

Ex-boyfriend

A Novel

Teresa D. Patterson

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Chapter One

Checking her hair and makeup in the rearview mirror, Vicki Holiday caught a glimpse of something that initially startled her. She stared for a while to make sure it wasn't a figment of her imagination. Her initial shock soon turned into anger.

"That bastard is following me again. When will he stop?" She realized that she was talking to herself, but didn't care. She was fed up with her ex-boyfriend, Terrence James. This had to be the fifth time she'd caught him following her.

She looked again to make sure she hadn't mistaken his vehicle. She hadn't. It was definitely him, and confirming this fact only made Vicki clench her teeth. She couldn't go anywhere without encountering Terrence's annoying presence. He needed to stop harassing her. She was about to go off on him.

When she first realized what he'd been up to, she'd tried reasoning with him, but that hadn't worked. When he'd shown up to a few other places she'd been, she'd tried ignoring him. However, Terrence wasn't easy to ignore, especially when he made sure that he was seen. He just couldn't seem to get the message in his head that she didn't want to be bothered by him. She'd been too nice trying to get

her point across. Now, it was obviously time for her to handle things differently.

She picked up her Sprint flip cell phone lying on the passenger's seat and punched in his number. She used to have it programmed in her phone, but she'd deleted it. She wished she could do the same to him. Just delete his tired ass right out of her life. If only it could be that easy.

"What's up?" Terrence's smooth tones vibrated through the receiver when he answered.

"Don't what's up me," she snapped. "Are you following me, Terrence?"

"No," he said, casually.

"Yes, you are," she said, hotly. "I see you behind me."

"I'm heading to my grandma's house," he told her. "I'm not following you."

"Terrence, your grandmother doesn't live in this area. Besides, why would you be going to her house at almost one o'clock in the morning?" He was such a liar. She sucked air through her teeth.

"I had to move in with her since you kicked me out," he said accusingly. "I understand that you're mad. I get that. But, can you at least talk to me? Then, I wouldn't have to follow you around."

"So, you're admitting that you've been following me?"

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“I didn’t admit anything,” he said, quickly. “I can’t help it if I end up where you are. This is a small city.” He became impatient. “Forget the small talk, shit. Can we talk?”

“I have nothing further to say to you. Do you know that you are pathetic?” She couldn’t resist the insult.

“I see you’re turning bitter. I really don’t understand what I did that was so unforgivable.”

His nonchalant tone infuriated her further. “Are you fucking serious?” she practically yelled. “You know what, whatever, Terrence. I’m wasting my time talking to you. But before I hang up, I want you to understand this. Get it through your fucking head, okay? I don’t want shit else to do with you. Do you understand? Stop calling my job. Don’t call my house or my cell phone. Stop dropping by my apartment and stop stalking me,” she said through gritted teeth, and disconnected.

She felt the fury boil inside her and wanted to slam the cell phone against the windshield. She wanted to hit something- someone- mainly Terrence.

The cellular phone rang, but she ignored it. She didn’t want to talk to Terrence anymore. He was an idiot.

Once Terrence realized that she wasn’t going to accept his calls, he began flashing his headlights behind her. He even turned on his high beams. What an asshole.

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She found it hard to believe that a little over a month ago, she'd thought he was the man of her dreams. She'd even considered marrying him.

"Vicki," she heard Terrence calling. He'd pulled up next to her in the left lane and lowered his window. "Vicki, talk to me. We can work it all out. I love you," he yelled through the opened window.

She let her window down and shouted, "Leave me alone." She glared at him as all of the pain resurfaced. "I don't love you," she hurled.

For a second, a hurt look crossed Terrence's face then he turned ugly. "Bitch," he swore. "You're going to talk to me. I'll be damned if it ends. It ain't over unless I say so."

She tried to put as much venom in her words as she could. "Kiss my ass, Terrence." With that insult delivered, she rolled up her window and sped off.

Terrence honked his horn repeatedly. She ignored him, turning down another street to get away. He swerved into the lane behind her, following in hot pursuit. She picked up speed. He did the same. Terrence began trailing her so closely that she was certain she'd feel his F150 hit the back of her Honda. She suddenly felt genuine fear. Would he run her off the road? Was he trying to cause an accident?

She picked up her cell again and entered his number. "Terrence, what are you doing?" She asked when he

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answered. She could hear the tremble in her voice, so she was certain he heard it, too.

“I’m just trying to get your attention. Do I have it now?” he asked sarcastically.

“You’re scaring me. Can you slow down before you run into me?”

“Are we going to talk?” he demanded to know.

She sighed audibly. “Okay. Okay. Let’s go to Starbucks. Turn right at the next light.”

“Don’t play, Vicki,” he growled. “You’d better be there.”

The only reason she agreed to talk was Terrence seemed to be on the verge of doing something stupid. She’d never seen that side of him and frankly, she didn’t care for it. If push came to shove, she’d get the police involved.

Terrence had to accept the fact that their relationship was finished. It was dead and buried. His cheating had been the nail in the coffin.

She pulled into a vacant parking space in front of Starbucks. Terrence had to drive around to find one because the coffee house was crowded. She waited for him to appear before exiting her car.

Inside, they were lucky to find a table that some college students recently vacated.

“So, Terrence, what do you possibly need to say to me?” she asked as soon as they sat down. Her arms were crossed over her chest, showing her obvious irritation and annoyance.

“Vicki, you’ve been avoiding me for weeks,” he stated, ignoring her discontent and anger.

“What did you expect? I walk into our apartment and find you and some skank with her feet up to Jesus. You’re lucky that *avoid you* is all I do,” she said tightly.

“That girl didn’t mean anything to me, Vicki,” Terrence began, but she cut him off.

“Is that supposed to justify your actions? Is that what you’re telling me?” Her eyes flashed.

“No. I’m not saying that,” he whined.

“How could you fuck someone else, Terrence? And in *our* bed? The bed that *we* shared?” She hadn’t realized how much that hurt until now. Damn. It really hurt.

“I wasn’t thinking. I just got caught up in the moment,” Terrence explained. “That girl threw herself at me. It was just supposed to be oral sex, but one thing led to another.”

“So, if she’d just sucked your dick that would have been okay?” She smirked with distaste.

“Well-” he shrugged. “I mean, a little head ain’t nothing. That doesn’t constitute cheating.”

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“If you believe that, then what am I supposed to think? Maybe you’ve been getting a *little head* all along,” she snapped.

“Nah, that’s out. I haven’t been with anyone before Tenesha. No one except you,” he added softly. He reached for her hand. “I made a mistake.”

“You are right about that.” Her eyes shot daggers at him as she snatched her hand away. “Don’t touch me.”

“Vicki, I fucked up. I’m sorry. I can’t go on without you. You know you are my life.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You should have thought about that before you stuck your dick in some whore.”

“Don’t be like that, Vicki,” he pleaded. “We can get past this. We can even set a date,” he said, licking his lips anxiously. “I’m finally ready to get married.”

Vicki stared at him incredulously. Did he honestly think that they could just shove what had happened under the rug and move on? She was supposed to forget that he’d cheated? The fact that their three-year relationship meant so little to him he’d risk it for a taste of different ass infuriated her. Mainly, she couldn’t believe how little he valued her after they’d been together for so long. He’d obviously mistaken her for a dumb bitch who’d accept any type of treatment from a man.

She'd often heard, "once a cheater, always a cheater." She wouldn't take Terrence back even if she wanted to, though that was the furthest thing from her mind.

"Terrence, I wouldn't marry you now even if you were the only available male left of earth," she said evenly. He had the nerve to look surprised by her statement. "You cheated on me. Not only did you destroy the trust that I had in you, you may have put my health at risk."

He held up a hand. "No, I didn't do that. I used protection," he insisted.

"You can tell me anything. Anyway-" she said curtly, "I don't care. The fact that you could sleep with someone else showed me just how deeply you care about me. Terrence, it's over. I don't want anything else to do with you."

He stared at her in silence until her words finally registered in his brain. "You're making a big mistake. I refuse to let you go. Vicki, don't do this," he begged.

"Don't do what, Terrence?" She finally let her annoyance seep through. "*You* did this to us- you and your doggish ways. I'm finished discussing this. It's over. I mean it." She rose from the table.

"Vicki, don't walk away from me," he said stiffly.

"Goodbye, Terrence."

"Vicki, I'm not finished talking to you."

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She gave him a stern look. "I'm finished talking to you," she said and walked off.

"Vicki." His voice level increased, causing some curious stares. She kept going. "I'm not playing with you. If you walk out that door, you'll be sorry."

He had such a look of fury on his face that a couple sitting at a booth next to him got up and moved. The manager, at the register up front, tossed him a nervous glance, but said nothing.

"What the fuck are you looking at?" Terrence snarled, glaring at the man. The guy quickly averted his gaze. Terrence got up and stormed out of the Starbucks.

After her run-in with Terrence, Vicki changed her plans for the night. She'd intended to meet some of her friends at a club in Tampa, but didn't feel like it anymore. Plus, she feared Terrence would follow her and ruin everything. Instead, she headed home.

She hadn't been inside her apartment more than fifteen minutes when she heard her car alarm. Accustomed to it going off from time to time, she thought nothing of it. She grabbed her keychain which had the remote attached and aimed it. She heard the familiar chirp and soon the noisy alarm stopped.

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After getting constant calls from Terrence, she shut off both her cell and home phone. As she prepared for bed, her mind replayed the events of the day she'd caught Terrence and that skank in the act.

She worked as a forms processor at Cobra Services, an insurance company. At times, their computer system went down and the processors were unable to enter claims. When that happened, they could either go to another department and help out, or go home for the rest of the day. She'd chosen to go home because the only department she'd been cross-trained in was customer service. The last thing she felt like doing was answering phones and getting cussed out repeatedly. She didn't care about having to use her paid time off. She had plenty of time accumulated because she rarely missed a day of work.

Arriving at the house at about a quarter past three, she saw Terrence's car which was unexpected. He worked the 7am to 3pm shift, and usually got home much later. Maybe he had the day off and had forgotten to mention it.

Vicki had been skeptical about letting Terrence move in with her two months prior, but the arrangement had worked out beautifully. They got along well. Terrence was neat and orderly. He didn't have any disgusting habits that she couldn't put up with. He took out the garbage, washed the dishes, cleaned, did the laundry and even cooked. He also

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made sure that her car was maintained and washed, and he detailed it regularly. He seemed to be the ideal mate.

They'd been dating for more than three years when they decided to shack up. It made sense to cut back on spending money to maintain two places. They could save toward a down payment on a house.

She parked behind him and went inside. Terrence didn't hear her enter the apartment. Since he hadn't expected her to come home so early, the bedroom door had been left wide opened.

As soon as she walked into the room, she saw them. She made a startled sound from somewhere down inside.

"What the hell is going on?" she finally managed to get out. Surely, her eyes were deceiving her.

Terrence jumped off the woman he'd been giving immense pleasure to, judging by the moans resounding throughout the room. The woman scrambled off the bed and grabbed her clothes.

"Vicki, w-what are you doing here?" Terrence asked dumbly.

"I live here," she snapped. "The question is what is this bitch doing here? What the fuck is going on?" she repeated.

Seeing the look of fury on Vicki's face, the woman remained silent. She quickly pulled on her bra and panties, tossed Terrence an annoyed look and told him, "Handle ya

business.” She rushed past Vicki who had a notion to grab her by her fake hair. Before she could act on her anger, the half-dressed woman was out the door.

“Baby, I can explain-” Terrence began, but Vicki wasn’t hearing anything he had to say. She went over to the closet and began snatching his clothes from hangers.

“Get your shit and get out.”

“Vicki, wait. I’m sorry.”

“Get out, Terrence,” she yelled. She felt so much anger that it almost choked her. She found it hard to breathe. The disbelief, pain and heartache encumbered her.

“I’ll go. But, once you’ve calmed down, we’ll talk about this,” he told her.

“There’s nothing to talk about.” Her voice came out sounding weak and pitiful.

She plopped down on the bed. She remembered that Terrence had just screwed someone in that bed and jumped back up. In a fit of rage, she grabbed the sheets and threw them at him.

“You can take those with you. If I could pick up the bed, I’d throw that at you, too.”

Looking guilty, Terrence just picked up the sheets and placed them in the laundry hamper. He picked up the clothes that littered the floor and put them in a laundry basket. He got

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some of his personal items off the top of the bureau. He threw those on top of the clothes and headed for the door.

“Call me,” he said.

“Negro, please.” She slammed the front door so hard that all of the windows in the house rattled.

Chapter Two

Vicki remembered the sordid details of that day and wanted to cry. She held it in because she was finished shedding tears over a no good man. She didn't care how much Terrence claimed to love her. Love didn't pull down its pants and fuck tricking whores.

"As far as I'm concerned, love doesn't live here anymore," she said.

She reached for the remote control and clicked on the television. The place was too silent. She had gotten used to having Terrence with her. She still hadn't adjusted to not having his warm body next to hers.

She thought about all the times they had snuggled together and made love for hours. Then, there were those times that they'd just laid in each other's arms. She'd considered those times special and precious.

Now, her heart ached. How could Terrence throw their love away? If she'd been lacking in certain areas, he should have just told her. He'd left her feeling inadequate. If she had put it down right in-between the sheets, he wouldn't have strayed. She must have done something wrong.

She could admit that she wasn't a firecracker in the bedroom, but she wasn't a prude either. Plus, she'd been

willing to learn and try different things. She didn't mind pleasing her man. She felt it was her womanly duty. She didn't look at sex like it was a chore. It was something she enjoyed doing with the right man. She thought that Terrence had been that man. How wrong she'd been.

