed to thank you? I’m supposed to say thanks for fucking my husband behind my back and stopping when you realized I was pregnant.”

“I-I. I was caught up. Fell in love with a married man. When I saw it wasn’t going anywhere. I stopped. I swear to you, I stopped. We haven’t done anything in a year.”

“Seven months. I saw you two during Christmas.”

“No, you saw him try to kiss me and I pulled away. I didn’t want to do this and live like this. I didn’t mean-”

“Girl, shut up. Be a woman for once. Pack your shit and get the fuck out of my bank.”

“Don’t do this. I need this job. I swear I didn’t think we’d end up this way. I’ll never speak to him again. You can transfer me, make me a teller, I don’t care. Just don’t do this.”

“Nothing is worse than sitting across from a woman, who has damaged my family and is asking for a job. Bitch, I wouldn’t give you a pot to piss in. Get out of my face.”

“Can you please just listen!”

“Listen to me, triflin’ little whore,” Mrs. Nash once calm voice was now a raspy growl. “From day one, you walked in here with that cheap little pin stripped suit, I’m sure your little trampy girlfriends let you borrow, I spotted a whore. You thought sleeping with my husband was gonna to get you ahead?”

“It wasn’t like that!” Jordan raised her voice. She felt herself start to lose control.

“What was it like then? Huh? What was it like knowing that you were sleeping with another woman’s husband? What sympathy do you think you’re gonna to get?”

“You’re man came after *me*! I didn’t go after *him*. He was going to leave *you* and when you got pregnant.” Jordan pointed to herself. “*I* was a woman and stopped everything. *I* told him to work things out with your family. *I* told him to forget about us.”

“Oh! So, *you* think the two of you were an *us*?” She shoved Jordan against the door hard and started choking her. “Don’t try to play me. I know little girls like you. Sitting on a man’s lap, hoping to get a piece of something you’ve never earned. Bitch, you haven’t earned shit. This is my bank, that is my husband and now you’re my trash that I’m ready to dispose. Get the fuck out of my bank.”

Mrs. Nash let go of Jordan's neck. Jordan picked up her purse and opened the door to leave; she could barely breathe. After stumbling down the stairs, she made it to the lobby of the bank. The same teller that had given her the warning was helping a customer. He looked panicked as Jordan ran out the bank.

“Jordan! Wait!”

Jordan ran out the bank as fast as she could. The pouring rain met her with what felt like a bucket of water splashing against her face. She wiped her face and ran off. As soon as she got down the street, she leaned against a building trying to catch her breath. Her whole body was trembling out of control and was soaked. The chest pains were familiar and it indicated a panic attack was coming on. A panhandler came over and tried to grab her purse. Jordan put up a weak fight; the purse broke and everything fell out. The bum ran off with her wallet. While making an attempt to stand up, a man came running up to her.

“Are you ok?” he said trying to help her off the ground holding an umbrella over her.

“Get away from me!” she screamed and started running down the street.

Jordan could barely breathe and the trembling got worse. The panic attack was in full effect and caused her to almost faint next to a deli. The same man that was trying to help her before came back.

“Miss! Miss! Can you hear me?” he said. “I have your wallet. Just breathe.”

Everything was blurry and she couldn't hear. Her head felt like an alarm was going off, the sound of the rain was loud and wind was like ice slapping her face. The man put his hand over her shoulder and repeated that she was ok and to breathe.

“You're ok. Can you hear me?” he said looking worried. “Look at the ground. The ground is wet. Breathe. Look at the girl. She's wearing a purple coat.”

Jordan looked up at the girl. It was a little girl wearing a raincoat.

“Look at the tree, the tree is green. Breathe.” He said reaching his hand out to her.

Jordan nodded. He continued his panic attack techniques until she was able to stand up.

He gave her a minute to collect herself.

“I slipped your wallet in there,” he said handing her the broken purse.

“Thank you.” She felt relieved.

“How are you feeling?” He looked genuinely concerned.

“I’m so embarrassed.” Jordan touched her face.

“Don’t be,” he said, “rough morning?”

“You have no idea,” Jordan exhaled.

“Can I walk you anywhere?”

“No, no, I’m fine,” she said. “Can I get you a cup of coffee or anything?”

“I just worked an overnight shift, I’m headed home.”

Jordan looked at what he was wearing. She couldn’t understand why someone, who wore a suit, would work overnight. Maybe he worked in one of those cooperate offices and had a big project that needed to be completed. He saw how she was looking at him.

“I’m a doorman for the condominium right over there,” he said pointing behind her.

“Oh!” she nodded her head. Just when she thought she was going to get his phone number, she decided against it. She wasn’t going to sit on the phone with some doorman.

“Maybe we could grab breakfast and tea?” he said pointing at the deli.

“You know what? I need to get home. Not feeling so great,” she said looking at the train station. “Gonna hop on the train.”

“Ok, let me at least walk you to the train then I will leave you alone,” he smiled. “Take my umbrella. I can wait out for the rain to stop.”

“No, it’s ok. I have a car parked at another station.”

“Ok. That’s good. You gonna be ok?”

“Yeah. Where did you learn...”

“I’m studying to be a psychotherapist. I just read and learned about panic attacks and how to coach people through them.”

“That’s pretty cool.”

They walked to the station and didn’t say too much after. She liked that he was tall with a cute boyish face. While he made a few comments about the weather warming up, she kept observing things about him, like his shoes were very shiny. His hands, although rough, were clean and the nails were kept. She heard an East Boston accent when he spoke and he had freckles.

“Here we are,” he said when they got to the train station. “My name is Luke by the way.”

“Luke? I’m sorry. I should have- I mean-” she stopped talking.

“That’s ok. You had a rough morning, I get it,” he looked at her again. “I hope your day gets better- ma’am.”

“Jordan, my name is Jordan.”

“Jordan. I hope your day gets better,” he said reaching in his pocket. “Here is my business card. You can call me if you ever want that tea and breakfast.”

She took his card and he started to walk away. Normally she would’ve torn the card up from someone she had no interest in speaking to ever again. But something about him was different. Keeping the card, just in case she wanted tea, somehow brought her comfort.

That comfort only lasted for a little while. When she got on the train, she realized she wouldn't be able to pay her car note. It was bad enough she was behind on payments, but now she didn't have any income to catch up. She wouldn't have income to pay for anything if she didn't find another job soon. She checked her phone and she saw she got a text from her teller/friend. She got another text from an unknown number. It read, *good luck trying to find another position. After two years of interning, one year of fieldwork, you don't be getting a recommendation.* Jordan felt the panic attack coming back on. She tried to shake it off. Look at the sign, the sign is orange. Look at the ground, the ground is wet. Look at the door, the door was closing...

Chapter Three

“Anthony!” London tried to pull the 260-pound man off one of her girls. “Coño!”

Anthony cocked back his fist and repeatedly punched the young girl in the face. With every blow, blood flew in all directions. It seemed like his fury only got worse with each blow. London had to save the girl he was savagely beating. She jumped on his back and tried to wrestle him to stop. Anthony, after trying to shove London off his back, stopped hitting the girl.

“Monica, where’s my money?” Anthony said to the bleeding girl. He looked like he wanted to continue hitting her.

“She doesn’t have it. Leave her alone!” London said looking at Monica, who was barely conscious on the floor. “Ay dios mio! She’s fucking bleeding you asshole! Get the fuck out my house!”

“Bitch, I leave when I fucking want to!” he came back towards them.

“Get away from us!” London helped Monica off the floor and onto the couch using her body as a shield against Anthony. “Sista! Get me a towel.” Sista was another woman, who watched with terror as Anthony beat her friend.

“This bitch has until tomorrow to pay me. I don’t give a fuck!” Anthony tried to hit the girl again but London blocked him.

He turned to leave and knocked something over on the way out. The girl was crying as London and Sista, tried to clean her up. She tried to talk but London stopped her. Another young woman, who was Asian, ran to the front door and locked it. Her name was Kia. She looked out the peephole and took a sigh of relief. She turned around and looked at Monica on the couch. The three of them cleaned up Monica.

“Sista,” London said as she was walking out the living room, “call me if he tries to come back and make sure to keep an eye on Monica. Kia, come with me to make Monica some tea and get her some medicine.”

Sista nodded her head and Kia followed London in the kitchen. She was visibly upset as she started brewing the tea. London knew she had to address the problems they were having. Monica getting beat up put everyone in a bad up mood.

“Say something,” London said standing next to Kia.

“I’m going to kill him,” Kia said looking at the pot of tea.

“I hate him too,” London said running her fingers through her hair.

“So because his sloppy cunt ass clients aren’t happy with shit, he gets to beat us?”

Kia said looking at London. “Well, not all of us.”

“Don’t do that,” London frowned. “Don’t make it seem like he’s doing me any favors. He doesn’t bruise me up because he uses me to get clients. If they see anything on me, they will-”

“I don’t know how much longer I can do this,” Kia said pouring the tea into a cup.

“Shit,” London looked at her nails. “Mami, me either.”

London looked up to see a tear fall off Kia’s face as she walked out the kitchen. A feeling of helplessness took over because London didn’t have enough money to pay Anthony back. Applying for a loan, with no credit, was not in the equation. Every time one of her girls either came up short or his clients complained, the girls received an inhuman beat down from him. She took a deep breath and went back into the living room. The girls were watching the news.

“Mamacita,” London said lifting Monica’s bruised face up. “I need you to drink some tea, take some medicine and get some rest.”

Monica nodded her head.

“I’m so sorry,” London kissed her on the forehead. “I’m going to find a way to get us out of this. I promise. He won’t hurt you anymore.”

When Monica sat up, London noticed she was holding on to her stomach. She worried if Anthony broke another one of her girl’s ribs. If he did, that would mean Monica would be out of commission for a while. She couldn’t afford any more problems or complaints from him.

“You stay right here,” London pulled the down blanket over Monica. “Sista, I know you’re tired. Go to bed in my room. I’ll keep an eye on her.”

Sista left and Monica finished taking her medicine and lay back down. London sat on the comfortable Egyptian rug and leaned against the white couch next to Monica.

“The news is still talking about this guy,” Kia said reaching for the TV remote.

“Wait.” London looked at the TV; she looked up and saw a familiar face, Easter Belizaire. London recognized her from in high school; they had been friends. Easter’s face hadn’t changed much; she gained a few pounds. It’s been years since they saw each other. After London graduated, they grew apart. “What happened?”

“The guy worked for a mortgage company. The company got sued cause they were giving out bad loans to people. People’s houses got foreclosed and were homeless. The company made a bunch of money off them.”

“So they scammed people into signing bad loans?”

“That’s what the news is saying. The guy was shot and killed in front of his family.”

“Jesus.”

“The family still has to pay back the money he got sued for,” Kia said. “The company won the case but they still have to pay fees and shit. I think the news said they have to pay a fines up to like millions of dollars.”

“So he dies and now they’re after his family,” London said. “Nice.”

“Cold world.”

“Colder hearts.” London turned to Kia. “I actually know that girl.”

“The daughter?”

“Yeah, we went to high school together.”

“You still cool?”

“Sometimes we say hi to each other online. But that’s about it.”

“Humm...” Kia said taking a deep breath.

“What?”

“We need a scam like that.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Something big. I bet that girl knows how to get money.”

London looked back and touched Monica’s face. She was in deep sleep. London looked back at Kia who was staring at her.

“What?” London said getting off the floor.

“We need a big scam like that to get out of this sitting situation. I can’t do this shit with Anthony anymore.”

“What scam can you think of that’s going to give us at least five hundred thousand dollars. Cause that’s what we need to pay this fucker off and have a decent life.”

“I don’t know but that girl, the one you are friends with, she knows. I know she knows.”

“How do you know?” London picked up the rest of the tea Monica was drinking. It was still warm, so she took a few sips. Watching Monica get beat up like that gave her a headache.

“I just know.”

“She is a goodie-goodie. Been like that since high school. She’s hella smart. Went to college and everything, just like you.”

Kia was thumbing through her phone. London checked to make sure Monica was breathing. Her light snoring was a good sign.

“I knew it.” Kia said showing London her phone.

“What?” London took the phone to see what she’s referring to.

“She is really smart. Graduated from MIT in computer science.”

“Ok and?”

“Listen. It says on her profile that her mother is throwing a barbeque away party. You should go and reconnect with her. Her profile says she’s a temp. That means she doesn’t have steady work.”

“What am I supposed to do what? Offer her a job to work with us? Please!”

London threw her hand at Kia to dismiss what she was saying.

“Let me think of something. I just need you to reconnect with her.”

“How? Showing up to her house and asking for a plate of food.”

“To send your condolences. Trust me on this. You want to keep dealing with Anthony?” Kia crossed her arms over her chest.

London felt tired and wanted to go to bed. She knew Kia was onto something but tonight wasn't the night she wanted to understand anything. She was tired of fighting Anthony, tired of running and tired of feeling trapped.

“Forget about it. We have other problems. I don't need to reconnect with anyone.”

London got up and to pour her tea.

“You won't even try?”

“No. Conversation is over.”

Sista came rushing in the room. Her face looked upset.

“What's the matter?” London looked at the frighten woman. “I told you to get some rest.”

Sista didn't say anything. She just looked at London and opened her robe. She showed London and Kia a fresh stab wound.

“Sista no!” London rushed ran towards Sista who fell to her knees.

Kia looked terrified as London screamed directions at her. Kia didn't move; she just stared at Sista bleeding out. London held Sista in her lap and screamed at Kia to get the phone. Kia still didn't move. London slowly laid Sista on the floor and ran towards her phone. That was when Kia snapped out of her trance.

“What are you doing? She doesn't have insurance and she's not legal. I'll call our friend. Help her!” Kia rushed out the room.

London dropped her cell phone and ran back to Sista. Sista was moaning and sobbing as London pressed on her wound.

“Shhh, honey, shh.” London held back her own tears. She didn’t realize how fragile Sista was. This wasn’t the first time Sista tried to kill herself. When Kia came back in the room, it seemed like she calmed herself down. She brought other towels and extra sheets with her and said to move Sista onto something more comfortable. Sista was a short woman who was a little heavier than they were. They struggled to move her onto the carpeted area of the condo. London kept pressing on the wound as Kia said their nurse friend was on the way. Sista was whimpering and squeezing London’s hand. With every moan, Sista got weaker.

“It’s ok mama. It’s ok. I’m going to fix this.” London whispered in Sista’s ear. “I promise to fix this. Just stay with me.”

Kia backed away, slid down the wall and covered her head with her arms. London kept repeating to Sista to stay awake. Sista got weaker and London could feel it. She looked up and saw Kia in a ball crying.

“No! No! Stop that! Where is the lady?” London was rocking a calmer Sista who seemed to be drifting off.

“I don’t know,” Kia said barely loud enough for London to hear.

“Sista, Sista. Stay with me. It’s ok. You’re ok.” London kept pressing on the wound. She reached over to see Sista was still bleeding but couldn’t see where. “Kia! Get over here. I need your help. She’s still bleeding. Kia!”

Kia didn’t move. Monica started coughing. London focused her attention to Sista. Sista’s hand slid on the bloody floor revealing she cut her wrist. London was in shock.

“No, no. Please no. Sista, no,” London gave up on putting pressure on the stab wound. She just pulled Sista towards her. “You remember me. You remember this face. Don’t go to sleep scared ok?” London looked at Sista. “Look at me mami. You not gonna hurt no more. Si? It’s gonna be ok. You can go to sleep and when you wake up, you gonna be happy.”

Sista nodded as she closed her eyes for the last time. London kissed her on the forehead and looked at the TV screen. Easter’s seemingly perfect family smiled at her.

Chapter Four

“I’m so pissed my mother really had this dumb ass barbeque slash garage sale. All these people really showed up!” Easter was sitting in the kitchen with Jordan and her childhood friend Emery. “Look at them outside! Stuffing their face and trying to make a deal on my shit!”

“So what? I actually got a lot of nice stuff,” Emery said smiling at her box on the floor next to her.

“I coulda gave you that for free!”

“I wouldn’t have asked. I’m not gonna lie, I was gonna fight that old lady if she didn’t let me have this lamp. I’ve always loved this lamp.” Emery smiled at the lamp like it was a prize.

“Whatever,” Easter said looking at Jordan. “At least we have stuff for our new place.”

“Yeah, I know. We’re good.” Jordan said. She was in her own world trying to wrap her brain around her current situation. Easter still didn’t know Jordan lost her job and they were about to move into an apartment with no income. Easter was already experiencing a lot of emotions with her father’s passing and now her mother moving. Adding on this news was not something Jordan was ready to do.

“You’re going to start a new life, let go of these things-” Emery started to say.

“I don’t want to hear it!” Easter said. “You sound like my mother.”

“You’re mother is a smart woman.” Emery said.

“Easter Egg!” a loud voice sang coming into the kitchen. They all looked up and saw it was Payton, Easter’s college roommate.

“Hey,” Easter forced a smile when Payton came over to kiss her on the cheek.

“Nope, I’m not buying that. I want a better welcome,” Payton said smiling. Her brown skin was glowing as she grinned from cheek to cheek. She stood tall in her expensive shoes, designer bag, freshly done hair and nails.

“Oh my God! Payton is here!” Easter put her hands on both sides of her cheeks and pretended to look surprised.

“I know, I know. Settle down bitches. I’m here to save the day.” Payton held up a bag of weed and shook it in the air.

“Thank God,” Easter jumped up and grabbed Payton’s arm. “Let’s go in the basement. Jordan, grab the wine. It’s time to get fucked up.”

They all went downstairs and Payton immediately lit up a fat blunt. She took a long hit, held it in and laid back on the sofa then exhaled. She passed it on to Jordan, who was anxiously waiting for her turn. Jordan figured after the week she had, this would relax her nerves. Easter was next. She finished a glass of wine and took a long deep pull. She held on to the joint for a second then offered it to Emery.

“Wow!” Jordan said sipping her wine. “You actually took a hit.”

“It’s just one of those days,” Emery said. “It’s not like I’m the governor’s daughter carrying that shit in my purse.”