She tossed and turned trying to get comfortable. Since she'd put him out, she couldn't really sleep through the night. She felt so lonely and empty-hearted.

She didn't care how miserable being without him made her feel. She would not take him back. She'd be a damned fool. If he cheated and she took him back, he'd do it again because she had allowed it. If there was one thing she'd learned in life, it was that we teach people how to treat us. If he cheated and she did nothing about it, he'd cheat throughout the relationship.

She was better off without Terrence. It was a good thing that he'd shown his true colors before they'd gotten married. Had they been married and he'd stepped out of their relationship, Vicki might have caught a charge. It is one thing to fuck over your girlfriend, but fucking over your wife takes it to a whole different level. She might have gone Lorena Bobbitt on his ass and sliced off his dick.

Thinking about Terrence's dick caused a tingle between her thighs. He had been one hell of a lover and his being well-endowed had been a plus. When she first saw his dick,

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she had thought to herself, *There is no way he's sticking that elephant trunk inside my stuff.* But, he'd been very gentle and patient the first time. Before that night ended, she'd been clinging to the bed sheets, begging for him to give her more and go deeper. He'd been only too happy to oblige.

Now, all she had was a vibrator that she didn't want to use. Once you'd had the real thing, you just couldn't go back to the fake. She wanted a man and she was going to find a replacement. The best way to get over one was to meet another. With that thought on her mind, she drifted off to sleep.

Saturday morning Vicki woke up around ten o'clock. She pattered around the house in her nightgown and bare feet. She felt like eating French toast so she made some. After cleaning the breakfast dishes, she took a leisurely shower and got dressed. Maybe she'd go shopping at the mall and get some new books from the book store.

Grabbing her purse and keys, she headed out. When she stepped outside, she gasped in horror. All four of her tires were flat. Her heart thumped in her chest. Now she knew why her alarm had gone off the night before. Someone had vandalized her car.

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Momentarily, she was paralyzed, not knowing whether or not to call the police. She knew that four tires couldn't just go flat at the same time. It wasn't a coincidence. Besides, Terrence had threatened her. Her best bet was that he'd done it.

She flipped open her cell phone and called her friend, Tresica. "Tressy, you up?" she asked.

"Girl, hell no," Tresica answered, hoarsely. "I went out last night, remember? What the hell happened to you?" Vicki told her what happened with Terrence and why she hadn't made it to the club.

"Your ass needs to have that crazy Negro locked up. He ain't gonna stop this shit until somebody gets hurt."

"Well, wait until I tell you what I think he did. Tressy, all four of my tires are flat."

"What the fuck," Tresica screeched through the phone.

"Girl, I just stepped outside and I swear to God, all four of my tires are flat," she repeated. "Should I report this to the police?"

"Are you fucking serious? Of course you report that shit."

"But, how do I know that it was him?"

"Because he's a deranged motherfucker," Tresica said bitterly.

Vicki sighed heavily. "So, I should call the cops?"

“Heifer, do I have to come over there and slap some sense into your empty head? You are too nice. Personally, I’d stomp a hole in that negro’s ass. But, you handle it your way. Call the cops, girl. I’m going back to sleep.”

“Okay. I’ll talk to you later.”

With some hesitation, she dialed the St. Petersburg Police Department. The officer taking down her complaint sounded bored. Even so, he told her that someone would be out to look at the damage and make a report. She went back inside and waited.

In the meantime, she called someone who could fix her tires. She breathed a sigh of relief when she was able to reach him, and he agreed to help. Gary was a decent guy, but he wasn’t overly nice. Sometimes, he could be downright rude. That was just Gary.

She’d met him on the job and had instantly taken a liking to him. Even though he had a harsh outlook on some situations, for the most part, she agreed with him. Some people couldn’t take his straightforwardness. He gave it to you straight-up with no chaser. He wasn’t one to sugarcoat anything. If you didn’t want to hear the truth, then Gary wasn’t the one you needed to talk to.

Gary arrived shortly after the policeman had taken her statement. When she told him what she thought happened, he

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let her know in no uncertain terms what she needed to do about the situation.

“If he did this shit, have his ass locked up. That was a bitch move. What the hell kind of man slashes tires? That’s some simpin’ ass shit.”

“What do you mean by simpin’?”

“That’s a simp. A weak-minded individual. What the fuck? If a woman caught me cheating and told me it was over, hell, it’s over. Slashing her damn tires ain’t gonna make her take me back.” He gave her a worried look. “You need to be careful. I have a feeling that it doesn’t stop here. That brother is mad that you cut off the punany.”

Vicki couldn’t help but to laugh. Gary was a trip. “Well, I wouldn’t have done it if he’d been faithful.”

“Hell, he doesn’t care about that. He’s probably thinking about how he fucked up. He’s missing that good loving right about now. It’s making him crazy. Prime example, he’s fucking up ya tires. You must have put it down in the bedroom, girl.”

“Shut up,” she said blushing.

“I’m serious. What’s the chance that I can get a piece of that?”

“Gary, I don’t have sexual relations with men that I work with,” she said.

“Hell, I can quit.”

She laughed again. "You are silly."

"I'll be back after I have these repaired." He'd taken off all the tires and placed them in his Durango. "You sit tight and think about what I'm offering. You won't be disappointed," he told her through the opened window.

"Gary, let's not go there. First of all, I'm more than ten years older than you. Second, I don't have those types of feelings for you."

"And third, because I know there's a number three," he joked.

"I think of you as a brother," she said.

"Oh, hell no. I was hoping that you'd at least think of me as a distant cousin, twice removed, only related by marriage. Damn, a brother? I'll never get in them panties."

"Gary." They both laughed, and he backed out of the driveway.

"I'll be back as soon as I can. Can you cook something?" he asked. "I'm tired of eating my cousin's cooking." He grimaced.

"It can't be that bad."

He frowned. "Oh, it is. I'll tell you all about it when I get back."

After Gary returned and he finished putting her tires on the car, she invited him inside. Gary had shared with her that he was a vegetarian and tried to eat healthy meals. She'd

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fixed tilapia fried in lemon-pepper fish-fry and tossed a garden salad.

“Wow, it smells good,” he complimented. “Where’s the bathroom so I can wash my hands?”

“Down the hall, first door on the right,” she directed.

A few minutes later, Gary joined her in the dining area. She placed the fish and salad on the table.

“Well, sit down and dig in,” she said. “What would you like to drink?”

“You have iced tea?” he asked.

“No. I have Country Time Lemonade.”

“Pink?”

“No just regular.”

“I’ll take it.”

“Coming right up.” She went to the refrigerator and got the pitcher of lemonade. She poured some of the beverage into a glass and handed it to him.

“So, you said you were tired of your cousin’s cooking?” she asked, sitting down. “Why?”

Gary, who had been enjoying his food, stopped chewing, and gave her a look. “Tired ain’t the word. He needs to stop cooking all together. Hell, he needs to be banned from all kitchens. He can’t cook worth a damn. The thing is he doesn’t know it. He actually thinks he’s a gourmet chef.”

“Stop lying.” She giggled as she stuck her fork into a slice of tomato and guided it to her mouth.

“I’m not. The other day, for instance, he cooked some meatloaf. Well, he said it was meatloaf, but I beg to differ. It was like no meatloaf I’ve ever seen. It resembled some mystery meat. I mean, it was all lumpy and greasy. I have never seen anything like it. And he wanted to know why I wasn’t hungry when he showed it to me.”

Vicki cracked up to the point of almost choking on a mouth full of tilapia. “Gary, if you don’t stop, you’re going to have to perform the Heimlich maneuver on me.”

“But, I am not exaggerating one bit. Tell me the truth, have you ever cooked meatloaf?” She nodded. “Well, do you put corn in it? And he used some shit I ain’t never heard of. Wor- something or another.”

“Worcestershire, perhaps?”

“I don’t know what the hell it was, but it was brown and nasty-tasting. There wasn’t no kind of ketchup in the meatloaf. It was just lying in a pan of grease looking like a big blob of yuck.” He took a drink from his glass of lemonade and continued. “Plus, I don’t ever want to eat nothing he cooks anyway because he doesn’t wash his hands. And he double dips back into the pots and shit.”

“How do you know that?” she asked, still chuckling.

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“Yesterday, when he cooked, asked him if he had double-dipped, and he took too long to answer. So, I just knew. You should have seen his face when he told me, too. He was excited.

He imitated his cousin’s tone of voice. “He was like: ‘Gary, I cooked.’ He said it all happy, too.”

“I feel bad for your cousin. He’s just trying to be helpful.”

“Helpful hell. He’s trying to kill me. Anyway, he was all excited. So, I asked him what he cooked. When I saw that shit, I was like: ‘I’m good.’”

“What had he cooked?”

“The hell if I could identify it. It was supposed to be chicken and rice, but I think he put some Worcestershire sauce in that, too.”

“Did you at least try it?”

“He-lllll no. First off, I know how he is. I know he tested it to see if it was done and that he double-dipped the spoon back into the pot without washing it.”

“He could have washed the spoon.”

“I doubt that. Needless to say, I didn’t eat it.”

“You probably hurt his feelings,” Vicki said.

“I don’t care. Hell, even if I was a poster child for Feed the Needy, I wouldn’t eat that crap.”

“Well, I’m glad I’m not your cousin. You couldn’t hurt my feelings like that. I’d stop cooking for you.”

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“I damn sure wish he thought like you.”

They continued to carry on idle conversation as they ate. As she listened to Gary, she thought that he might have missed his calling. He should have been a stand-up comedian.

“I really appreciate you having my tires fixed,” she told him, pouring him some more lemonade.

“Enough to give me some?” he asked, with a hopeful look on his face.

“Gary, why does it always have to go back to sex with you?”

“Hell, why not?”

“Sex isn’t everything.”

“I know it’s not.”

“And it’s the reason that I’m single again,” she added. They both fell silent.

“Vicki, he was a loser from the jump,” he said, breaking the awkwardness. “Don’t beat yourself up over it.”

“I can’t help but to think that it’s my fault.”

“Well, why would you think that? Did you give him some pussy?”

“Gary,” she exclaimed.

“Well, did you?”

“Yes,” she answered, feeling a blush creep into her cheeks.

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“Did you give it to him when he wanted, the way he wanted it?”

“Yes,” she said, not understanding for the life of her why she was answering such bold questions.

“Well, how was his cheating your fault?” He pushed his empty plate away. “It amazes me when women think that way. Women need to wake up. A man will only do to you what you allow him to do. Believe that.”

Gary hadn’t spoken anything but the truth, so she couldn’t get mad.

“What are your plans for the rest of the day?” she asked, changing the subject.

“I’ll be working on my website and recording an audio book. I plan to release it soon.”

“That’s great. Well, I’m gonna head to the mall as originally planned. I really do appreciate your help.”

“Anytime. You know, you might find another man at the mall, so keep your eyes open.”

“I’m going to a bookstore. I doubt if many men will be browsing through the romance section,” she said.

“You’d be surprised. That’s one of the main places I meet women. I usually run up on them at a bookstore or in a department store.”

“I guess that means you have a lot of books,” she said in amusement.

“Yep. But I also happen to read.”

“You?”

“Yes. I’m not all that into fiction, but I read a lot of non-fiction, self-help, and inspirational books,” he said.

“Really?” Again, she was surprised. There was more to Gary than a pretty face. If she wasn’t so through with men, she might have considered him as a love interest.

“A good book to read is the autobiography of Malcolm X,” he told her.

“I might check it out. I saw the movie where Denzel played Malcolm.”

“The book is more in depth. It’s deep.” He looked at his phone. “I gotta run. I have to go fix my grandma something for dinner.” She gave him a puzzled look. “My grandma can’t get around. So, I go over and fix her meals for her,” he explained. “That’s why I’m working so hard on this audio book. If it sells the way I hope it does, I’ll be able to quit my job and take care of my grandma full-time.”

Vicki’s heart melted. A man who took care of his elderly grandmother had to have a heart of gold. Gary wasn’t as cold, uncaring and impersonal as he pretended to be after all. Maybe she’d take him up on his offer the next time he propositioned her.

Chapter Three

The anger surged through Terrence's veins. Vicki had to take him back. Yeah, he'd fucked up. All men fucked up from time to time. He'd told her he was sorry. An apology should be enough. Why was she being so stubborn?

He didn't understand why women put so much value on faithfulness. All men cheated. If they said they didn't, they were lying through their assholes or they were hen pecked, pussy-whipped wimps.

He wondered how Vicki had reacted when she saw her tires. He knew he should have controlled himself, but when she walked off like that at Starbucks, it had riled him up. Then, she wouldn't answer his calls. He had never resorted to violence when he couldn't get his way. There was a first time for everything.

He didn't know what had come over him. Something dark lurked inside, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to keep it at bay. He had a burning desire to hurt somebody if Vicki didn't take him back.

He thought about what he'd done to the tires and experienced a small amount of remorse. Vicki didn't deserve that. She was actually a wonderful person. She'd treated him

like a king and had been the only woman to make him feel special. He had no idea why he'd cheated on her.

He sighed aloud. It was just complicated. He couldn't explain it. Tenesha had been coming on to him for months. He had a dime at home and couldn't understand his attraction to Tenesha. She wasn't even his type. She wasn't much to look at. She was one of those ghettofied project chicks. You know the kind. They wear two-toned hairdos, smack gum, roll their eyes and talk too loud. They sport fake, acrylic nails with ridiculous color schemes. The kind with low self-esteem, who think having sex is the way to a man's heart. Tenesha was the ride-or-die, shit-talking type.

She got hired through work force in a program called Welfare to Work. She'd just gotten off Section 8 housing, and could barely pay her rent. She complained about it all the time. She told her problems to anyone who would listen. Terrence happened to be the person she griped to the most.

He guessed it must have been her body. She did have an hour-glass figure and one of those juicy asses – like the BET video dancers. She always wore something tight and provocative to work. She seemed to exaggerate her twist every time she passed by him.

She'd make it a daily habit to call him over to her desk and hold a conversation. Her breasts would almost be bursting out of the blouse she wore. He couldn't stop himself

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from staring at those puppies and salivating. Tenesha knew exactly what she was doing.

She was supposed to be the receptionist. But, she hardly answered the phone because she was too busy running her mouth. Her other way to avoid working was to surf the Internet or instant message her unemployed friends all day.

It wasn't long before he'd gotten the idea in his head that he wanted to tap that ass. Hell, she practically laid it in his lap. She'd probably let him take her off in one of the empty patient's rooms and knock it out real quick. She seemed to be that kind of freak.

The day he finally took Tenesha up on her offer hadn't been planned. They got off at three in the evening. She needed a ride because her car had broken down. He agreed to give her a lift since she lived on the south side and it wasn't too far out the way.

In the car, she'd boldly told him what she could do to him. She said how good she could make him feel. She'd bragged that Superhead wasn't the only one that could get a book deal for sucking dick.

He'd been curious and his curiosity had gotten the best of him. He took her to his place because she said one of her kids would be home from school. He didn't want some snotty nose brat interrupting his nut. He knew how kids could cock-block. They'd cry and whine, beg for a glass of Kool-Aid or a

peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Kids aggravated his nerves. His place would be unoccupied.

The last thing he expected was for Vicki to get home early and catch them in the act. He couldn't deny or explain it away because he'd been butt-naked, wearing only his socks. It had been like catching a kid with his grubby hands in the cookie jar. Damn.

He thought Vicki would clown, but didn't count on her kicking him out. Well, actually he had expected to be in the dog house for a while, but not totally kicked to the curb.

Shit, she didn't want anything to do with him. Period. He'd been edited out of her life, like insignificant words to a novel. It's like she'd hit Ctrl, Alt, Delete.

He couldn't accept it.

Something urged him to drive by Vicki's place that Saturday morning. He'd been living with his grandma and she was getting on his nerves. She had a rule: no sleeping past ten o'clock. He'd had to get out. If he stayed, she would find some work for him to do. She'd want him to mow the yard, clip the hedges, pick the grapefruits off the tree—shit he didn't feel like doing.

His missed his old routine. On his days off, he liked to sleep as late as he wanted. More often than not, Vicki would be curled up next to him. When he did wake up, she'd give him some good loving. Then, she'd fix him breakfast.

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His grandma said she wasn't cooking or cleaning up behind no grown ass man.

"I didn't do it for ya mama, and I'm not gonna start with you," she told him.

"Yes, ma'am," he mumbled.

"Now, I ain't gonna turn you to the streets, but I'm gonna suggest you get ya own place real soon, Son. I need peace in my old age."

Grandma was not the coddling type. She wasn't a sitting in the rocking chair, knitting a quilt, baking cookies type either. She didn't play. Trust him; he wanted to be the hell out of there ASAP. That's why Vicki had to quit tripping. He had given up his apartment to move in with her three months ago. He couldn't afford to get his own place for at least another couple of paychecks. His grandma would have driven him to suicide by then. And if he had to put up with seeing her stockings hanging over the shower stall for another day, he didn't think he could take it.

When he turned the corner and saw an unfamiliar vehicle parked behind Vicki's car, he almost screeched to a halt. He took notice of the person driving it— a tall, medium built, handsome guy. He was light-skinned with that good grade of hair.

He couldn't stand those pretty ass Negroes. What the fuck was the dude doing at his lady's house? He saw the guy jack

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up the car and take off the tires. He relaxed a bit, but not much. He heard him say something that caused Vicki to blush and laugh. Who was the motherfucker flirting with his woman?

He saw red.

Chapter Four

Vicki browsed the bookstore, picked up the novels she'd come to buy and a few others. She bought *Alize on the Rocks* because it was written by Lovelle, a local author, and she liked the book cover. Since Gary had suggested Malcolm X's autobiography, she bought that, too. On her way out of the mall, she stopped at Wild Pair to look at the boots on sale. She wanted a pair of leather, thigh high boots to wear with her army print mini skirt. She couldn't find any, so she settled for a pair of calf-length ones.

When she left the shoe store, she could have sworn she saw Terrence, but whoever it was ducked into a video store. After what he had done to her tires, Terrence better give her fifty feet. He was one trifling ass Negro. What had Gary referred to him as? A simp. He was a fucking simp.

She glanced back a few times, but saw no signs of the guy she thought had been Terrence. She relaxed a bit. She didn't want her Saturday to end in a confrontation with that clown.

As she breezed through the mall, she received many admiring glances from the men. Vicki was what they called a dime. She was simply stunning, with her model-like figure and long flowing hair. She didn't place too much emphasis on looks because she knew that what God had given, He could

also take away. She believed that looks could only get you so far in life, so she never exhibited any signs of vanity or conceit.

She stopped at China Wok and ordered the teriyaki chicken with fried rice. She wasn't hungry, but figured she'd probably want something later. She thought about calling Tresica, but knew she'd still be in bed. When Tresica went out on the town, it usually took the entire weekend for her to recuperate. That girl could drink any man under the table. Vicki had a two-drink limit and usually stuck to the fruity drinks. Tresica and Janelle both preferred hard liquor. Tresica liked Hennessy and Janelle usually drank vodka or gin. Those two could really down the drinks, especially if it was ladies' night at the club. Usually, Vicki would be appointed the designated driver.

While she waited in the line at the Chinese store, her phone rang. Surprised to see that it was Janelle, she answered cheerfully.

"Hey girl. I must have thought you up."

"Are you okay? Tressy told me what that motherfucker did to ya car. Let's write his eulogy," Janelle said, hyped up.

Vicki laughed. Janelle was the last person you'd expect to speak so maliciously. She was petite, couldn't weigh no more than one hundred and three pounds soaking wet, and had a laid-back attitude.

“It ain’t even that serious. I can’t really prove that he did it. It may just be a coincidence.”

“Coincidence my ass.” Janelle snorted. “He did it. He’s been following you everywhere, harassing you ever since you kicked his ass out. He’s bitter. That’s something a bitter motherfucker would do.”

Vicki paid for her food and moved along with the line. “Well, he needs to get over it. I will never take his slimy ass back.”

“You’d be crazy if you did. After the way he’s been acting, I’m beginning to think he’s a psycho. It’s a good thing you’re finding out how crazy he is now. What if you’d married that jerk?”

“I know. Girl, what are you doing up this early anyway?” she asked, changing the subject.

“I have a hair appointment. I’m going to Tampa to get my hair braided.”

“Why are you going all the way to Tampa?”

“Because the Africans have two or three people on ya head at once. I can’t be sitting in a chair all damn day waiting on these folk in Da Burg to braid my hair. I have things to do.”

“I know what you mean,” Vicki said. She got her food and headed out the front entrance of the mall. “What are you planning on doing later on?” She chatted animatedly on the

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phone with her friend, not noticing that she was being watched.

* * *

Terrence hadn't been following Vicki, that time. He actually spotted her by accident. He'd just left Foot Locker after buying a new pair of Nikes when he recognized her familiar walk. He'd know that sexy body anywhere.

When she glanced his way, he ducked into Blockbuster. She already thought he was psychotic. If he wanted her back, he had to be cool about it.

Since he already saw her, there was no sense letting her out of his sight. He watched as she stopped at China Wok then headed toward the mall's exit. She was on her cell phone. He wondered if she was talking to that guy he'd seen at her place. The very thought incensed him. He had to find out, so he called her.

"Terrence is that you I see behind me?" she snapped when she answered.

"Er-" he stammered, caught off guard. He hadn't expected for her to answer. "No," he lied. "I'm at my grandma's house. Where are you?"

"That's none of your concern," she stated. "So, what do you want? Are you calling to apologize for flattening my tires?" All she heard was silence. "Well?"

“I didn’t do that,” he lied again. “So, did you get that problem fixed?” he asked casually.

“Yes. I had a co-worker help me out.”

“So, that tall, light-skinned guy works with you?” he asked before he could catch himself. She wasn’t supposed to know that he’d been watching her.

“Terrence, how do you know-” She paused. “You’re not at your grandmother’s house, are you? You’re following me again. I knew it.” Before he had a chance to respond, she disconnected the call.

Vicki hurried to find her car. She hated that it was so crowded in the parking lot. Every available space was filled. She couldn’t remember where she’d parked. Was it near Burdines or by Dillard’s? She just wanted to get to the safety of her vehicle, lock her doors, and head home. She didn’t see Terrence, but knew he was nearby. Knowing that filled her heart with dread.

Finally, she found the black Honda and breathed a sigh of relief. She hurried to get behind the wheel. Just as she pulled the door closed, Terrence grabbed it and snatched it back open.

“Stop running from me, Vicki,” he commanded. “I just want to talk.”

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“Terrence, leave me alone.”

“No, Vicki, I can’t do that.”

“Let go of my door,” she said.

“Not until you talk to me.”

“Why do you keep doing this? Are you crazy?” When she stared into his eyes, she answered her own question.

Chapter Five

Terrence was livid. He couldn't believe that Vicki had thrown all that Chinese food on his new South Pole outfit. That red shit from the Teriyaki chicken had even gotten on his Nikes. How the hell was he going to get that out? He had fried rice all in his hair and inside his clothes. He had no choice but to let go of her car door when she began backing out of the parking space, almost dragging him in the process.

He would make her pay for what she'd done. People who witnessed the incident had pointed and laughed. He'd almost wanted to shout at them, "Kiss my ass." What the hell was so funny about a man getting food thrown on him? Some people were insensitive idiots.

He bought a newspaper to put under him when he sat down. He didn't want all that stickiness from his pants to get on the seat of his truck. He peeled out of the mall parking lot, tires squealing.

"I'm gonna get that bitch. How in the hell can she treat me like this? I'll get her."

Fuming, he drove toward home thinking about all the ways he could get back at Vicki. He'd heard about people putting sugar in gas tanks. He wondered what would happen if he did that. Maybe he'd find out. Or maybe he'd just egg

her car and let it simmer in the steamy, Florida heat. That would do quite a number on her paint job. Bet she wouldn't be acting so high and mighty then.

He pulled into the driveway and got out, slamming the door of the Ford F150. He stomped across the yard and went inside his grandmother's house.

"Lord, have mercy. What in the world happened to you?" his grandmother asked as he entered. She eyed his stained clothes warily. "You all right, child?"

"Nah, Grandma, I ain't all right. I can't understand why Vicki won't listen to me. I just want her back. But, no matter how hard I try, she just won't hear me out."

"Terrence, leave that child alone before you end up getting yaself in some real trouble," his grandmother advised.

"Seems to me like you was the one in the wrong. You need to move on with ya life. You can't keep running behind that gal if she don't want you. Move on with ya life," she said again, shaking her head.

"I can't. You just don't understand. Vicki *is* my life. If I can't have her, I don't want to live."

"You're talking crazy. This obsession you got with her ain't healthy at all. Mark my words, it's gonna land you in a heap o' trouble."

Terrence didn't want to hear what his grandmother had to say. She was old school. She didn't know anything about how

things went down in the modern age. He hurried from the room before she began bombarding him with scriptures from the Bible. It burned him up when she did that. She thought everything could be solved by opening that book. She was so disillusioned. God wasn't into answering prayers, at least not his. The only thing God could do for him was send Vicki back.

After taking a shower and changing clothes, he dragged around the house looking pitiful. He didn't cheer up until he received a call from his friend Jimmy. Jimmy wanted to go shoot some hoops at Fullerton Park. Since Jim didn't have a ride, Terrence usually picked him up and they'd ball together. He had to put up with his grandma's fussing before he finally made it out the front door. She treated him like he was still ten-years-old.

He stopped in front of Jimmy's house and honked. Jimmy came outside, wearing Champion shorts, a tee-shirt and Nikes. He was a brown-skinned, stocky dude who stood about five feet eight.

"What's up, man? How you been?" Jimmy greeted, getting in on the passenger's side. "I ain't seen you much since you and ya girl broke up. What's the deal?"

"I've just been chilling at my grandma's place. You know, trying to maintain." The truth was he didn't have much time to hang with the brothers. He'd been too busy chasing after

Vicki, following her, watching her every move. Stalking a person took up a lot of time. Hell, it was almost a full-time job.

He wondered what his friends would think if they knew what he'd been up to. They'd probably laugh at him and call him pussy whipped. Most likely, they'd think he'd lost his damn mind.

"So, tell me something," Jimmy shot at him. "Was it worth it? Hooking up with that project chick?"

Terrence exhaled loudly. "Hell Nah. The pussy wasn't even all that good, and she couldn't suck dick worth shit," he lied. The truth was Tenesha could suck the skin off a dick. But that was for him to know.

"So, you lost a damn good woman like Vicki over some lame pussy? Man, you must feel really stupid right about now." Jimmy laughed.

Terrence felt like leaning over, opening the door, and pushing his ass out. "Shut the fuck up," he growled.

"Chill, man. Chill. I'm just saying. Anyway, you'll find someone else. If you get bucked off the horse, you just pick ya self up, dust ya self off, and get back on."

"I don't want anybody else. I want Vicki," he said with great passion. "I'm gonna get her back."

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“How? You plan to kidnap her or something? From what I heard, she ain’t never coming back. Give it up, man. Give it up.” Jimmy chuckled to himself and shook his head.

“You sound just like my damn grandma. Fuck you.”