“Umm, excuse you,” Payton snatched the joint out of Emery’s hand. “I was supporting the Black community like you keep telling me to do!”

“Buying weed?” Emery scoffed and picked at her plate of food. “Yeah ok.”

“Ain’t nothing wrong with people making some side money to feed their families,” Payton said blowing circles in the air.

“You’re right about that but it’s never enough. It won’t be enough to *not* have to keep a second job. I mean, most people will work for the rest of their lives and can’t enjoy it cause they work so much,” Easter said. “Like my dad.”

No one said anything for a minute.

“Your father wanted to be wealthy; he wanted to enjoy it then pass it on to his family,” Payton said. “That’s what smart wealthy men do.”

“Exactly!” Easter said. “Now, now...we’re in debt and he’s gone. I’m a what? Computer engineer? 80-100K is the most I’ll make by the end of my career, which by then won’t be considered rich.”

“Wealthy,” Payton said taking another hit. “You want to be wealthy not rich. Rich is for athletes that go broke after they retire or a one hit wonder rapper. Rich is temporary and doesn’t last through generations. 80K is wealthy.”

“That’s wealth?” Easter frowned and reached for the blunt. “80K is not going to last even one generation.”

“First of all,” Payton said blowing smoke in the air. “80-100K a year is pretty damn good.”

“Not at the end of your career,” Jordan said. “By then it will be equivalent to 50-60K.”

“Not necessarily,” Payton said.

“Yes, it is! Count mortgage, kids, other expenses, healthcare cost and you’re a typical middle class American living from check to check,” Jordan said.

“A mortgage would indicate you own a home, which is wealth,” Payton gulped the rest of her wine. “It’s not like you’re renting, adding to someone else’s wealth.”

“It’s not the same as comfortable,” Jordan said. “It’s barely steady.”

“I want to be filthy wealthy- rich, whatever. I just don’t want to struggle anymore,” Easter said.

“Payton, you can say that because you grew up with money,” Emery said. “The rest of us had to work our asses off, not that you didn’t, so don’t get snippy with me.”

Payton slammed her hand on the table. “Don’t throw your poverty in my face and act like I don’t get up and go to work every morning. I worked to get my own car, pay for my own place, I’m just like Beyoncé, Independent Woman!” She pointed to herself.

“I believe she’s married,” Emery said.

Jordan burst out laughing. Payton and Emery constantly go into arguments like this. Payton hated it when someone threw in her face that she came from a wealthy family. When Payton and Easter became friends, Easter didn’t even know who she was. It wasn’t until someone complained about her father in front of Easter. They became close because Easter was the first person, who didn’t seem to care that Payton came from a line of mayors, governors and senators.

Easter joined Jordan laughing. “Here she goes! Us po’ folk ain’t not allowed to talk ‘bout money or taxes!”

“I’m just saying, no grants were offered to me, I earned a few scholarships, and I even took out a student loan,” Payton said.

“Girl please, your loan was because you didn’t pass Spanish for the third time and you needed to take it again. Didn’t your father pay for the tutor?” Easter said making a face.

“Yeah and? I am very frugal and stand on my own,” Payton said. “Jordan has the fancy car! I am still pushing my sweet old Honda Accord from college.”

“The black woman’s,” Emery made air quotes. “I made it car.”

“I’ll remember that when you’re at a bus stop!” Payton said jiggling her keys in Emery’s face.

The girls laughed and drank even more. Easter’s brother, Ezra, came down the stairs in the basement. At first, he looked taken back at the scene. Payton said hello to break the silence. He took the Patron bottle out of Easter’s hand and finished it.

“So ya’ll just going to get high down here and act like nothing is going on outside?” He said reaching for the joint from Payton. “I know you aren’t letting this illegal activity go on in front of your face.”

“She brought the weed,” Emery said making a face.

“I hope you take your daddy’s place. I’d vote for you any day,” Ezra inhaled and blew the smoke out. He held on to the joint.

“So you just gonna take our shit?” Easter said trying to get it out of his hand.

“Hell yeah! One of your other friends is here,” he said pushing Easter’s head away.

“Everyone already here,” Easter said.

“I don’t know.” He held the joint high in the air. “She was helping mom and I introduced myself.”

“For what? Married man!” Easter got up from the table and tried to wrestle the joint out of Ezra’s hand.

“I was being a gentleman, something you know nothing about youngin’,” he stepped back and took the joint. “I’ll get her; you hoodlums stay put.”

“Loser!” Easter said coming back to the table. “I wasn’t even done with my drink. Dang.”

“No worries! I got you!” Payton pulled out another small bottle of Patron and slid it across the table.

“Of course she does!” Emery said

“What time is it?” Jordan said.

“It’s like 8,” Payton said.

“Oh shit,” Jordan said.

“What’s wrong?” Easter said.

“I needed to go back to the office to-” Jordan wasn’t ready to tell her friends she got fired, let alone the reason why she got fired. “I need to grab something at the job. I’m transferring offices.”

“Oh... can’t you go tomorrow?” Easter said.

“I kinda can’t.” Jordan looked at Emery. “I need you to drive.”

“This is your doing!” Emery hit Payton, who was still drinking. “You coming too.”

“The hell I am! I just got here,” Payton said.

“No, you’ve been here for like an hour and a half and have a car,” Emery said.

“Jordan took the bus here after she got off work and her car is-“

“I stopped listening to you,” Payton shoved her hand in Emery’s face to stop her from talking. Emery grabbed her hand and pulled her off the sofa.

“You college bitches want to be rich, huh?” A voice said coming down the stairs.

“Payton? Is that you?”

“London?” Easter said in complete shock.

“London.” Jordan looked at a woman, who she once despised.

“Do I know you?” Payton said giving the bottle of Patron away from Emery.

“Mont- you’re the governor’s daughter,” London said looking at Payton.

“Hump,” Payton pressed her index finger in Emery’s cheek. “Guess I’m a popular independent woman.”

“London,” Easter got out of her seat. “What are you doing here?” She went over to hug her but was stumbling.

“Nice to see you too,” London said hugging her back and looking directly at Jordan. “Jordan, been a long time.”

“Not long enough,” Jordan got up from the table. “Emery, Payton let’s go.”

“I’m not ready to go,” Payton said. “My Easter Egg might need me.”

“No, no, Jordan needs to take care of work. She’s the only one who is working in our house so please don’t get her in any trouble. I’ll walk everyone out. London, did you eat yet?” Easter said stretching.

“Oh you have the munchies?” Emery said looking at Payton.

“I got gummy bears and chips in my purse!” Payton said holding up her purse.

“Please don’t tell me you put junk food in a Birkin bag?” London said looking at Payton.

“That’s not all she has in there, we’re leaving,” Emery grabbed Payton who was kissing her bag.

They all went to the front door of Easter's house and hugged her goodbye. London stayed behind in the kitchen while the rest of the girls left. Payton promised to come by the next day as she danced out the front door giggling. When they got in front of Payton's car, Payton and Emery argued where the keys were and who was going to drive. Emery didn't want to drive with a drunk and high Payton next to her and suggested Payton sit in the back and sober up. After a few minutes of Payton refusing to be in the back seat, they left with Payton exactly where she said she wouldn't be, in the back. Payton complained the entire drive downtown Boston.

"Why can't you relax Miss. Daisy!" Emery said. "You should be used to someone driving you around."

"Oh I am," Payton said stretched out in the back of the car. "Because wealthy people just have drivers everywhere, right?"

Jordan was barely listening. She knew the building would be closing at nine and if they didn't get there, she would have to go back Monday and face her old co-workers. It was humiliating enough knowing that people saw her run out of the building, so returning while they were there was out of the question. This was her only shot to clear her desk. The security guard said she would be there, so that Jordan could get her stuff. They left Easter's house after eight and Easter lived in Milton, Massachusetts, which wasn't too far from Downtown, Boston. Emery was driving extra careful because of Payton and her bag of goodies. Jordan's anxiety was really high when they finally pulled up to the building. She jumped out the car and ran right into the security guard.

"I'm so sorry, Denise!" Jordan said.

“Girl, you good,” she said opening the door. “You have about twenty minutes. That enough time?”

“Yes! I’m only getting a few things, I won’t be long,” Jordan handed over her key fob for the final time and ran inside the bank. She went right up to the office. The same box that was sitting at her desk the day she got fired was still there. Jordan picked it up and within minutes, she was done and ready to walk out the door. She thought of stealing office supplies but the only thing she wanted was a binder of client’s accounts. She looked around and found it in one of the cabinets. She threw the binder in the box, along with her degree and the expensive stapler she always wanted. She was ready to walk out the door when she heard a noise coming from behind.

“Hey.”

Jordan knew who it was. She turned around and faced Vince, who reeked of alcohol. She didn’t know what to say to him. A man, who she loved and wanted to be with more than anything else in the world, looked like he needed to shave and shower. The same man, for the last two years, who promised her a life he never intended to give. The love she never told anyone about, not even Easter. Just looking at him made her weak. It was frustrating moments like this that made her want to go to him and scream, vent, kiss, fuck right on her desk to release everything she’d been feeling. The anxiety and fear of a future she had no control over.

“Surprised to see me?” he said coming over and taking the box. “I’ll help you with these. I’m sure you’re exhausted.”

“No, I’m good.” She looked at the binder and hoped he didn’t see it.

“Come on,” he said yanking the box out her hand. “Let me help you.”

“You’ve helped me enough.” She tried to go around him but he blocked.

“I didn’t have a choice!” he yelled. “She knew and the divorce was going to be more than ugly. I need more time. I swear-”

“Dude, keep telling yourself that shit.” She held her hand up. “I don’t want to hear it. I’m outta here, moving on with my life and don’t need you or your triflin’ wife.”

“Listen,” he said grabbing her and dropping the box. He was stumbling around. “I miss you... I *need* you.”

“Oh well.” She tried to move around him again.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” He shoved her against the wall.

“Asshole!” She caught her balance.

“I’m an asshole?” He rushed up to her and grabbed her by the shoulders. “You wouldn’t have shit if it wasn’t for me. I gave you a job right out of school. A salary. That car you drive. I got you approved. You’re nothing without me! Not a damn thing!”

“Keep that shit!” Jordan pushed him and went for the box.

“Bitch!” he slapped her in the back of her head. After the pain hit her head, it only made sense to leave the office. Nothing in the box, other than her degree, was important. Someone could send it to her if necessary. Vince was out of control.

“Are you crazy?” She turned around to face him.

“I’m so sorry,” he said still pulling her against his body. “Baby, I’m soo sorry. I’m just upset about this whole shit. I hate when you walk away from me when I’m trying to talk to you. You talking about leaving and not wanting me no more. I can’t fucking take this. Come here, I need you.”

“I need you to get off me,” she said feeling dread in the room.

“No, stay. I’ll get a room for us.”

“Stop it.” She started to have trouble breathing. “Let me go.”

“Stop fucking saying that!” He shook her and slapped her in the face. “You’re making me do this.”

“What the hell is wrong with you!” She touched her face and tried to back away from him.

“Let’s just make love,” he said pushing her against the desk.

“No, I – I- let go of me.” She felt panic rush through her body.

“Come on, it will make us both feel better.” He started pulling down her skirt.

“Stop it!” She tried to pull his hand away from her.

“You act like you don’t want me.” He kept touching her and started to kiss her on her neck.

“Get the fuck off me!” She tried to knee him in the balls but missed and got his strong leg.

He punched her right in the stomach and slapped her again. “Don’t get all in your feelings because you’re mad at me. This is my pussy.” He shoved her skirt up and yanked her panties down.

“Vince, please, please,” she pled in panic.

He squeezed her neck, the same way his wife did was causing her to have trouble breathing even more. Every time she tried to move away, he’d slap her in the face and punched her stomach. The way he pinned her down on the desk, was the same way she used to make love to him. This time they fucked with resistance and fear. “Please, stop!”

“It’s going to feel good like always,” he said unzipping his pants. “Tell me it’s going to fucking feel good.”

“Please,” Jordan whispered crying. She couldn’t get out of his grip.

“Bitch you’re acting like you didn’t beg me for this dick before. Now you don’t need me? Think you just going to walk out here and get another job just like that and fuck up my life?”

“Can we just talk?” She didn’t know what else to do; she just wanted to get out.

“No, fuck that.” He shoved himself right inside her.

She screamed and felt herself rip in half. It was like her body was on fire. She closed her eyes and prayed for him to stop. She was still resisting but he was fucking her so hard she gave up. When she realized it was happening, she prayed for it to be over.

“That’s right bitch. I hear you crying for me, crying because you need me. Let me here you. Come on!”

His grunting and moaning only made her cry harder. The smell of the liquor on his breath made her nauseous. Him pushing himself in and out only made the nausea comes on even stronger. His scent was strong. The colon, she used to love, was mixed with sweat was dripping off his shirt. His hands, she once loved holding, were hard and heavy, gripping her neck and pressing on her thigh. He used to say sweet things to her and now he was spitting on her face and calling her names. She felt him expand inside her and knew he was going to cum. He only went harder, hurting every inch of her body. What terrified her most was she felt herself cum. Her body trembled in an awkward sensation she didn’t understand.

“Yes, bitch. Yes! Yes!” he finished. He slowed down. “Yes. Yes.” He kept repeating it over and over again before he pulled out.

Jordan sat still as she watched him pull his pants up. She wanted to run out screaming but she knew he’d stop her. She felt sore and broken.

“You still want to go to a hotel room?” he said looking at her.

“I-I-”

“You gotta ride downstairs right?”

Jordan nodded her head. Her hands trembled as she pulled up her panties and tried to fix herself up. He handed her the box, but still was blocking the exit. He came up to her and kissed her on the lips.

“When am I going to see you again?”

“I don’t know,” she said trying to control herself from falling apart.

“I’ll call you tomorrow.” He opened the door.

Jordan walked passed him and wanted to drop the box and run but something told her not to. It wouldn’t have mattered because she felt like 1000 pounds. Every step was heavy. It was well over 20 minutes and she knew she needed to hurry. The security guard, Denise, was outside smoking a cigarette with another guard. The nausea got worse and wouldn’t hold back anymore. She dropped the box, ran out the door and vomited all over the sidewalk. The security guards jumped back.

“Dang girl,” Denise said.

“You see! You see!” Jordan heard Emery’s voice come closer to her. “Crazy ass Payton got you all drunk! I’ll get the box. Where is the office you are moving to?”

“Just put the box in the car,” Jordan kept throwing up.

“Oh shit!” Payton came out of the car to hold Jordan’s hair up.

“Hey boss man!” Denise said putting her cigarette out.

“Mr. Nash,” the other guard said standing straight.

“Relax, it’s almost 10,” Vince said lighting up a cigarette for Denise. “Jordan, you ok?”

“Mr. Nash,” Emery said. “We were trying to comfort our friend tonight and some of us went a little too far. I’m sorry. It is not Jordan’s fault. Please don’t hold it against her.”

“It’s ok.” Vince smiled. “Do you ladies have a ride home? I don’t want you drinking and driving. I can call a cab.”

“Mr. Nash, we’re fine. I wasn’t drinking and I will get these ladies home, *safely*,” Emery said.

“Vince!” Payton said helping Jordan into the car. “Good to see ya. Give my girl a raise!”

“Ms. Montgomery. Good to see you as well,” he said helping Emery put the box in the truck of the car. “How’s your father?”

“Likely waiting on a donation from you,” she said winking.

“I bet,” Vince said. “Well you ladies have a good night. Jordan.”

Jordan turned around and gave him a dirty look.

“Goodnight?” he smiled and walked away.

Jordan watched him walk down the street. Denise walked up to her from behind and zipped Jordan’s skirt.

“It slipped,” Jordan said avoiding eye contact.

“That happens to me all the time, good luck,” she said patting Jordan on her back.

Payton helped Jordan in the car. Jordan’s whole body was shaking at this point. When she sat down she felt another panic attack coming on. She tried to keep herself from falling apart. She just had to make it home. Look at the ceiling.

“I think there was something in your drugs!” Emery said starting the car up.

“What?” Payton was in the backseat trying to get Jordan to drink some water.

“Her face is all pink!” Emery said pointing to Jordan. “She looks like someone hit her or got into a fight. It’s the drugs. I shouldn’t have trusted you or your drugs. Talking about supporting the community.”

“Leave my weed alone!” Payton said then turned to Jordan. “Baby, you’re coming home with me, ok? Just sit back and try to relax. I bet her boss tried to hit on her.”

“Isn’t he married?” Emery said.

“And?” Payton said.

“Married men don’t just flirt with their employees.” Emery pulled out of the parking spot and drove past Vince who was still walking.

“Oh please, that man is known to mess around.” Payton looked at him as they drove by.

“His poor wife.” Emery shook her head.

“Oh please, she’s a rude bitch anyway.” Payton shrugged.

Chapter Five

“Glad you are having a good time.” Kia said over the phone.

“Everything ok?” London still had her eyes closed when she answered her cell.

“Yes. Everything is fine. Anthony got locked up last night.”

“What? Uhh, I’m on my way.” London jumped out of the bed and felt dizzy.

“No, no. Stay there. Go with the plan. I got him busted on purpose.”

“Are you crazy?” London threw the covers off the bed and looked for her shoes.

“I’m sick of him. We need time to get our shit together and get away from him.

The cops caught him with some stuff so he’s doing time.”

London paused for a minute. She lowered her voice and went to the other side of the room just in case someone was outside the door listening.

“How much time?”

“At least a few months. That is just enough time to roll out my plan and get us out of here. I put the cops on about the medicinal weed. He’s done.”

“Shit. Well. You sure you covered your tracks?”

“You really have to ask? Anyway, go be friendly and make sure you build the bond. Do you have the money?”

“Yes, I got it. How are the other girls?”

“Monica is feeling better. She’s still crying over Sista.”

“Aren’t we all?” London was looking at the door because she thought she heard someone walk by.

“Go with the plan. Call me later.”

“Ok. And Kia?”

“Yeah?”

“You did good.”

“Thanks. Now go.”