“Hey, I can see it’s still a sore spot for you, so I’ll leave it alone. But, I still don’t understand how you could throw away a perfectly good relationship, for ghetto, street booty.”

“Shit happens.”

“I guess it does.”

On the court, Terrence tried to release all of his aggression. He almost got in a fight with some dread-head dude named Rico. He’d balled with the cat for years and knew that he had a few screws loose. He didn’t care. Rico wasn’t shit. He’d try his best to beat Rico like he’d been convicted of beating a pit bull with a bat a few years prior. Rico swore to that day that he’d been getting the dog off him because it had tried to attack. Right. The white folks hadn’t seen it like that.

When Rico’s brother showed up, Terrence decided to slack off. Now, that motherfucker was straight up crazy. Rondell had ex-convict written all over his face. When he looked at you, you just felt chills. Winning a ball game

wasn't worth his life. He took a break and went to call Vicki. Of course, she didn't answer.

He was sitting on the bench watching the game when a tall guy walked past him. He nodded and the guy nodded back. Recognition dawned.

That's the guy I saw at Vicki's place.

He got up and followed the man.

"Hey, yo. Hold up a minute," he called. The guy stopped, staring at Terrence with a suspicious look.

"You talking to me?" he asked.

"Yeah. I think I saw you at my lady's house earlier today. You drive a silver Dodge Durango?"

"Yeah, but I don't fuck with anyone's woman," the guy said quickly.

"I didn't accuse you of nothing. I just wanted to know if it was you." He eyed the brother. He looked even better close up and in person. He was just the kind of suave type that Vicki would probably go for. "You know a Vicki Holiday?"

"Er- yeah," he answered, hesitantly.

"Well, I saw you at her house today. What's up with that?"

"What do you mean?"

"Y'all kicking it or something? You trying to hit that?"

"What?" he asked incredulously. He stared at Terrence and just shook his head in disbelief. "You know what, I'm not

gonna even stand here and entertain this bullshit.” He threw up his hands, turned his back and walked off.

“Who was that?” Jimmy asked, plopping down on a bench nearby, wiping sweat on a white hand towel that he’d brought with him. He finished and placed the rolled up towel around his neck.

“Some bitch boy I saw at Vicki’s house.”

“Oh. Sizing up the competition, huh?”

“Nah,” he lied. “She told me that they work together. I ain’t worried.”

“If you’re ready to go, I’m down with it. I’m beat. I think I just lost five pounds on that court,” he said, breathing heavily.

Terrence looked at him critically. “You can stand to lose fifty more.”

Jimmy gave Terrence a sharp look. “Man, you done turned bitter. I hope you hurry up and find another lady, shit.”

“I already told you. I’m getting Vicki back.”

“Yeah, and Michael Vick is gonna be able to own pit bulls again. Please.”

Terrence frowned. “You ain’t funny.”

“I’m not trying to be. I’m just keeping it real.” He gave his friend a pitying look. “Just leave the lady alone. Get over it and charge it to the game. Move on. For real, man.”

“I can’t let her go.”

“Don’t end up in jail. You know, you are sounding like you’re obsessed or something.”

“I’m not obsessed. I just love her, man. But, you wouldn’t know anything about that,” he insulted.

“Apparently, you don’t either. If you loved her so much, why did you cheat?”

“You know it’s different for men. That shit didn’t mean nothing. I just did it because it was offered to me. I mean, I didn’t even have to try.” He shook his head. “Why the fuck Tenesha had to keep fucking with me? It’s like she was constantly flaunting that ass in front of me, smiling and flirting all the time and shit.”

“Never trust a big butt and a smile,” Jimmy said. “Hey man, let’s bounce.”

“Bet it up.”

As they left, Gary who had just left the basketball court, stared behind them. His eye was on Terrence. Terrence, feeling as though he was being watched, turned around. When he saw the man he’d confronted earlier, mean-mugging him, he gave him the middle finger.

“I think I know that dude,” Jimmy said, frowning. He squinted, trying to get a better look. “Yeah, that’s him. That’s that cat G-Ball. At least, that’s what he went by, back in the day. You may wanna choose ya battles carefully.” He gave

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Terrence a look of concern. “He ain’t the one to be fucking with. That nigga is crazier than a country rooster.”

Chapter Six

After her scare with Terrence at the mall, Vicki didn't want to go home. There was a possibility that he'd follow her. She really was getting fed up with his behavior.

She thought about going to the beauty salon where Janelle was, but didn't want to make the long drive to Tampa. Besides, everybody and their mama would be there. Salon Dior, off of W. Cypress Street was extremely popular. They had the best African hair braiders. They were real Africans, too. They spoke that broken French dialect and everything. Vicki used to go there when she'd sported braids. Now that her hair had reached a length that she was comfortable with, she wore it regular.

She ruled out going to the salon because too many people from St. Petersburg would be there. She didn't need them all up in her business. Instead, she stopped by Tresica's place. If she was still sleeping that late in the evening, she needed to wake up anyway.

After pushing Tresica's doorbell for a full minute, Vicki almost gave up and left. Suddenly, the door flew opened and Tresica glared at her through bloodshot eyes.

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“What the hell are you doing here? I knew I should have gotten an *Unwelcome* mat and placed it right outside my door a long time ago.”

“Heifer, shut up and let me in. It ain’t my fault that you’re hung over.”

“I know. I can blame Janelle for that,” she said sourly, opening the door wider so Vicki could step inside. “She didn’t want to leave the club when I was ready. Since she drove, I had to wait on her ass. So, I kept drinking.”

“Well, hurry up and make some coffee. I have to tell you about what Terrence did.”

“You mean since he fucked up ya tires?”

“Yes. We need to hurry up and get you sober. I’ll make your coffee.”

She went into her friend’s kitchen and opened the cabinet. She grabbed a black mug with the Aquarius Zodiac symbol on it. It was Tresica’s favorite cup. Janelle had given it to her as a birthday present a few years back.

Tresica liked Maxwell House instant coffee. Vicki filled the mug with water and placed it in the microwave.

“Damn that coffee,” Tresica yelled to her from the living room. “Just tell me what happened now. Am I gonna have to fuck that Negro up? He is getting on my last nerves and he ain’t bothering me.”

“Patience is a virtue,” Vicki said. “It won’t take long. You know you ain’t human until you drink at least one cup of Maxwell House.”

“True.” Tresica plopped down on her couch. “Oh the drama,” she groaned. “Why you had to pop the coochie and whip the man like that? Now, he’s tripping.”

They laughed. Vicki took the boiling cup of water out of the microwave, added a full teaspoon of instant coffee, and two heaping spoons of sugar. She got the French vanilla Coffeemate creamer out of the refrigerator and poured some in.

She went into the living room and placed the steaming cup of liquid on the table. “Drink up.”

“Okay Mom.” They laughed again. Tresica picked up the cup and took a tentative sip, testing the temperature. Once satisfied that it wasn’t too hot, she took a few swallows. “That’s good,” she said. “Now, tell me, what did Terrence do?”

“Girl, he followed me around at the mall. He said he wasn’t following me, but that’s a damn lie. Plus, he’s been by my house, stalking me.”

“How do you know he went by your place?”

“He pretty much admitted it when he asked me about Gary.”

“Who the hell is Gary?” Tresica’s brow rose in confusion.

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“A guy I work with. He came over to fix my tires. Terrence must have seen him and assumed that he and I have something going on. If Terrence hadn’t been watching me as he claims he wasn’t, then he wouldn’t have seen Gary.”

“Is Gary interested in you romantically?”

Vicki gave her a look. “I doubt it. He’s a youngin anyway. Besides, I’m not interested in any man right now. Tressy, stop interrupting me,” she chastised. “Back to Terrence. Girl, he followed me to my car and tried to grab me in the parking lot.”

Tresica almost choked on a mouth full of coffee. “You’re shitting me, right?”

“No. He snatched open my door and I don’t know what the hell was on his mind. But when I looked into his eyes, they were cold.”

“Damn.”

“So, I threw my Chinese food on him and hauled ass as fast as I could,” she ended.

“Girl, you need to see about getting a restraining order against him. He is taking things a bit too far.”

“You might be right. But, is it really necessary? Maybe he’ll stop this madness soon.”

Tresica looked at her with a doubtful expression on her face. “Seems like he’s lost control. I wouldn’t have wasted my Chinese food on his ass, though.”

At that instant, Vicki's cell phone rang. Seeing that it wasn't Terrence, she answered.

"What's up, Gary?" She listened for a while, her face changing from curious too perplexed. "I'm so sorry, Gary. I'm sure it was Terrence from the description you gave me." Finally, she hung up giving Tresica a worried look.

"What, girl?"

"I think Terrence threatened Gary at the park where he went to play basketball." She repeated what Gary had shared.

"That's it." Tresica slammed her now empty mug down on the table, hard. "That asshole is off his damn rocker. He has lost it. You can't take any more chances, Vicki. You have to protect yourself. Get a restraining order ASAP. I mean, what will he do next?"

Vicki shook her head in distress. "I don't know. Gary advised me to do the same thing. Gary said if I need him to, he'll write a statement for me concerning the altercation he had with Terrence. I can use it at my court hearing."

"Gary sounds like a cool guy. I'm starting to like him. You sure you ain't interested in him?"

"Not at all. Maybe you and he will hit it off once you meet. I know how you are about astrological signs. He's an Aquarius, too."

"Oh, really? Then, he's already earned some cool points with me."

“You and your signs.”

They fell silent.

“So, are you going to do it?” Tresica asked, breaking the silence. “You can go down to the court house first thing Monday morning and file the paperwork.”

“Yeah, I think I need to.” Vicki let out a deep breath. “He won’t stop following me around and today when he grabbed my car door, it really scared me. He’s making me nervous.”

“Well, I don’t see why they wouldn’t issue a restraining order. They have a police report on him for slashing your tires.”

“Allegedly,” Vicki reminded. “Remember, no one saw him do it.”

“Allegedly my ass. He’s the only one who could have done something like that. Since when has anybody ever vandalized your property? Why would anyone want to? It was Terrence,” she said.

“I feel that it was. But, I just can’t prove it.”

“Well, you can prove that he almost grabbed you at the mall. And, didn’t you say he tried to run you off the road, too?”

“Oh. I almost forgot about that.”

“Vicki, don’t get to feeling sorry for him now. He’s dangerous. Either you’re going to do what you have to do to

protect yourself, or you're going to take him back. Which will it be?"

"Girl, I'll never take him back," Vicki denied vehemently. "I don't want to be involved with a cheater. And now I'm finding out that he has some anger issues as well. That's the last thing I need in my life."

"Your best bet is to get the ball rolling. I think it takes a few weeks for them to issue the order. So, the sooner you file that paper work, the better."

"I guess I have no other choice," Vicki said sadly.

Janelle met them at Tresica's place once she left Tampa. The three women sat in Tresica's living room talking. Tresica had showered, gotten dressed, and had even baked some cinnamon rolls.

Janelle sported Senegalese twists, long braids that looked like miniature jump ropes hanging halfway down her back.

"Those Africans hooked you up and it didn't even take that long," Vicki commented.

"Well, they had two people braiding my hair at the same time. I'm willing to pay the extra money just to get it over with. When I used to go to Mimi, it took her two days to finish. I don't like waiting."

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“You lucky she finished. Sometimes, you can’t catch up with her and you walk around half-did for weeks or until you get somebody else to finish or take it out.”

“You think I paid her before the job was done?” She raised her eyebrows. “I know better.”

“So, Miss Lady, since ya hair is all done up, where you planning on going to show it off?” Tresica asked.

“No damn where. I’m tired from hanging out last night and from sitting all day getting these braids. I think I’ll spend a quiet night at home.”

“You and what woman’s son?” Tresica teased.

Janelle laughed. “Nobody. I pledged a vow of celibacy. I’m not giving up anymore of this cookie until I meet the right man.”

“You pledged what?” Tresica asked in disbelief. “You celibate? As much as you enjoy dick? Girl, please. I’ll give it a month. Two months tops. What do you think, Vicki?”

“I think she can do it. I got faith in my girl. I say she can hold out for as long as it takes,” Vicki replied.

“I don’t understand why you’d want to be celibate,” Tresica remarked. “I mean, you’ve had dick in ya life. Why not continue to have it?”

“It’s not the dick, Tressy. It’s dealing with the men attached to the dick. I can do without them.”

“Yeah, men are assholes,” Vicki piped in. “Look at how Terrence turned out.”

“Terrence is a special case,” Tresica said to Vicki. “But, why eliminate *all* dick?” she wanted to know, staring at Janelle and waiting for an answer.

“Because the men of St. Pete. are all about the bullshit. Some are damn near forty, still wanting to play games. They don’t want commitment,” Janelle said sourly. “And when you find one that’s good in bed, he’s got other obligations or other women. He’s not available when you get horny and need some.”

“True.”

“I’d rather just go without than to lay around horny and feigning for it and not being able to get it.”

“Well, that sounds sensible. I thought you were gonna toss us a religious speech or something. You know, tell us you were a born-again Christian and wasn’t giving up no panties until you got married.”

“Isn’t being celibate the same thing as being a born-again virgin?” Vicki asked.

Janelle shrugged. “I don’t know. I ain’t never been a born-again virgin, but I’ve been celibate before.” The other two women fell out laughing. “What the hell is so funny?”

“You sound like this comedian I heard once,” Tresica explained. “He said somebody asked him if pussy tasted like

pumpkin pie. He said he didn't know because he ain't never ate no pumpkin pie." Janelle joined in on the laughter.