London sighed in relief. She got out the bed and smelled food. She looked at the time; it was 10:30. She only slept for a little over five hours, but it felt like 10 hours. London went into the bathroom and saw a new toothbrush and toothpaste waiting for her. She also saw an extra set of clothes sitting on top of the toilet. They were cropped sweatpants and a t-shirt. The note that was left on it was from Easter’s mom, it said to rest as much as she needed and to join them when she was ready. After London cleaned up, she went into the kitchen. Easter was sitting next to the breakfast bar, staring at her food. Her mother was also in the kitchen and her face lit up when London came in.

“Hungry?” she said grabbing a plate.

Easter turned to look at her. She also smiled a little and waved her over.

“You ok? How did you sleep?” Easter said.

“That bed is so comfortable,” London said sitting next to Easter. “I felt like I was knocked out for hours.”

“I love that bed,” Easter said pouring herself a cup of coffee. “Want a sip?”

“Sure,” London took the mug and let Easter pour her coffee and she reached for the creamer. “This place is almost packed up. You are ready to go huh?”

“I’ve got a couple of weeks left but pretty much.”

“This is a beautiful house.”

“Tell me about it. But we have to sell it, thanks to my mother.”

Easter's mom threw her hands in the air. "Do you know how much the mortgage is?"

"I can help you pay." Easter said.

"With what? You're non-existent job? London sweetie, don't mind her. She's just mad because she's getting kicked out the nest."

"I know the feeling," London said smiling at Easter. "Plus, Easter, why would she want to stay here? Eventually you will move out and it will just be her in this big house alone. Be fair."

"Thank you!" Easter's mother said sliding the plate over to London. "Finally someone with reasonable sense, not nonsense."

"Whatever," Easter shoved a muffin in her mouth. "Where are you working now?"

"I actually own a furniture store on in Brookline."

"Wow! That is very impressive!" Easter's mother said smiling with pride.

"Oh great. Another business owner." Easter rolled her eyes.

"I'll let you girls catch up. Maybe you can rub off that entrepreneur spirit on to my child." She walked pass Easter and kissed her on the cheek. "She wants her check to come from a slave master."

After Easter's mother walked out the room, London looked at how tired Easter still was.

"You might want to go back to bed," she said. "You look like you need more sleep."

"No, it won't matter."

“All because of the move? Easter, you are going to be fine.”

“The move, dealing with my father’s death, no job. I feel like I’m literally drowning.”

Before London was going to respond, the doorbell rang.

“Oh great. It’s the movers. The pod came this morning to pack up the stuff my mom is sending to her new place.” Easter got up to open the door and London followed.

London smirked when she saw the handsome mover walk in the door with his clipboard. Easter seemed pretty taken by him too. As she was mumbling walking towards the door, she started stuttering at the handsome mover when he asked if this was the Belizare residence.

“Yes, um,” Easter giggled. “It is. You’re the mover?”

“Yeah, my name is Naven.” He looked directly in her face when she said this.

London could clearly see the immediate attraction between the two. Easter let him and his crew in. She pointed out what was leaving and what was staying. Naven seemed cool, calm and collective as he told his crew what to do. Easter turned to look at London.

“Tell me he isn’t fine,” Easter’s eyes lit up.

“I would definitely bit into him,” London smiled.

Easter’s mother came downstairs to greet the movers. “My daughter’s things are moving to the apartment today. The only thing she hasn’t really packed is her bed really.” Easter’s mother said looking at the clipboard.

“The apartment in Roxbury?”

“Yeah the ghetto,” Easter rolled her eyes.

“Thank you honey,” Easter’s mother said to her. “Oh and I hope you brushed your teeth this morning before talking to this handsome young man.”

London immediately started laughing. The embarrassment on Easter’s face was clear. Naven, looked at Easter and smirked.

“I live in Roxbury,” he said leaning against the sofa.

“So you understand what I’m moving into.”

“No, it’s not that bad. Roxbury is changing.”

“Oh, were new rats moving in?”

“You funny!” He was eyeing her up and down.

“I wanted to move like downtown or something but this is all we could afford for right now. In about six months to a year, we’re moving to like one of those condominiums on Mass Ave.”

“You don’t want to move there!”

“And why not?”

“Because, there are actually rats down there. At least in Roxbury you might have to deal with a little mouse here and there.”

“I think I just died.” Easter grabbed her chest.

While they continued to make small talk, London walked away feeling pleased. She went to her cell phone to text Kia. *It’s working. The eagle has landed and scooped up the little worm.* Kia texted her back. *Did you leave more bait?* London looked back at Easter and Naven laughing and talking. She reached into her purse and texted Kia back. *No need, he’s got this. I’m about to leave in a few.* After a few minutes of gathering her

things and kissing Easter's mother goodbye, London went up to Easter and Naven who were still talking.

"Hey! I'm out of here," London touched Easter on the shoulder.

"Oh really? Ok thanks for coming by and checking on your girl," Easter turned around to give her a big hug.

While they were hugging, London winked at Naven, who was standing behind Easter. "Good luck with the move girlie. Call me. I left you a little note on your bed."

"Ok thanks again."

"Nice to meet you," London reached out to shake Naven's hand.

"It's a pleasure." He smiled at her and bit his lip.

Chapter Six

I rushed upstairs after Naven and I exchanged phone numbers. I said he should come to our housewarming party when we finally threw one. I needed to get dressed and make sure the movers didn't take the wrong stuff. When I went into my bedroom and looked on my bed, I saw a note from London. I opened it because it was thick. When I opened, what I thought was a card but \$1000 fell out on my bed. I read the note.

I know this might seem like an outrageous gift but I know you guys need it. If you need a job, I can offer you one at the furniture store. It may not be much, but it can be steady income. There are other ways you can make money if you want. Just give me a call. –London.

I was never that close to London and it seemed strange for her to be so generous. I knew I needed to call Jordan. I didn't want to take any money away from my mother but I needed a way to make money.

“Come pick me up. I have to talk to you about something,” I said when Jordan picked up the phone. I put the money back in the envelope and put it in my purse.

I went ahead and got dressed. I put on extra make-up because I wanted to see Naven before I left. I didn't want him thinking I always looked this rough. Jordan said she was happy to be going out and she would swing by and pick me up. She also said she had a surprise for me. I wasn't in the mood for any more surprises but I did want to get out of my house. I told my mother, who was still packing and labeling things in the kitchen, I was leaving. Just as I was ready to jump in Jordan's car and tell her about the money London gave me, I was startled by the presence of Payton, who was headed to my house.

“Surprise!” Payton threw her arms around me and gave me a big hug.

I looked over at Jordan and gave her a dirty look. Jordan looked distant and very tired from the night before. She shrugged her shoulders and started to make her way towards the house.

“What are you doing?” I said watching them walk past me.

“We’re going to see how your mom is doing,” Payton said looking at me funny.

“Today isn’t a good day.” I started walking towards Jordan’s car. It wasn’t that I was mad at Payton, she was one of my best friends; I just didn’t want to tell her anything because I just knew she wouldn’t understand. I went in the back seat because I knew Payton was already sitting shotgun.

“Hey, if you want to ride in the front-” Payton said.

“I’m good,” I slammed the door shut. I saw the look Payton gave Jordan and Jordan shrugged her shoulders. They both got in the car and Payton looked straight ahead. Jordan pinned up her bright red dyed hair in a bun.

“So, we were thinking of heading to the city to get a bite to eat and listen to some music,” Jordan said backing up out the driveway.

“Sounds good,” I couldn’t shake my mood. I really had a lot to tell Jordan and it bothered me that I had to wait because of Payton. We were about to pull off until my mother came outside to grab the mail.

“You sure we shouldn’t just stop for a second and say hi,” Payton said.

“No, wave and drive,” I said.

“Alright,” Jordan said waving with Payton.

Jordan didn't say much during the ride downtown. She just turned on some old school jams and stayed quiet. I found out, through Payton, Jordan was so drunk she spent the night at Payton's. When we got to the lounge I realized it was 80s night and they would be playing old school music all night. We got a nice corner booth and Payton damn near bum rushed Jordan to sit next to me. We ordered food and started to enjoy some drinks. Payton said she had the tab and they we could order anything that we wanted. While we were singing and eating food, I forgot all about London's money. Jordan wasn't saying much but I figured it was because she was so tired from the night before.

"So any job perspectives? I sent you a link to a company I know is hiring," Payton said. "Did you get it?"

"Yes, and they rejected me! I didn't even get an interview!"

"Damn, I have a name and email of someone you can call. I mean, no one is really hiring." Payton looked at her watch. "How you feeling today?"

"Better. Thanks for last night. I had fun."

"Me too. A little too much fun. Right Jordan?" Payton elbowed Jordan. "Jordan was so wasted that she vomited in front of her boss!"

"Oh shit! You serious?"

"I'm not kidding you. But he was cool though."

"Damn J, someone can't hold her liquor? Don't get soft on my now," I smiled and noticed Jordan was on another planet. "J, you ok?"

"Yeah I'm fine." She looked up and reached for her food.

Something wasn't right but I wasn't going to bug her about it now.

“Anyway ladies,” Payton said. “I can’t stay long.”

“Why?” I asked.

“I have to go to work in the morning,” she said clutching on to her jacket.

“Jordan, what time do you have to be in tomorrow?”

“Oh um. I have tomorrow off.” Jordan looked up looking nervous.

“Vacation time?” I said noticing the look on her face.

“Yeah, with the move and everything.” She shrugged it off not looking at either one of us in the eye.

“Good for you. You ladies enjoy but I need to get some sleep. It's been one of those weeks at work you know.”

“Tell me about it.” Jordan flagged over the waiter and asked him to wrap up our food.

“Walk me outside so I can catch a cab and you guys don't drink it up too much,” Payton said. She paid the tab and the waiter wrapped our food for us.

We went outside waiting for a cab; Payton finally flagged one down. She hugged me it was like she hadn't done it in so long. She prolonged the hug.

“Even though you were being a little shady towards me earlier, I still had a lot of fun tonight with you ladies,” she said pulling back.

“Really? You just had to bring that up,” Jordan said frowning.

“Both of you have been mean to me tonight,” Payton said turning toward me.

“I’m just calling ya’ll out.”

“No, you’re calling me out. But my bad, I wasn’t in a good mood. With the move and all. I’m a little stressed,” I said.

“Miss, the meter is running,” the Ethiopian cab driver said.

“So let it run! You’ll get your money!” Payton said holding on to the door.

I couldn’t help but feel bad for the man. Payton was hilarious when someone interrupted her. We talked for a few more minutes before Payton got in the cab and left.

“Listen,” I said watching the cab drive away. “There is something really important I need to talk to you about.”

“Sounds serious.”

“It is. Let’s get to your car. It’s getting cold outside.”

When we got in the car I noticed Jordan looked nervous. I didn’t know what she would have to be nervous about.

“Remember how London randomly showed up at my mom’s going away?” I said.

“Don’t remind me.”

“Well, she left me with a little something – something.” I reached in my purse and pulled out the envelope I got from London. Jordan looked inside it and her eyes opened wide.

Jordan counted the money. “So you mean she just left you \$1000 just like that? How can she afford it? She’s a store clerk.”

“She’s a manager at a furniture store that she owns. She got it like that.”

“She stole it.”

“Come on! Really?”

“I know she doesn’t make that kind of money to just give away to someone she hasn’t seen in how long? That’s pretty generous. Even Payton didn’t give you that money.”

“Payton would be,” Easter mimicked Payton’s voice, “enabling me, which would later cause my downfall.”

“Ha! That is exactly what she would say too.”

Jordan looked at the envelope and counted the money again.

“This just doesn’t make sense. What does she want?”

“I don’t know but she said I can work at her furniture store.”

“Are you crazy? Hell no!” Jordan started the car up.

“You didn’t here me out. Jay, we have an apartment and I have to be able to hold up my end. I can’t depend on you to pay all the bills.”

“There’s something I have to tell you.”

I knew something was off. I looked and waited for her to say something.

“I lost my job. I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want you to panic and worry about how we’re going to pay our bills. You’re already going through a lot and I didn’t want to add on to it.”

I took a deep breath. “I knew something was wrong. I thought you were changing your mind about me moving in.”

“Oh no! I didn’t want to add on to the stress you had. I’m really sorry.”

“Was it because of last night?”

“No, it happened this week.”

“Why?”

“Dumb shit.”

“That’s what was bothering you?”

“Yeah, that and other things.”

“What other things?”

“It doesn’t matter. Listen, I don’t like London but it may not be a bad idea temporarily.”

“Maybe she can give you a job too!”

“Over my dead body I’ll work under that bitch.”

“Oh so I can work for her but you can’t? We are going to need more income.”

Jordan just frowned. She knew the answers as she drove towards my house.

“J, we need the money.”

“We need jobs.”

“We do but at least we have something to lean on in the meanwhile. I don’t want to end up homeless.”

I should’ve bit my tongue. Jordan faced homelessness at some point in her life when we were in high school. Her foster family didn’t work out and she ran away. She never told me why but she stayed with me for a few weeks before her social worker found another home.

“It won’t happen.” She stared straight ahead. “How do you know she’d let me come work for her?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“And she gave you a grand? This is weird. She wants something.”

“No, I don’t think that was the case.” I smirked at her comment. “I think it is for something else. I texted her about the money and she never texted me back. I think we should stop by the store to talk to her.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Alright. But on one condition.”

“What?”

“While we’re working for her, we start our own business.”

“Uh! Fine!”

“I’m serious. We can flush out a business plan and make something work with both of our talents. You’re techy and I have the business end.”

I didn’t want to agree to it but it sounded better than applying to jobs online all day, while working at the furniture store. I took the money in my hand and put it back in my purse. “Well, this should definitely help us in the meanwhile.”

“I can’t believe it boils down to me going back to retail. I work in banking!”

“Worked, past tense,” I said clearing my throat. When we stopped at a red light, she gave me a dirty look.

“This working for someone else shit isn’t for me. I need to do something big. Something so big that it will show that son of a bitch who the fuck is boss.” She pressed on the gas. “I don’t want to wait on someone to tell me what kind of food I can eat, when I can eat and if I’m moving up or down in this world. Having a job does that. They give us a check that makes these decisions for us. I’m done with that.”

“Whatever it is, it has to be something that will never put us where we are right now,” I said. “Something tells me the key is London. Once we figure out her motives, we plot our escape from this shitty place called middle class.”

Chapter Seven

“Leave me the fuck alone!” Jordan said after hitting talk on her cell phone. Vince was calling again. This wasn’t the first time he tried to call her since she last saw him at the office.

“When you coming to see me?” he said almost in a whisper.

“Never. Stop calling me. Don’t text me. Don’t-”

“Watch your mouth. I’ve been trying to call you to apologize for being so rough the other night because-”

“Rough? You call rape, rough!”

“Oh, you’re going to call the cops? Do you know who I am?”

“I don’t care who you are. I call the cops and they’ll arrest your ass.”

“They’ll care that a recently fired employee is claiming I raped her when I have proof of you busting it wide open for me just fine before. Text messages of you begging for it and begging for me. I love how you came all over me the other night.”

“You make me sick.”

“You still haven’t learned a damn thing. Pissing me off isn’t good for you. Make it up to me later and maybe I might put in a good word for you at another bank.”

Jordan looked at her phone. “I’m not meeting you anywhere. Stop calling me.”

“Have it your way. Remember what I’ve taught you. Once you’re blackballed in this small industry of ours, you don’t come back.”

Jordan hit the end button. She was getting flash backs of him breathing on her. She felt herself start to tremble. She wasn’t sure if it was because of what he said or the flashbacks of the rape, but she fell to her knees. She couldn’t breathe. She tried to

mentally block him out to control herself. When the phone rang again, it only made her panic even more. Her head started to pound and the room was getting smaller and smaller. She was on all fours as if she were a dog. His raspy voice calling her bitch kept repeating over and over in her head. She wanted to scream but had no air.

She looked outside the backyard and saw a red robin. There were actually two of them eating out of the bird feeder. As Jordan tried to catch her breath, she listened to the silence of the kitchen and birds outside. *Look at the corner. There is a window. Look at the tile. The tile is nice. Look at the ceiling. There is a ceiling fan.* She tried to relax. *Look at the robins, they are free, they are safe. I am safe.* It took a few minutes before her breathing got back to normal and she could muster up the strength to stand up. When she did, she slid into a chair and put her head on the cool granite countertop on the breakfast bar. Just as her body relaxed, Easter came in the room.

“Sorry I took so long,” she looked at Jordan. “You feel hung-over too right? I can see it in your face. Want some water?”

“Get me a bottle. We’re already running behind. You drive.”

Easter grabbed Jordan’s keys and they left. When they pulled up to the furniture store, Jordan was hesitant about going in. She was ready to protest but then her phone buzzed and it was a text message from Vince. The text message asked that she stop calling his phone from random numbers and he wouldn’t leave his family for her. Jordan knew what those text messages meant. That was Vince trying to cover his tracks in case she decided to go forward with the rape charges.

It was a losing battle. Going against Vince, his wife and their high-powered attorneys were impossible. Jordan was without a job, no savings and no chance. Easter

was saying something about just hearing London out but Jordan wasn't listening. At this point, she was in a sinking boat and if even London offered her a life jacket with holes, she wasn't too proud to take it.

When they walked in, London standing at the entrance with two women beside her. One was on her left, holding a tray of food. The other was on the right, holding a tray with a bottle of wine and three glasses. She was dressed in all white and gold. Shiny gold bracelets on her wrist, three diamond rings on each hand, and expensive looking stilettos. The way her fingers rested on her waist, showed of her freshly manicured nails. Her hair was pinned in a high bun that showed off some curls at the top. She looked like a million dollars. When London came to greet them, her perfume was clearly a high-end brand Jordan recognized. She remembered the scent from magazine at Easter's house. The same scent, or something close to it, was dripping off London.

"About time you broke bitches dragged your asses in here," London said taking a glass and letting the Asian girl pour the champagne in it.

"Wow," Easter said looking around and taking the glass from London. "This is your store? It's incredible."

"Yeah, real nice," Jordan said looking around.