It got later and later. None of the women knew that Terrence watched them through the half-closed curtains. He'd driven by Vicki's house and hadn't seen her car. He'd tried Janelle's place and hadn't seen either Vicki's car or Janelle's. So, he'd gone over to Tresica's place. There they all were, giggling and cackling like hens. What the hell was so damn funny? Were they talking about him? He never could stand Vicki's friends anyway. He was sure they'd had something to do with her not taking him back. He had something planned for those two bitches. No one would keep Vicki away from him.

He watched and waited.

Chapter Seven

Terrence couldn't sleep. He felt restless. He hated living in his grandmother's house, all cramped up in a twin bed. He craved his king sized bed. Most of all, he ached for Vicki. He missed making love to her. He missed hearing her call out his name in the throes of passion. He wanted to feel her tremble and vibrate as she reached an orgasm with him buried deep inside of her. He needed to hold her tight. He plain needed her.

It hadn't been long since he'd left Tresica's place spying on them. He'd been fine until he overheard them talking outside before they left. Tresica had reminded Vicki to file a restraining order against him. That bitch. He'd always known that her friends were against him. Now, he'd heard the proof with his own ears.

He didn't care if Vicki filed a restraining order or not. A restraining order nor any other type of order would stop him from being with her.

When Janelle and Vicki left, Terrence got out of this car, carrying a quart of motor oil. He knew how Tresica valued her precious Mercedes. The trifling, gold-digging, stuck up bitch. She'd probably screwed most of the Tampa Bay

Buccaneers to get it. She lived high on the hog off other people's money.

He got lucky because she hadn't set the alarm. The stupid whore hadn't even locked the door. How dumb could you get? You're profiling around in a souped-up Benz and you don't lock it or set your alarm? You were just setting yourself up for disaster. And that's exactly what she was going to find in the morning: a black, gooey disaster.

Terrence groaned aloud. His dick was hard, and he wasn't going to be able to sleep. He grabbed his cell phone and called Tenesha. He needed his dick sucked and knew she'd jump at the chance to please him.

Of course Tenesha was at some club. He could barely hear her over the loud music in the background. She told him to pick her up in front of *Somethin' Different* on Central Avenue. He had never heard of it. He hadn't even known that St. Petersburg had any clubs since back in the day. It seemed that every club that opened ended up getting shut down because of shootings and violence.

"Terrence, is that you?" he heard his grandmother calling and hurried out the front door before she could get up. The last thing he wanted was to hear her mouth. He was grown and having a curfew was something he hadn't dealt with since he was twelve.

Terrence frowned as he pulled up in front of the so-called club. Nothing but dirtyfoots and hoodrats were gathered out front. The women sported two-toned hair dos and long, colorful acrylic nails. They wore form-fitting outfits to capture the attention of the men. He saw thugs and drug dealers smoking blunts and Black and Mild cigars. Tenesha was certainly in her element.

She walked out of the club, wearing booty-shorts and high heeled shoes with straps that went halfway up her leg. Some man in baggy Sean Jean jeans felt on her ass as she passed by. She just giggled and kept going. Seeing his truck, she pulled open the passenger side door and climbed in.

“What’s up, boo?” she greeted. Her breath smelled worst than his.

“Damn girl. What the fuck you got on? And please pop some gum in ya damn mouth,” he insulted, turning his face away.

“I been drinkin’.” She stated the obvious.

“Duh,” he said sarcastically. Tenesha’s face tightened.

“Nigga, what the fuck is up? You gonna sit here and insult me or what? I thought you was all about fuckin’ this pussy tonight. If you ain’t ‘bout it, I can get somebody else.”

“I’m sure ya ho ass can. I don’t give a damn about who you fuck. But, watch ya fuckin’ tone when you talk to me bitch.”

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“Aiight. Nigga, you trippin’.” She dug around in her purse until she found some gum. She un-wrapped a stick and put it in her mouth, smacking loudly. “Let’s go.”

“I can’t take you to my grandma’s house. You make too much noise.”

“We can go to my place,” she suggested. “My kids sleep at this time of night.”

Terrence thought about that but quickly ruled it out. He’d been to her place before and no way in hell would he ever set foot in that joint again. Tenesha had a whole separate family living with her - a family of roaches. He could feel his skin crawl just thinking about the bastards.

“Tenesha, you don’t clean up. You keep ya kitchen looking like shit and have all those clothes strewn all over the place. You don’t vacuum. You don’t even sweep. I’ll be damned if I fuck you on sheets filled with some other nigga’s cum.”

“I do laundry erry week,” she said hotly.

“You probably fuck every night, though,” he said sarcastically.

She rolled her eyes at him. “We can go to a hotel,” she suggested.

“I ain’t spending no money on ya ass.”

“I’ll pay for the room.” She sucked air through her teeth. “You is trippin’ tonight. You ‘bout to make me lose my high.” She stuck her lips out in a pout.

“You can get high again off this dick. Why don’t you lean over here and suck it while I find a hotel?” he said, lowering his voice and sounding seductive.

“Okay.” She fell for his tactics, scooted over and unzipped his pants. She pulled out his dick and stared at it, licking her lips in anticipation. “You might have a fucked up attitude, Terrence, but this dick makes up for all you lack in the personality department.”

“Shut up bitch and just suck it.” He roughly pulled her head toward his dick and tried to ram it to the back of her throat. “Put these nuts in ya mouth. Can’t talk all that shit with something in ya mouth, can you?”

Terrence found a cheap motel called Crystal Inn. It was a seedy, well-known hangout for drug dealers and prostitutes. He didn’t care that it was below standards. It wasn’t like Tenesha had high morals anyway. As she’d stated, she paid for the room.

Upon opening the door, they were greeted by smells of stale marijuana and cigarette smoke. It had two twin beds, a phone and television, the usual.

Terrence wasted no time getting down to business. Tenesha had sucked him off so good on the ride there that he

was rock hard and ready. He pulled out a Magnum, opened it up and rolled it on. As soon as Tenesha removed her shorts, he pushed her over the bed, pulled her g-string to the side and slid up in her.

“Can I get undressed?” she complained, palms down, ass up.

“No need to. We ain’t gonna be here that long.” He began to pump in and out of her, faster and faster.

“Damn, Terrence, since I paid for the room, can I at least catch a nut? Slow down,” she panted.

He figured he didn’t have to rush. He was in no hurry to go back to his grandma’s house and lay in that lonely ass bed. He eased up a bit. He could tell that Tenesha liked that. Her pussy muscles relaxed and he felt himself slip in deeper. Damn. He had almost twelve inches and she was taking every inch. That turned him on. He pinched her ass cheek.

“Ohh,” she moaned. “I like that. Spank me, Terrence. Spank this juicy ass.”

“You like that, huh?” He slapped one ass cheek and her moans increased. “You freaky bitch. You like that shit, huh?” He hit the other cheek.

“Oh shit. Keep doin’ that shit. I’m about to cum.” He continued to spank her and she began backing her ass up, letting him ram the dick inside her. He knew he was hitting bottom and she wasn’t complaining that it hurt, like Vicki

always did. She was getting wetter and slippery. She was trembling, shaking and vibrating like mad. “Fuck this pussy, Terrence. Fuck me. Oh, I’m cummin’. This pussy is cummin’. Oooh shiiit.”

Terrence couldn’t hold his load any longer. He grabbed her by her waist and just slammed into her as deep as he could go. He released all of his pent up frustrations as he climaxed.

“Vicki,” he called out.

“What the fuck did you call me?” Tenesha tensed up.

“Huh?” he asked feigning stupidity.

“Nigga, my motherfuckin’ name ain’t Vicki,” Tenesha yelled, breaking him out of his passion-induced fantasy. He was still inside her. He pulled out and went to the bathroom, not bothering to offer any explanations. Why explain? She was just a hot piece of pussy, nothing more. He disposed of the condom by flushing it down the toilet.

When he came out of the bathroom, Tenesha had fixed her clothes. She sat on the edge of the bed with her lips stuck out, obviously angry.

“How the fuck you gonna call out somebody else’s name while you fuckin’ me?”

“Don’t start. If you want to cop an attitude, I’ll leave you and ya damn attitude right in this fuckin’ room,” he snarled.

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Before he knew it, Tenesha hopped up and slapped him upside the head. Momentarily stunned, he just stared at her.

“What the fuck is ya problem?” He snatched her up and body slammed her on the bed. “Bitch, don’t you ever-” He grabbed her by the throat, “-ever- no mo’ in life- put ya fuckin’ hands on me. Do you understand?” With every word, he rammed her head into the mattress. Tears sprang into her eyes, and she made gasping sounds. When he finally released her, she had a coughing fit.

“You... you...one crazy nigga,” she finally got out, holding her throat, breathing hard.

“And don’t you ever forget it,” he snarled. “Now, suck my dick again before we leave this motherfucker.” Compliantly, Tenesha slid off the bed and got on her knees in front of him.

When Vicki answered her phone at two in the morning, she didn’t expect to hear Tresica’s distraught voice filled with tears.

“Girl, somebody fucked up my car,” she sobbed.

“What?” She sat up in bed, sleep immediately fleeing from her. “What happened?”

“I went to get a CD I had left in my car and saw that some motherfucker had poured oil all in my shit. Girl, I don’t think that shit will come out.”

“Who would pour oil in your car? Vicki asked in disbelief.

“I don’t know. I broke up with the one who bought it. But, he and I ended things on good terms. Besides, he’s not the type to trip like that.”

Vicki asked hesitantly, “Do you think it might be someone’s girlfriend or wife?”

“I really don’t know. The men I date tell me that they’re single. If they’re lying, I have no way of finding out.”

“Did you call the police?”

“Yes. They dusted for fingerprints. The idiot even left the empty oil container on the seat. Maybe they’ll be able to get a print.”

“I hope so,” Vicki said quietly.

“Damn. Your car got vandalized, now mine. What the fuck is happening?”

“I don’t know,” Vicki answered.

“Well, at least you know who your stalker is. You know who to be on the lookout for. I haven’t the slightest idea who’s fucking with me.”

They talked for a while longer then hung up. Vicki couldn’t get back to sleep. She couldn’t believe the stroke of bad luck she and the people closest to her were having.

She knew that people assumed her friend Tresica led a lavish lifestyle paid for by the money of athletes. But, that wasn’t true. Tresica wasn’t a gold digger or a sideline ho. She

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was a beautiful woman who happened to be the type that those athletes went for. Since she was a choreographer, she worked with the cheerleaders. Her line of work was an avenue for her to meet the players. She'd dated quite a few, but that didn't mean she'd slept with them all.

As far as Vicki knew, Tresica had only been serious about one football player in particular. He'd been the one to buy her the Benz. When he'd gotten another woman pregnant, Tresica broke up with him.

It was possible that some jealous female had done the damage to Tresica's car. It couldn't have been random because it seemed like a crime of passion. Someone had planned on ruining the vehicle. It had been the act of a scorned person.

"Tenesha. Tenesha, wake ya drunk ass up," Terrence yelled. He hadn't planned on sleeping at the crappy hotel. After Tenesha had sucked him off again, it had been on and popping. He'd worked her over a second time and had fallen asleep. "Get up." He nudged her.

"What?" she mumbled irritably.

"Wake up so that I can take you home. I have to go to work in a few hours."

Ex-boyfriend

“Le’ me ‘lone,” she slurred and rolled back over. Soon, snores could be heard throughout the room.

“Damn.” Terrence stared at her in disgust. She looked like a hot mess. Her weaved hair was wild and disheveled. Both her eye makeup and lipstick were smudged. At that moment, there was nothing sexy or attractive about her. “How the fuck did I stoop this low?”

He pulled on his clothes and shoes. Once he’d finished dressing, he left Tenesha in the room, still snoring loudly. He was certain she’d find a way home. Hoodrats always knew how to get back to the hood.

Chapter Eight

Another Monday rolled around. Vicki sat in the cafeteria at her job. She was in a far corner, eating chicken parmesan. She looked up and saw Gary heading her way. She waved at him until she caught his attention.

“Hey, Gary,” she greeted.

“Hey. What’s up?” He took a seat at the table.

“I’ve never seen you eat in the cafeteria. What brings you here?”

“I’m tired of fast food, and I’m only taking a thirty-minute lunch today,” he told her.

“I see you got the chicken parmesan, too?” she commented.

“Is it any good?”

“Not like mine,” she bragged. “But it’ll do.”

“Well, I know it’s better than anything I can cook.”

“So, are you saying that you can’t cook?”

“Sure can’t,” he admitted with no problem.

“How do you manage to survive? You can’t cook and from what you’ve told me about your cousin, you wish he didn’t know how to cook. You must starve most days.”

“Well, actually-” He looked sheepish, “I usually go to my mama’s house to eat or hit up a fast food joint.”

“A regular mama’s boy, huh?” she teased.

“I wouldn’t put it like that- but,” he paused. “Yeah, I guess I am,” he admitted, grinning. “She usually cooks a lot just so I can come over.”

“What about your brothers and sisters?”

“I don’t have any. I’m an only child.”

“Yeah, you are definitely a mama’s boy,” she said, and they laughed.

“Hey, you had any more problems with your ex?” he asked.

Vicki grimaced. “Not since he scared me at the mall. But now, my friend’s car got vandalized.” She told him about Tresica’s car. He looked thoughtful.

“You think ya boy could have had something to do with it?” he asked.

“I don’t think so,” Vicki said slowly. Actually, she hadn’t thought about it until Gary mentioned it. “If he could do something so low, he really has issues.”

“Well, when I ran into him, he looked a bit crazed,” Gary said. “Looked like he was on some different shit, and I’m not talking about drugs.”

“I’m sorry you had to deal with that, Gary,” she said apologetically. “I don’t know why he’s acting that way. I mean, really. He cheated on me. He should be able to get the fact that I no longer want him through his thick skull.”