Easter kicked her when London turned around but Jordan saw the Asian girl observed what happened. The Asian girl didn't say anything, she just gestured that they follow London. When they went to sit on a sofa set, Jordan noticed they were alone and the sales girls were at the front of the store.

"What gives? Why'd you give Easter a grand?" Jordan was not in the mood to play games.

“Oh, well damn.” London looked thrown off.

“Jay...” Easter shook her head. “Seriously?”

“No, it’s cool. I’m going to get to the point. Let’s start with why you got fired-”

London said.

“Ok first of all, you don’t know-” Jordan started to say. Jordan remembered why she didn’t like London. Her fast mouth and attitude just reminded Jordan why they didn’t get along in high school. Clearly things weren’t going to be different between them even now.

“I know because I fucked your boss. I fucked him a couple of times. Sometimes while I fucked him, he would talk about you. Do you want to continue with the high school shit or do you want to get down to business?” London crossed her legs and sipped on her drink.

“Continue,” Jordan felt her heartbeat speed up. She didn’t want Easter knowing about the affair, rape or anything else that happened, while she worked at the bank. Easter looked confused but she also knew Easter wouldn’t ask for details right there and then, she would wait until later.

“You what?” Easter said looking like someone punched her in the stomach.

“I date men like Jordan’s old boss. I date a lot of powerful men. That is how I make a lot of my money. I manage girls, who also go out on dates with these men and spend time with them,” London said. The way she spoke, she made it seem as if she was describing how to bake a cake. “You’re broke, I have a lot of debt. I know a way we can work together to make some money,” London said.

“We’re not tricking for you,” Jordan was ready to get up but Easter pulled her back down.

“Jay, come on. That’s not what you want, right?” Easter was looking very closely at London.

“Not at all. And watch your mouth,” London glared at Jordan. “I know a way to make about 50K tax free.”

“London, you need to slow down. First, you give me all this money, then you’re telling us you’re some pimp,” Easter said.

“More like Madam. Is that what you are?” Jordan said smiling

“Now you want to make 50 grand with us?” Easter said.

“Whatever title you want to give me is not important. I run a legit business that has a license and is not illegal. I’m not ashamed about that. I have debts to pay and girls to look over. My girls and I want out and that’s why I called you here. We good now?” London said.

Jordan looked at Easter, who was staring intensely at London. Easter nodded her head “How can we make 50K?” Easter said.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Jordan said.

“That money doesn’t go to me. It goes to my business partner that has me in a major hole. I want to do a job. A job that I learned about from one of my clients in New York.” London looked behind them and leaned forward. “I heard, and correct me if I’m wrong Jordan, that people can make up to 100K by writing fake checks without getting caught. A kid I met said he made half a million dollars in a year by using fake debit cards and checks. Am I wrong, *Jordan*?”

“No, it doesn’t work like that. Someone usually gets a bank account number and they create a fake check and try to cash it. But people get caught all the time,” Jordan didn’t know where she was going with this.

“I think idiots get caught,” London said. “Easter you have, what? Three weeks before the bank takes your house? I heard your mom say she needed over seven thousand dollars to pull it out of foreclosure. Jordan, do you even still have a job? Wouldn’t you like a cushion to sit on, while you find what you want? I doubt our boy Vince is going to give you a recommendation anytime soon. Why can’t we do this the smart way to get us out of our situations?” London said waiting for an answer.

Jordan looked like she was ready to go but Easter looked like she was thinking about what London said.

“This is what you called us down here for? You thought about some heist?” Jordan said.

“Yeah, I gotta agree with Jay, this whole thing sounds crazy, illegal, jail time and honestly, kinda stupid.” Easter looked disappointed.

London looked like she got her feelings hurt. The Asian girl, who greeted them came over and asked to speak to London quietly. London said she would be right back. When she walked away, Jordan turned to Easter.

“People like that always get caught,” Jordan said standing up. “Let’s go.”

“Wait. People can actually do this? Like, steal money out of accounts and make half a million dollars, without getting caught?” Easter said.

“I mean yeah but eventually they get caught.”

“Ok. Ok. Hold on. So there is a possibility that this could be done. Flawlessly if we did, what did she call it? A job?”

“Easter Egg, don’t get caught up with what she’s saying. It takes a serious master mind to do all that, create fake cards, checks, debit cards, and all that to make that kind of money.” Jordan shook her head. “It’s complicated, way too risky and honestly stupid. We’ll get jobs and be fine.”

“No we can’t cause no one is hiring and for whatever reason, your boss isn’t giving you a recommendation. I might have an opportunity to save the house my father died for.”

“I’m sorry but he didn’t die for your house. He died cause someone killed him.”

“Someone killed him because of a greedy major cooperation. One I should add, we’re trying to work for. We said it the other night. We’ll never see real money working for someone else. AND you wanted to start our own business.”

“Not like this! What? Becoming thieves? Yeah, great career path. Benefits, food and shelter in woman’s prison. Easter, please.”

“You don’t have to do this with me. I just want to make the money quick and save my house. I don’t want my mom to move, I don’t want to see all my dad’s hard work be taken away anymore.” Easter sat back down on the couch. “I’m tired of everything being taken away and feeling helpless and worthless, while it happens. I want to be able to save something. This ground we are standing on is crumbling. We need to find a way out, even if it’s temporary. We need a break.

“We’re better than this. Things aren’t so bad,” Jordan said.

“Our rent is \$1800. What’s going to happen if we don’t have rent money next month?”

“We’ll work here. I promise. We don’t have to go down this path. We’re not doing this,” Jordan pulled Easter off the couch.

“Fine, but I have to pee. Where is the fancy toilet?” Easter said looking around.

Jordan pointed at the restroom sign and made her way to the front. She wanted to let London know both her and Easter were going to pass on her heist scam and but would like to work at the store.

“Jordan,” London said looking behind her.

“We’re not doing your little scam. But we do need jobs, both of us. So can we work for you?” she said.

“Jordan,” London said again.

“Don’t try to throw what you think you know about me and Vince in my face either because again, you don’t know shit.”

“Whatever, but-”

“But nothing. I don’t even know why you brought that up.”

“Jordan!” Easter said from behind. “You’re car is getting towed!”

Jordan turned around to look out the door. Her car was indeed getting repossessed. Jordan yelped and ran out the furniture store. She was behind on her payments but never thought they would find her at the furniture store.

“What are you doing?” Jordan ran up to the man that was towing her car.

“I’m sorry but miss I have to taken the car,” a man, with a thick accent, said. He already hooked the car up to the tow truck.

“No, wait! I paid! Stop!”

“Miss you show me receipt to the bank I leave car. If no I have to take.” The man finished up what he was doing to the car and he looked at Jordan, who was looking through her phone.

She knew she hadn't paid the car in months but whenever she fell behind on payments, Vince took care of it and allowed her to catch up whenever she could. With her moving out of her foster sister's house and getting the apartment, her money was tied in the first, last and security deposit. Easter paid her portion but money was still tight. Jordan looked back at London, who was staring blankly at her. Easter was yelling at the man to unhook the car because they had the wrong car.

“I can't find the receipt,” she said still looking through her phone.

“So call bank so they say it is mistake, not your friend. You car on my list for two weeks!” The man yelled something at the driver. The driver started to pull the car up on the tow truck. “You run and hide from me! You no pay!”

“Let her call the bank papi!” Easter said then turned to Jordan. “Call them, so they won't take the car.”

“The bank was my job.” Jordan said looking defeated.

Easter dropped her head and walked away from the man that was waiting on them. When he saw they were not putting up a fight, he ordered the black man to take the car. London wasn't at the counter when Jordan and Easter came back in, but the Asian girl was.

“Damn,” Easter said looking out the glass door. “We're just going to sit down for a little while till our ride comes. It's about to start raining.”

“The bus?” the Asian girl said with a smirk at the front counter.

Easter turned around and gave Jordan a pissed off look. She pulled out her phone.

“Who are you calling?” Jordan said.

“I’m texting Emery to come pick us up. She said she was around here anyway. She should have her car. I’m not walking in this rain,” Easter said looking at the front counter. “To catch some damn bus.”

The Asian girl rolled her eyes and called London to come back to the front.

“She said she’s only a few minutes away,” Easter said putting her phone in her bag. “J, don’t look like that. We’re going to figure it out.”

“You two are broker than I thought,” London said coming out the back holding two folders in her arms.

“Don’t start with me!” Jordan said.

“I’m not doing anything,” London said. “I have money troubles too, believe it or not. That’s why I thought of that plan. But you think it’s dumb. I do need some sales girls in here and a full time assistant manager. You need the money so you’re hired.”

Jordan got a text message from her phone. It was Vince. *This is only the beginning. Fight it. I’ll expose you.* Jordan felt herself get even angrier.

“Hey,” Jordan said to London. “One job. We make 50K. Split that shit and we’re done. You have a connect?”

London looked at Jordan for a second. She didn’t say anything. The Asian girl handed her a few pens. London went over to them.

“Do either of you have experience in retail?”

“Yeah,” Easter said. “Nine West and the Gap.”

“I meant high-end retail. I need a full time assistant. Think you can find me an assistant manager?” London said.