Gary shook his head. "How well do you really know him?" he asked, staring at Vicki and weighing her reaction. She said nothing, just gave him a puzzled look. "Just because we think we know someone doesn't mean we really do."

"What do you mean?"

"I watched a talk show the other day. This woman had married a possible serial killer and didn't even know." Vicki looked shocked. "They had children together and everything. They'd been married for years, and she had no idea that he was a murderer." His eyes met hers as he spoke. "He kept secrets. So, she never really knew him."

Vicki swallowed nervously. "How did she find out?"

"She'd contacted the show because she thought that her husband was cheating on her. She wanted to get to the bottom of it. Turned out, he'd been doing more than cheating. He confessed to his wife that he'd killed two women. He told how it happened and where he'd buried the bodies. At the end of the show, the local authorities ended up trying to locate the bodies. The wife got a protective order against the husband, took the kids and left because she feared for her safety. It turned out real ugly."

"That's awful." Vicki contemplated all that he'd told her. "Terrence and I have known each other a little over three years," she said. "He doesn't really talk about his family that much. He said his mother left him to be raised by his

grandmother. His father was just a sperm donor. He didn't really like to talk about his growing up years."

"So, you don't really know much about this dude, huh? He might end up really hurting you or someone close to you," Gary warned.

Suddenly, she felt gloom. "What should I do?"

"Get that restraining order. And to be on the safe side, get a gun."

Terrence was at work, in one of the patient's rooms, when Tenesha confronted him. She was mad and didn't try to hide it. Her voice boomed down the silent hallway of the nursing home.

"Motherfucker, why the fuck you left me in the hotel room?" she bellowed.

"What?" Terrence stopped sponge bathing the elderly gentleman he'd been cleaning. He glared at Tenesha as she entered.

"Why did you leave me at the hotel last night?" she repeated.

He shrugged indifferently. "I tried to wake you up, but you told me to leave you alone."

“I don’t give a fuck, nigga. You knew I was drunk. You don’t just leave a woman alone at a no-tell, raggedy ass hotel like that. Anything could have happened to me.”

He continued to glare at her, getting irritated. “Well, did it?” he asked.

“No, but the PoPo came and busted some drug dealers a few rooms down. I had to beg this girl I can’t stand for a ride home.”

Terrence rolled his eyes. “Look like you’re still in one piece to me.”

“You don’t even care?” she asked indignantly.

“No, I don’t, Tenesha. I have work to do. If you not gonna help me clean these patients, then haul ass on out of here.”

“You don’t have to raise ya voice at me, Terrence. I’m not a child.”

“Ya ass acting worst than a child right about now. Shit. You’re acting like you’re a fucking retard. Didn’t I tell you I have work to do? Why you keep standing there yapping?”

He pushed past her and went to the next room. Tenesha followed him. He could hear her sucking air through her teeth.

“Nigga, you ‘bout to make me lose my job today. ‘Cause don’t no motherfucker treat me like this. Nan.” Before he could react, she charged at him. She began to rain blows upon his upper torso and about his face. Terrence tried to grab her,

but she continued to swing wildly. Finally, he penned her arms to her sides.

“What the fuck is wrong with you, girl?” he asked, furious. “Why you clowning like this on the job? You gonna get both of us fired. Stop this shit.”

“I don’t give a fuck ‘bout no job. Hell, I’ll gladly go back to collecting a government check and food stamps after I stomp a knot in ya ass.”

“Don’t get beside yourself now, Tenesha. I already warned you back at that hotel about putting ya hands on me. You lucky we at work or I’d forget you a lady and fuck ya ass up,” he snarled. He shook her before releasing her.

“Forget I’m a lady then, bitch,” she screamed and charged at him again. She hit him so hard that he had to blink. He shook his head several times to clear it. Before he could control himself, something inside snapped. He grabbed Tenesha by the waist of her pants and slung her down the hallway. She slid about five feet before she hit a food cart that a dietary aide had left outside one of the rooms. She connected with that cart like a bowling ball striking down all the pins.

It made so much noise that the aide hurried out of the patient’s room to see what was going on. When she saw the furious look on Terrence’s face, she ran to get help. She didn’t bother helping Tenesha get up off the floor.

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By the time the director of nursing and some other nursing assistants got there, Tenesha and Terrence had fought like they were on an episode of W.W.E. Tenesha had a swollen lip, but Terrence had suffered a black eye, his nose was bleeding, and he had a lump in the middle of his forehead. Tenesha had hit him with her high heel pump.

“Don’t fuck wit’ no project chick if you ain’t got no fight game, bitch,” she snarled at him as the women held her back.

“You attacked me. I told you to leave me alone, but you jumped on me first,” he whined.

“I’ll do it again, too. I guess I’ll be the last bitch you leave at the hotel, won’t I?”

The women standing around gave him a disgusted look, shaking their heads and clucking their tongues. Of course they’d take Tenesha’s side. They didn’t like him because he was the only male C.N.A. that worked there. He’d been promoted quickly to restorative aid because he worked harder than any of them. He didn’t waste time or stand around gossiping all the time. Plus, all of them had tried to hook up with him at one point or another. However, he had turned them down flat. He didn’t date fat ass ham beasts. He had standards. At least, he’d *had* standards before he’d encountered Tenesha’s trifling ass.

Tenesha ended up getting fired on the spot because she’d admitted to starting the fight. She’d even tried to fight him

again in the director's office. They had to call the police to have her escorted off the premises. She yelled and carried on, threatening to press charges against Terrence until the police insisted she leave.

Terrence got suspended until further investigation. He knew that in three days, he would probably be looking for another job. White people didn't play about black folk displaying violence on the job. They already feared black people. He knew how they thought that all black men were angry. He hadn't helped things by getting into it with Tenesha. If only he could have walked away or held his temper in check.

He'd fucked up big time. It would be hard finding another job with his criminal record. A black man couldn't win for losing, especially if he had a felony in his background.

Chapter Nine

Vicki half-heartedly entered claims as she debated on whether she'd leave early to go to the courthouse. The phone on her desk rang.

"Hello? This is Vicki Holiday. Thanks for calling," she answered in a professional tone.

"Girl, you are not going to believe this shit." It was Tresica.

"What? Did something else happen to your car?"

"No. But, I got a visit from a police officer and guess what?"

"What girl? I don't have time to play guessing games with you on this phone. Tell me," she said impatiently.

"They got a clear fingerprint from the oil can, and it belongs to Terrence Bernard James." Vicki almost dropped the phone. She was speechless. "Vicki, are you still there?"

"E-er, yeah. I'm here. So, you're telling me that Terrence is the one who did that to you car?"

"Yes. And I can almost bet that he fucked up your tires, too."

"But why would Terrence do that?"

“I don’t know. I guess the only person who knows the answer to that is Terrence.”

“I was just getting ready to leave early to file for that restraining order against him. Hearing this, well- it just makes me realize that I’m doing the right thing. I’m so sorry that you got dragged into this mess, Tressy.”

“It’s not your fault. You didn’t put the can of oil in Terrence’s hand. He knows right from wrong. I don’t care how mad he is, he still knows right from wrong.”

“I’ll talk to you later. I have to go. I want to make it to the courthouse before they close.”

“We’ll talk. I think there’s a warrant out for Terrence’s arrest. Once they pick him up, ain’t no telling how he’ll react being that he’s been behaving like a lunatic lately.”

After Vicki hung up, she thought about all that had happened. She also thought about what Tresica had shared with her. Now, she felt so fearful. Once Terrence got arrested, he’d no doubt blame her. She reflected back on what Gary had said to her earlier, “*Get that restraining order. And to be on the safe side, get a gun.*”

It didn’t take long to file the necessary paperwork once at the courthouse. She filled out a petition for an order of protection. She had a copy of the police report she’d filed earlier. On the petition she made sure she mentioned the night

Terrence tried to run her off the highway and the incident at the mall.

She received a temporary restraining order that was good for fifteen days. On the documentation, it stated that Terrence would be served, and they'd both have to appear in court ten days later. At that time, she'd be issued a personal protection order.

Glad to have that out the way, Vicki headed for home. She checked her messages and found she'd received quite a few. Tresica had called to see if she'd made it to the courthouse. Janelle had left a message and she even had one missed call from Gary. What surprised her was a message from Tenesha, the trick who'd slept with Terrence. She told a horrendous tale about getting into a fight with Terrence on the job.

"I'm pressing charges on that nigga, and his ass is gonna get locked up," Tenesha ranted. "He's a sorry motherfucker, and if you got any sense, you'll leave his triflin' ass alone. Anyways, I just called to tell you what went down. I'm through with Terrence. You can have him back. He's all yours."

Vicki couldn't believe the audacity of that ghetto bitch. How in the hell could she be giving back someone who didn't belong to her? Furthermore, where had she gotten her number? She wanted to call the chick back and tell her about herself. She had to count to ten to calm down.

Chapter Ten

Terrence's grandmother was frantic when the police showed up at her house. They pounded so hard on the door that it scared her out of her sleep. Did they have to knock so hard? The flashing lights and activity drew all of her nosey neighbors out of their houses. Now, she would be the talk of the church group. All those busy body hens would be cackling up a storm, calling each other on the phone and clucking about what went on in her house.

"What has this child done? Lord, have mercy," Mrs. James lamented. A few minutes later, Terrence was being hauled out of his bedroom, with his hands cuffed behind his back. "What did he do?" the elderly woman demanded to know. "What has the child done?" The cops ignored her and read Terrence his rights. Just as he was advised, he remained silent. He knew that if he said anything, they'd take his words and use them against him. "Can somebody please tell me something?" She gave Terrence a sharp look, and he let his head drop. He couldn't meet her eyes. "I tell you, if this mess has anything to do with that gal you was seein', I'm washin' my hands of you, Terrence. Let God be my witness. I told you, ya obsession was gonna lead to trouble."

“Just come get me out of jail, Grandma,” he whined. “I can’t be locked up in that place. Please get me out,” he begged, forcing fake tears to surface.

“Don’t worry, baby,” she said, feeling sorry for him. “Let me call your uncle Frank. He’ll know what to do.”

“Call him then. Call anybody. Just get me out.” He was putting on an act, but his grandmother had no way of knowing. He didn’t care who she called. Wasn’t Jesus supposed to be on the main line? She could call him if that would get him out of jail.

“Let’s go,” one of the cops growled, giving Terrence a forceful shove. “We ain’t got time for these Oprah moments. Move your feet.” Terrence walked dejectedly toward the squad car parked in front of the house. He hung his head as the neighbors and other nosey people stared on. His grandmother watched from behind the screen door. She stared until they pulled off, then she closed her front door.

Terrence went through the booking process. They took his fingerprints and mug shot, as well as asked him some basic questions about where he lived and worked. He didn’t have to check in any jewelry because he’d been arrested wearing only his boxers and wife-beater tee-shirt. It was cold so he gladly put on the clothes they gave him. Even though it was ugly ass

orange scrubs, he didn't complain. He was glad that he didn't have to wear that new zebra suit that some of the jails had switched to. He wasn't one of the Three Stooges. That shit was demeaning to a man.

Terrence shivered on the small cot in the holding cell. They didn't have any more blankets, so he had to suffer. The hard cot gave him a headache. He had plenty of time to think about all that had occurred. He thought about Vicki and the first time they'd met.

It was a Saturday night and he'd gone to the pier to fish. He fished often because it was how he relieved stress. He cast his line, stared out at the vast ocean, and waited on something to bite.

"Catch anything?" he heard a soft voice ask. He turned to stare into the face of the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. He looked around. Since there was no one else in sight, she had to be talking to him.

"Not yet," he answered, "But, I just got here."

"Do you come here often?" She came and stood near him at the seawall.

"Er, yes. Kind of." He fidgeted with the pole.

"I bet you're wondering why I'm striking up a conversation with you, you being a stranger and all? I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"No. Not at all."

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“If you want me to leave, I will.”

“No, you can stay,” he said quickly. At the moment, he didn’t give a damn about fishing. He was mesmerized by the stunning woman talking to him. “Nothing seems to be biting tonight anyway.” He stared at her, taking in her outfit. She was dressed casually in jeans and a swoop necked sweater. Leather boots completed the ensemble. “I’ve never seen you down here before. Catching a breath of fresh air?”

“No. I got stood up.” She exhaled. “My date was supposed to meet me at Cha Cha Coconuts. He was a no call, no show.”

“That’s too bad.” He couldn’t understand why anyone would leave a fine woman like that unattended. That guy’s loss would be his gain. “If you’d like, I’ll buy you a drink. You do drink, right?”

“Yes. Oh, I’m being rude. My name is Vicki.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Vicki. I’m Terrence.” He reeled in his line and prepared to put the fishing gear away. “So, are you down with me buying you a drink?”

“I guess so. I don’t want the night to be a complete waste.”

“How about Wet Willy’s at Bay Walk?” he suggested.

“Sure. I’ll meet you down there.”

“Okay. See you in a few.”

Vicki and Terrence ended up talking for hours over drinks and hot wings. She’d insisted on going Dutch which was a

first for Terrence. Every woman he'd ever dated had assumed that he'd pay for everything. Even after the club closed, they stood in front of her car continuing their conversation. They'd exchanged numbers, and the relationship had developed from that day.

Because of Vicki, Terrence had stopped dressing like a thug with his pants hanging past his butt. He wanted to show her that he was intelligent and different from the rest of the men who approached her. He took her out to places like museums, art shows, and festivals in the park. They visited amusement parks, went jet skiing and even traveled out of state to Las Vegas and the Grand Canyon.