Just as Easter was about to say something, Emery burst in the door.

“Hi!” Emery said. “It’s about to start raining outside!”

“Where’s your car?” Jordan looked alert.

“At home,” Emery said. “Have you seen gas prices?”

“It’s about to start raining!” Easter looked annoyed.

“I have an umbrella you know. You texted me they’re hiring and I need a job. Who do I talk to? I have my resume and everything,” Emery said. “Hi, I’m Emery. I remember you from the other night.”

London smiled and reintroduced herself. She told Emery to follow the Asian girl, to the back, so she can learn the store. Emery looked confused but left with the Asian girl. London handed Easter and Jordan two folders.

“What’s this?” Easter said.

“Job applications. I still need something on file and you both need to cover your asses when Uncle Sam comes through. Only 50k?”

“Yes, that’s all we need. Deal?” Jordan said.

London looked at her and smiled. “Deal.”

Chapter Eight

“So they agreed?” Kia said locking up the store.

“Yup, but only for 50 grand.” London turned off the lights and grabbed the keys off the counter.

“That’s ok. As long as they agree to it. I know they’ll figure out a way to make more than that. Our New York connects take to long to get us our money and we aren’t making enough.” Kia walked behind London.

“I noticed Jordan seemed to understand a little bit of the lingo. Is that normal?”

“She’s in banking and knows something she doesn’t want to say.”

“You called Vince to tell him Jordan was here?”

“No, I called the tow truck company to pick up the car. I was nervous they weren’t going to get here on time.”

London and Kia left the store and started driving home. While they were driving, Kia was talking about how the other girls, who worked for London, were feeling about Anthony getting locked up. Although morale was good, it would be a matter of time before Anthony got out of jail and punished everyone for leaving him in there for so long.

“The girls and I are going to your house in Malden and to stay for a little while,” Kia said. “We already packed.”

“Why can’t you stay with me and leave the girls in Malden?” London didn’t like being alone.

“One, you have clients coming by this week. And two, ever since Sista...” Kia didn’t finish her sentence. “Plus, I have to look over them for you.”

“When’s the funeral?”

“She’s being cremated, remember? The ashes are being sent to her family in the islands. I spoke to her mother today.”

London thought about Sista’s family and how she promised to take care of her after Anthony got them deported. Now she was sending Sista back in ashes. She could never face them.

“How much did you send them?”

“There wasn’t much to send. You gave Easter that \$1000 and we had bills to pay. The nurse needed to get paid; we needed to replace the carpet because of the blood. Monica is still not good, so we’re losing money off her.”

“Dammit!” London slammed on the breaks. She started pounding on the steering wheel in fury and screaming. Kia didn’t say anything; she lowered the window and waved at the cars behind them to go around. She threw the car in park and put on the emergency lights.

“We don’t need to get pulled over by police,” Kia said in a low voice. “Let’s go home. I will make you some tea, draw you a bath and get you ready for tonight. The Mayor of Detroit is coming. You have an event.”

“I don’t want to go,” London raised her head up and started the car back up.

“I know. But Monty’s going to be there.” Kia tried to lighten the mood.

London didn’t care who was going to be there. Sista has been on her mind since the night she committed suicide. London didn’t have time to grieve, process it or anything. She just missed her. London held back her tears for another day. They needed the money and it was already almost 8. By this time, the fundraiser wives were getting

ready to leave. London had an hour to shower, get dressed and make sure her girls were ready to meet their guests on the concierge level at the Ritz.

Even though Kia was helping her get ready, London felt like she couldn't get anything done. After she showered, London slipped on a short, tight, purple dress with black stilettos. Kia picked out the diamonds she was going to wear. She picked a simple necklace with a matching bracelet, giant studs, and two rings on each hand. Kia finished her make up and hair. Before she left, London looked in the mirror and saw her mother staring back. She shook off her reflection and focused on the night ahead.

It seemed like the time flew by when she got into the car with six of her girls and arrived at the hotel. She felt the same headache she had all day. The aspirin was supposed to help but what she needed was sleep. She hoped the night would be easy without any problems.

London looked around at her girls to make sure they all looked perfect. "Smell good?" London stretched her neck out for one of the girls to sniff. "Got condoms?" All the girls checked their purses. "Got lube?" London smiled when the elevator door opened. The girls giggled and filed out behind her. A guard, who immediately saw London and let the girls in, blocked the entrance to the concierge level to make sure no one else came through after them. London walked up to a man, who was laughing loudly.

"Hi Monty," London said in a low seductive voice.

"If it isn't the pretty lady in the little purple dress. And you brought friends! Welcome ladies!" he said greeting each with a kiss on the hand. "Please make yourselves comfortable."

The girls spread out to greet and giggle next to a different businessman. Immediately, London saw they were hungry. One man, a stockbroker London was familiar with, started kissing one of her girls. He was pulling up her dress as if he was going to fuck her in the middle of the room. London saw how her girl handled the horny pig and was proud. The girl grabbed his dick and started whispering in his ear. The man looked so excited but was more into what she was saying than where his dick would go. All of her girls were on point tonight. Elucia, the second most requested girl, was all over the Mayor. He paraded her around like his most prized possession. When Monty told her about the benefit, he specially asked that Elucia made it.

“You look amazing,” Monty said kissing her shoulder.

London had a thing for Monty. He was one of the most powerful African American men in Boston and he always wanted her. He was always sweet and gentle with her, which was something, was rare in her industry. They would talk about things. Things he said his wife never understood.

“You don’t look so bad yourself,” London said kissing him on the lips.

“Flattery gets you everything baby girl.” He pulled her close to him. He tickled her side, which made her giggle.

“You know I hate when people tickle me!”

“I’m not people,” he cupped her face and kissed her again.

“I have some more girls coming up in a few minutes. They were caught in a little traffic,” London said closing her eyes.

“I don’t care about them. The only girl I want to look at is you.”

London smiled and blushed. She started to feel better for the first time in days.

“I want you right now.”

“Noo, right now?”

“Yes.”

“Business first. The other girls just walked in.”

“Didn’t I just say you’re the only girl I want to ever look at.”

“For tonight.”

“Every night. I’m counting down.”

London knew what counting down meant. The time he would finally leave his wife. She had been in this business long enough to know that was not a possibility. There was no leaving anyone just a few left behind.

“Let’s make sure everyone is happy and I’ll make you happy.” London kissed him on the cheek. “Capisce?”

“Whatever you say baby.” He waved the waiter over to them.

London ordered her favorite drink. Monty was in a good mood and she wanted to soak up every moment they had together. About fifteen of her girls were working the room and leaving with the men. By the end of the night, she sat in the presidential suite with Monty as he told his wife he wasn’t coming home. London made sure Kia put the most expensive perfume they had on her. She knew which perfume was his favorite.

“How much money did you raise tonight?” London said kicking off her shoes.

“Over five hundred thousand,” he unbuttoned his shirt. “And this is for you.”

“You already paid...” London turned around to see him handing her a necklace box. “What’s this?”

“You came through last minute for me tonight and it’s an extra bonus.” He opened the box and showed her the necklace.

“This is... wow. Thank you.” London took the necklace. “You want me to put it on?” London looked at the gift.

“At first, I was thinking no because I just wanted to rip that dress off you tonight but looking at your happy face, yes. Let me see it on,” he helped her put it on and looked at her lovingly. “Beautiful. Stay the night.”

“You know the rules. I have to make sure my girls are ok and get home safe.”

“Can’t they just text you?”

“Yeah but.”

“I missed you. I had a long day and you know what kept me going?”

“Seeing me?”

“Seeing your smile.”

“I smile because I’m proud of you. All that you do for this city. Who you are. What you represent. You’re so amazing to me.”

Monty looked like he melted. He pulled London close to him. They were in bed looking at each other. “I know you have to go but just lay with me for a while. Stay in my arms and let me look at your pretty face until I fall asleep. I just want to listen to you talk.”

“Ok, so I was reading the newspaper the other day. I saw crime has gone down in the city of Boston by 13% since you took office. I said that’s my Monty. One day he’s going to be president of the United States.”

“We already have a Black president.”

“But he’s not you. He’s just not you. He can’t touch like you. He can’t kiss like you. He can’t love like you.”

Monty looked at London. “You love me?”

“Yes.”

“Give me some time. I’ll change this.”

“Ok. I’ll wait forever.” London lied. She knew he was lying and this was a game they played with one another for the past two years. As much as she wanted to be with Monty, reality kept them apart and would forever keep them apart.

Monty fell asleep and started snoring. That was when she reached over to look at her phone. About half of her girls left in cabs and she was still waiting on a few more. She snuggled under Monty for a little longer. When she finally got up to leave, she saw Monty’s phone on the floor. She picked it up and pressed the home button. She saw a pretty picture of his daughter. The daughter she met at Easter’s barbeque. She put the phone in the pocket and kissed Monty on the lips. To her surprise, Monty smiled.

“You’re kissing me goodbye? I must be special.”

“You are special.”

“When am I going to see you again?”

“Whenever you want.”

“Give me time.” Monty kept his eyes closed when he spoke.

“Time is all we have.”