He knew he'd fallen in love with her from day one. Slowly but surely he'd won her heart. After three years, she'd agreed to let him move in with her. They were talking about marriage and had looked at houses together. Their relationship had been great until he'd messed it up by sleeping with Tenesha.

He knew that Vicki still loved him. She had to. Even though she was mad, she couldn't just shut down her feelings. He realized he loved her more than ever because he was so close to losing her.

"Vicki, I'm sorry." It scared him to think about living the rest of his life without her. He curled into the fetal position and cried like a baby.

It was almost one-thirty in the morning when they released him. He had prayed that someone would bond him out, but if they hadn't, he knew the court would have released him on his own recognizance the next morning. He really didn't care about the process; he was just glad to be out of that bitch. He almost danced a jig.

He expected to see his grandmother and uncle waiting to give him a ride home. Instead, Tenesha's ghettofied butt was there. He frowned at her.

"Nigga, I don't know why you mean muggin' me. I'm the one who bailed ya broke ass out," she greeted.

"I hope you don't expect a thank you since it's your fault that I got locked up in the first place," he snapped.

"No, it's not. I found out that you got arrested because you fucked up some bitch's car, and they pulled your fingerprint off the oil container," she stated matter-of-factly.

"What the fuck?" He couldn't believe he'd been so stupid as to leave evidence. He had to be more careful in the future.

"I didn't even tell the police about our altercation on the job. I was just lyin' about doin' that 'cause you pissed me off," she admitted.

"You shouldn't have started with me."

"You shouldn't have left me at that hotel."

Terrence growled. He hated to apologize to Tenesha, but he saw he had no choice. It seemed like she was the only one in his corner.

“I’m sorry about that,” he said, grudgingly.

“It’s aiight. Did they hurt you in there?” She switched to Mrs. Sweetness in the blink of an eye. “You all right, boo?”

“I’m fine.”

“You hungry?”

“Hell yeah,” he said with enthusiasm. “I couldn’t eat that garbage they served in there. I don’t see how niggas live like that. I don’t plan on ever going back.”

“Come on. I’ll take you to IHOP and treat you to breakfast.”

“Aiight.” Terrence wondered what had happened to his grandmother and uncle. Since Tenesha wanted to buy him breakfast, he wasn’t going to turn down a free meal. He followed her to the car. Of course she wore tight fitting clothes that made his dick swell when he watched her ass jiggle for too long. “Girl, you gonna have to start dressing better than you’re doing,” he said, getting in on the passenger’s side.

“What you mean? I pay for my own shit, so I should be able to wear whatever I want.”

“You’re a mother, not a hooker. You ever thought about that?”

“Well- no. But, what’s that gotta do with the way I dress?”

Terrence just shook his head. Tenesha definitely wasn’t the brightest crayon in the box. He couldn’t help comparing her to Vicki. It was no competition. Vicki won, hands down.

After leaving the restaurant, Tenesha dropped him off at his grandmother’s house. As soon as he walked through the door, he encountered his uncle’s angry face.

“What’s up, Uncle Frank?”

“Mama’s blood pressure,” he snarled. “And it’s because of you and your foolishness.”

“How is she?” He began to head for her room, but Frank halted him.

“*You* don’t need to worry about her,” he said pointedly.

“I’ll take care of Mama.”

“You blaming me for this? What’s up?” He and his uncle faced off.

“Look, you fucking punk, you not gonna be stressing my mama out with your shit. She doesn’t need this aggravation in her old age. You need to get the fuck out of her house as fast as you can pack.”

“Uncle Frank, that ain’t even right. Where am I supposed to go?”

“I really don’t give a fuck. Take your ass to the Salvation Army. They got a cot and three hots. Get ya shit and get out.”

“Uncle Frank, why you doing this, man?” Terrence stood, glaring at his uncle, breathing hard.

“It’s for your own good. You’re a man, and a man has to stand on his own two feet.”

Terrence almost swung on his uncle. Frank stood about five feet eleven. He worked out, and it showed on his muscular frame.

Terrence thought of him as a hypocrite. He knew all about his uncle’s drug-dealing past and his current involvement in the game. How in the hell could he frown upon him when his shit was stink? His guess was that Frank wanted him to grovel, but he’d never stoop to that level.

“Aiiight, man.”

“Need help packing?” His uncle smirked.

“Fuck you, bitch ass nigga. Don’t even act like you’re trying to save me. You didn’t try to save my mama, did you?” Frank’s face turned ashen. Terrence walked off before his uncle could respond.

Once again, Terrence found himself having to depend on Tenesha. She didn’t hesitate to pick him up once she’d heard of his dilemma. He packed all of his belongings into her car and headed for her low-income apartment. He’d just have to deal with it, roaches and all.

“Tenesha, this is just temporary. Once I find my own place, I’ll be out. If you need something on the rent, I got

you,” he said, once he’d found room for his stuff in her crowded bedroom.

“Boo, I ain’t worried ‘bout no rent. I’m back on Section 8.”

“How did you manage to pull that off? I thought you had to be on a waiting list for a long time or something?” he asked.

“I have my ways. But if I tell you, it won’t be a secret, will it?”

“Well, still, if you need anything, just let me know.” Terrence really didn’t like to be indebted to anyone. He didn’t want it to come back later and bite him in the ass.

“That’s so sweet. But, all I need is to be fucked down. That dick you got is better than cash,” she said, licking her lips.

“That’s because you’re a damn freak, Tenesha.”

“Living wit’ me, you gonna find out just how freaky I am,” she promised.

That night she showed him she was downright insatiable. Even though they’d fought earlier during the day, they made up for it in bed that night, getting buck wild.

Tenesha dressed in lingerie and stilettos and did a strip tease for him. She had her fine hips gyrating. She wiggled her juicy breasts and jiggled her plump ass cheeks. It was like a club up in the bedroom. When she got down on all fours and

made her booty clap the way he liked it, he almost spilled his load.

“Damn, bring that fat ass here.” He whistled.

“You want it, come get it, nigga,” she teased. And get it is exactly what he did. He tried his best to beat the brakes off it. He needed to be in control of something in his life and fucking Tenesha’s brains out gave him that control. With each moan he elicited from her, he felt empowered. When she trembled, shook and convulsed, he became a super hero.

His euphoria was only temporary. As he turned over and tried to sleep, he realized that even Superman had to stop flying and come back down to earth.

If Terrence thought his luck would change, those hopes were dashed when he received the call from his job. They suspended him for ten days. He’d be allowed to return, but he’d have to begin over and work his way back up.

“Shit,” he swore. Tenesha’s son, DeQuan, who sat in front of the PlayStation turned to glare at him.

“Stop cussin’ in front of me.”

“Lil jit, I bet you know more cuss words than I do.”

“I bet my daddy can kick ya butt,” the little kid said and stuck his tongue out. “When he get out of prison, you gonna hafta bounce up outta here.”

“Says who?” Terrence asked, amused.

“My other daddy,” DeQuan answered in a serious tone.

“How did you get another daddy?” Terrence almost laughed, but caught himself.

DeQuan shrugged his small shoulders. “I dunno. I got a lot of uncles, too,” he shared. “They come over all the time.” He turned his focus back on the video game.

Terrence shook his head. Just as he’d figured, Tenesha was a tramp. Maybe he’d talk to her about her promiscuous behavior. It wasn’t good to raise children under such confusion. She’d have them thinking they had the largest extended family in St. Petersburg. That wasn’t right.

“Did you do your homework?” he asked.

“Nope,” he said without hesitation.

“Well, I suggest you get off that game and do it.”

“But I don’t wanna.”

“Boy, what did I say?” He raised his voice, and the child dropped the joystick, staring at him with wide eyes.

“Okay.” He scurried over to his backpack and took out books, folders, and pencils. He sat down and worked on his homework. Occasionally, he’d ask Terrence a question, and Terrence would help him figure it out. The child wasn’t dumb by a long shot. He just needed guidance and encouragement. Terrence figured he’d be a mentor to the kid as long as he lived there. Somebody had to.

Terrence straightened up the living room because he hated filth. It didn't make sense for a grown ass woman not to clean up. That was another thing he'd discuss with Tenesha. Children didn't need to grow up surrounded by clutter. It made them feel helpless and disorganized. He ought to know.

When Tenesha got home with her other two kids, she looked around like she'd stepped into the wrong apartment. The room sparkled. Tables gleamed from being dusted and rubbed down with Pledge. The floor had been vacuumed, and smudges wiped from the television screen.

"What's up with this?" She found Terrence in the kitchen. That too had been scrubbed clean. The dishes were washed and put away, and the floor mopped. There wasn't a load of garbage spilling out of the can. Terrence had gotten DeQuan to take it out by giving him a dollar.

"Oh, hey." Terrence turned from the gumbo he'd been stirring. "The food is done if you're ready to eat."

"You cooked?" she asked in amazement.

"It's just gumbo. Not much, but I figured I'd show my appreciation. I mean, I do appreciate you letting me stay here for a bit."

"If you're gonna cook and clean, you can stay forever," Tenesha declared, sitting down.

"Tenesha, ain't you forgetting something?" Terrence frowned.

She looked up at him with a dumb expression. “What?”

“Fix your children some food first, then you eat,” he told her.

“Oh. My bad. My bad.” She got up and dished up three bowls of gumbo for her children. “Y’all bad asses better eat every bit of it, too,” she said.

“I wanna eat in front of the TV,” DeQuan stated.

“Me, too,” his sister said.

“Me three,” the other twin stated.

“No. All y’all sit at the table,” Terrence instructed. Tenesha didn’t argue with him, so the kids complied. Terrence helped the two girls into their chairs because apparently Tenesha hadn’t thought about doing it. She was already chowing down.

“Yummy. This taste good,” one of the twins said, after taking a few bites.

“My other daddy can cook, too,” DeQuan said, staring at Terrence innocently. Tenesha almost choked on her food.

“Shut up, boy, and just eat,” she chastised. This time, Terrence couldn’t hold back his laughter. He just shook his head.

Chapter Eleven

The data entry department underwent a transition leaving Gary's and Vicki's cubicles right next to each other. This made it easier for them to communicate and become better friends.

As they worked, Vicki told Gary about the latest news on Terrence.

"Can you believe that ghetto trick had the nerve to leave a voicemail on my phone?"

"What?" Gary stopped processing claims and stared at her in amusement. "Well, what did she say?" He had a way of getting people to loosen up and reveal things they wouldn't normally let out. For some reason, people just trusted him. Vicki was no exception.

"She was telling me this ridiculous story about how she and Terrence had gotten into a fight on the job. She said she was going to press charges against him because he assaulted her." Gary remained quiet, taking it all in. "Then, she had the audacity to say that I could have him back because he's trifling." At that moment Gary burst into laughter. Some nearby co-workers glanced their way and he quieted down.

"What?" Vicki couldn't figure out what was so hilarious. She just rolled her eyes at Gary and continued working.

“Y’all women are trips. You sure you don’t want him back?”

“Of course not.”

“Then why are you even upset that she called you and all bent out of shape over what she said?”

“I just thought she had a lot of nerve,” Vicki said lowly, thinking about his questions.

“Don’t all project chicks have nerve?” He turned and caught the sight of the new temp. “Damn, who is that?” She was petite with shoulder-length, curly black hair. She appeared to be Hispanic or Filipino or a mixture of both. She wore a professional dress-suit that you’d find at a store like Marshall’s or Burdines. It wasn’t too expensive, nor was it too cheap. It hugged her ample curves. The skirt was well past three inches above her knee, but Gary wasn’t complaining. Shorty’s body was banging. He usually preferred women of the darker complexion, but he’d forgo that in this instance.

“Who?” Vicki asked, half-interested.

“That fine ass woman standing at Thomas’s desk.”

Vicki swiveled around in her seat to glance at the woman.

“Oh,” she said sourly. “That’s Sharon Garcia, one of the new temporary employees they hired. Hopefully, her stay will be *very* temporary.”

“Do I detect some malice? Are we being hos...tile,” he quipped in amusement.

“Not at all. Miss Beauty Queen seems to think that black women are beneath her,” she said dryly. “She didn’t even say good morning when I spoke to her.”

“What about black men? I’d like to be beneath her,” he said with a wicked laugh.

Vicki rolled her eyes at him again. “You might make the cut since you’re bi-racial. But, I don’t think color really matters to her if you’re of the male persuasion. Anyway, I think she’s messing around with Claiborne in the mailroom.”

“What, Clay hitting that?”

“I didn’t say that Gary,” she clarified. “I just heard that they’re talking.”

“Well, I can’t say I blame him. She’s hot.”

“Alright, Paris Hilton.” She got up to retrieve more new hire forms.

“Hey, bring me another batch,” Gary told her. “A small one. I’ll stretch it out until lunch time.”

“Gary, there’s only twenty forms in a batch and new hires only require basic entry. You can enter more than one form per minute.”

“Yeah, I know. So, what part didn’t you get when I said, bring me a small batch?” She giggled and shook her head. It was a good thing that the work atmosphere was lax. Their

manager rarely came out of her office, and the supervisors were always missing in action or yakking it up with somebody. As long as they got all the forms entered by the end of the day, there were no real problems. They could surf the Internet, email each other and could even listen to music through their headphones. All in all, the data entry department was a decent place to work. It was just so redundant, borderline boring. That's why Gary took full advantage of the times the manager was tucked away in her office. He entered just enough forms to get by.

Gary continued to check out the temp. She seemed to be smiling a lot at Thomas. Thomas was looking like he was star struck or something. Gary decided to make his way over to Thomas's desk and slide in an introduction.

"Hey, Gary, where are you going? I just put a batch of forms on your desk." Vicki told him, sitting back down in her seat.

"I just got a few questions for Thomas."

"What kind of questions?"

"You know, form processing questions, and stuff," he answered.

"Yeah, right. You are so full of it." She just shook her head and went back to keying.

Vicki knew that Gary was trying to scope out the new temp. She felt irritated every time she stared that woman's

way. She could understand why the men were attracted to her. She had to admit that the woman was beautiful in a doll-like sense. She just had a nasty attitude, and Vicki couldn't stand those types.

After about ten minutes of shooting the breeze, Gary returned to his desk.

"Are you finally going to do some work?" Vicki asked sarcastically.

"Of course not. It's lunch time." He leaned over the wall between their cubicles. "I found out quite a bit."

"In that short amount of time? You're good." She got her purse out of the bottom drawer where she kept it. "You can tell me all about it at lunch."

"Are we going somewhere or to the cafeteria?" he asked.

"Cafeteria. I didn't bring my lunch today and I don't feel like eating fast food."

"Okay. I hope they got something good today. The last time I ate something from the cafe it gave me some serious diarrhea."

"Gary TMI. That is too much information."

While they headed down the hallway together, the temp passed them. She smiled at Gary and gave Vicki a cold stare.

"What the hell is her problem?" Vicki asked after Sharon turned the corner.

“Er...you wouldn’t mind if I kind of ate lunch with you another time, would you?”

Vicki frowned. “Oh, so it’s like that now, huh? Go ahead. Gone and sniff up her butt like the rest of these dogs around here.”

“Dang. You ain’t got to be acting like a jealous lover.”

“Whatever, Gary. Go ahead and handle your business.”

“I plan to.” He chuckled and headed in the direction that Sharon had taken.

Vicki felt slighted, but she didn’t dwell on it. Gary had his own mind. He’d find out that everything that looks good to you isn’t always good for you. Vicki had a suspicion that Sharon wasn’t the little miss prissy she was projecting herself to be.

Eating lunch alone, Vicki spotted Claiborne standing in the lunch line. He was a supervisor in the mailroom. She thought he was so handsome with his smooth dark chocolate complexion. He always had a warm smile for everyone who crossed his path. He caught her staring and threw her one of those Colgate bright smiles. Her heart thumped excitedly in her chest. She didn’t believe in work-place dating, but if Claiborne showed her any amount of interest, she would jump at the chance to be with him. She felt real disappointment when she saw Sharon join Claiborne in the line. That sneaky heifer seemed to be everywhere she turned.

“Why don’t you just suck air through your teeth? You know you want to,” Gary said, startling her.

“Gary, stop creeping up on me. You almost gave me a heart attack.”

“My bad.” He chuckled, sitting down.

“I thought you had other plans for lunch?”

“Well, it didn’t work out like that because she wanted me to buy her lunch, too.”

“Why didn’t you come out the pocket?”

“I don’t go for that type of simp behavior. I’m not a paymaster like some of these niggas around here. She better get her food from somebody else.”

“I guess we know who did buy her lunch.” Vicki cast her eyes in Claiborne’s direction.

“Damn, I hadn’t figured him out for that type of brother.”

“Maybe he’s just nice,” Vicki remarked.

“Maybe he just wants some ass. We all know that the way to a woman’s heart is to show her our bank statement.”

“What type of foolish crap are you rambling about?”

“Gold-digging bitches. You know some of these hos act all sweet and innocent, but know damn well they’ll give up the ass if you start flashing cash.”

“I’m not sure what type of woman you’re used to dealing with, Gary. Maybe you were dealing with girls.”

“Show me three women who aren’t trying to take a nigga for his little paycheck and I’ll buy you dinner,” he challenged.

“Okay. I know three women who aren’t like that. You sure you want to bet on it?”

“Yeah, I’ll put my cards on the table. Show me three women who are not out to get a man for what he’s got, and I’ll take you to whatever restaurant you want to go.”

“Bet it up. How about you come over to my place after work?”

“You’re finally trying to let a brother hit that, huh?”

“Gary, no,” she said exasperatedly. “Are you able to come over or not?”

“Yeah. I’ll roll through. What time?”

“Seven?”

“Yeah, seven is good.”

“Hey, we’d better get back to work.”

“You didn’t even touch your lunch,” he remarked.

“It wasn’t very good, and I kept thinking about what you said earlier. I don’t want to be walking around here with the shits.”

“More time off the computer processing and more time on the toilet. What is that anyway, tuna fish? Give me the other half of that. You shouldn’t waste food.”

“Why shouldn’t I? Africans are starving?”

“Damn them Africans. A nigga right here at this table is feeling hunger pangs,” he said.

“You are so wrong for saying that. The things you say are just so wrong in so many different ways. But, you know what?”

“What?” he asked as he stuffed half of the sandwich into his mouth.

“I like you.”

“I like me, too.” He chewed the rest of the sandwich more slowly and stared at Vicki with a serious expression. “I’ll be ready for you when you finally let go of that other nigga,” he finally said. His eyes were unreadable.

“I have let him go,” Vicki insisted.

“Does he still call you?”

“Well, he has a few times,” she admitted.

“Have you answered?”

“No,” she said too quickly.

“Tell the truth, Vicki.”

“Well...yes I answered, but only once.”

“If you want him out of your life, you’ll cut all ties with him. You won’t call him. You’ll stop accepting any of his calls. As a matter of fact, you’d change all of your numbers and maybe even consider moving.”

“Why should I move? He’s the one stalking me,” she said with a hint of stubbornness.

“If you really want closure, you’ll find a way to get it.”

“Gary, how do you know what I want?” she asked. Her voice held an edge.

“Don’t get salty with me. I know what you *don’t* want, and that’s another man.”

“Let’s end this conversation before we both say some things we might regret later,” Vicki suggested.

“You’re right. We should be getting back to work anyway.” They both got up.

They walked back to the building together, but the atmosphere between them was cool. Once at their desks, Vicki put on her headphones to signal that she didn’t want to be bothered by him. He got the message loud and clear. He put on his own headsets and actually did some work until his last break.

Chapter Twelve

When Vicki looked up and saw that it was break time, she turned around to ask Gary if he was going on break. Even though he had rubbed her the wrong way, she'd gotten over it. Seeing that his seat was vacant, she felt disappointed.

He's probably with that stuck-up Sharon, she thought. For some reason, that annoyed her. She could see right through Sharon, and wondered why the men at Cobra Services couldn't. She'd thought Gary was different, but maybe he wasn't. After all, he was only a man.

She went to the break room and got a snack and a soda from the vending machine. She encountered Andrew, a guy from the telecommunications department. He spoke and she returned the greeting politely. He was handsome and friendly with light-brown eyes, and a nice smile. He was also married. That didn't stop him from flirting with the women, though.

Vicki didn't encourage advances from any of the men. She just didn't believe in mixing business with pleasure. Too much could happen if you got intimately involved with someone you worked with. She'd seen some disastrous outcomes.

Just two months prior, David Dillard got fired because a relationship turned volatile. He'd been a manager at the

company for three years, and it had all gone up in smoke. He and the woman he'd been dating had gotten into a dispute on company's grounds- over a damn laptop. He'd snatched the laptop from her and in the process she'd fallen down. Rumor has it that he was trying to hide emails he'd been getting from other women. Needless to say, the incident caused him his job.

She looked up as Marvin Thomas walked into the break room. He was another gorgeous brother that she wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole. She'd heard too many rumors of the different women he'd been involved with. He was supposed to be messing around with Tamika in the FSA department. She didn't need to get into any altercations on the job, so she kept to herself.

No one in the break room bothered Vicki. She wasn't mean, rude or stuck-up, but remained professional while in the workplace. She didn't participate in idle gossip like the majority of the people. Gary was the only person she even felt comfortable with letting her guard down. She could talk to him about anything...well, except about Terrence. He just didn't understand anything she had to say on that subject.

Just as she was getting up from the table, Gary entered.

"Hey," he greeted. "You over them hot flashes you were having or was it PMS?"

Ex-boyfriend

She just rolled her eyes at him and smiled. All was forgiven.

“Are you still stopping by my place later on?” she asked.

“Yeah. You gonna cook something?”

“Maybe I will. Maybe I won’t,” she teased, walking out the break room.

Vicki ordered pizza and invited Tresica and Janelle over. The women arrived before Gary, and they were gossiping about the latest sports rumors. Tresica had the juicy news because she worked with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers’ cheerleaders. They constantly supplied her with more information than the Yellow Pages.

“Ladies, are we getting into anything tonight? It is Wednesday. Shouldn’t we be humping somebody this hump day?” Tresica asked.

“The only thing I’ll be humping is my pillow,” Janelle said.

“Oh, my bad. How is that celibacy thing working for you?” Tresica teased.

“Girl, don’t even start with me. You don’t know how bad I want some dick, but I’m cool.”

“Better invest in some toys,” Vicki suggested.

“Please. I don’t like that type of stuff.”

Teresa D. Patterson

“Have you ever tried any?”

“No, and I don’t want to. I think that being celibate means absolutely no sex or sexual acts. That includes using vibrators or masturbating,” Janelle said.

“Girl, I know you have lost your mind. When you finally decide to give up some ass, you gonna break the poor man’s back. You’re going to have so much pent up frustrations.”

Tresica shook her head. “It couldn’t be me. I have to get mine, at least from time to time.”

“Vicki, what do you do since you and Terrence broke up? It’s been a minute,” Janelle asked.

“Sex is the last thing on my mind,” Vicki said. She wasn’t going to share with them that she did have toys, and she used them frequently. She had recently purchased something called The Tongue and it felt almost as good as the real thing. Men who didn’t go down on women would soon be eliminated if the word got around about The Tongue.

“Oh, I almost forgot, I invited Gary over,” she said.

“Gary?” Janelle inquired.

“That guy from your job?” Tresica asked. “The one who fixed your tires that day Terrence went berserk and sliced them like a little bitch?”

“Allegedly,” Vicki reminded.

“I don’t understand why you keep sticking up for that asshole.”

“Me either,” Janelle agreed. “All fingers point toward him. And after what he did to Tresica’s car, I wouldn’t put anything past him.”

“Anyway.” Vicki cut her eyes at both of her friends. “Gary is coming over,” she continued. “He and I have a bet.”

“What kind of a bet?”

“He said that I couldn’t show him three women who didn’t try to take a man for all he’s worth. You see, Gary is the type who thinks that all women are out to milk a man for his money.”

“What’s he been through? Has he been hurt or walked over by some bitch and he’s bitter or something?” Tresica asked.

“I don’t know the story with him. He’s kind of a tough one to figure out.”

“I’ll figure that nigga out,” Janelle said confidently.

“I don’t know about that. Aquarians are too complex to figure out,” Tresica said. “You did say he was an Aquarian, didn’t you?” she asked Vicki.

“Yes. He is. He was born at the end of January.”

“Oh man, Tresica I hope you ain’t gonna pull out the tarot cards on the brother and try to read his future.” They laughed.

“I’ll hold back the tarot cards. He might not be into that. But, see if we can get him to drink some freshly brewed tea. Then I can read the leaves,” she joked.

Gary heard a bunch of females laughing as he walked up to Vicki's place and rang the doorbell. A mixed-looking chick answered the door. She was cute, but not his type.

"You must be the man of the hour," she greeted. "Come on in."

"O-kay," he said, stepping over the threshold. He spotted Vicki and another woman sitting on the couch. He noticed that the other woman was strikingly beautiful with a dark complexion. The deep hue of her skin only accented her beauty. For a second, he just gawked at her.

"Hey Gary," Vicki said. "I want you to meet my friends." She indicated the dark-skinned girl sitting next to her. "This is Janelle Washington and that's my girl, Tresica Davis."

Gary just nodded at each of them. He didn't move to shake hands or anything, and Janelle thought that was rude. Her eyes narrowing told him as much.

"I'm sure y'all are pleased to meet me," he said. "What kind of pizza is that?"

"I ordered a cheese pizza because I know you're a vegetarian," Vicki told him.

"How is he getting special privileges already?" Janelle mumbled.

"Thanks, Vicki. I see you're the type of woman who knows the steps it takes to please a good man."

“Good man?” Janelle exclaimed, not able to hold in her fury. “I haven’t seen anything good about you yet. So far, all you’ve been is rude and obnoxious.”

“Damn, shorty, you don’t even know me. Calm down.”

“My name isn’t shorty. Vicki, where did you find this motherfucker? He’s already getting on my nerves. I think I need to pour me a drink. You got any liquor?” She hopped up. With attitude, she headed for the kitchen. Gary noticed that she was short and possessed a magnificent body.

Something stirred in his loins.

“Pour me something, too, while you’re at it,” Gary said. “But I don’t drink alcohol.”

“I wouldn’t recommend you drink anything poured by her hand right now,” Tresica told him, amused. “You might end up in the ER from ingesting bleach or ammonia.”

Gary chuckled. “I guess I rubbed her the wrong way. It’s something I’m used to doing.”

“Maybe it’s something you need to stop doing,” Janelle said as she returned to the living room. “Girl, you ain’t got nothing in there but some E & J. I don’t drink that cheap crap.”

It was obvious that she’d ignored Gary’s request for something to drink on purpose. Vicki got up and came back with a Pepsi.

"I guess you remember that this is my favorite, too?" he asked, smiling at her. Janelle just rolled her eyes.

"Actually, she buys Pepsi because she knows that it's *my* favorite," Tresica chimed in. Janelle smirked at Gary.

"Is it too much to ask for a slice of pizza or will your friend chop my hand off at the wrist if I help myself?" Gary asked, staring warily at Janelle. They laughed, lightening the mood. All of them helped themselves to pizza and something to drink.

"Okay, Gary you owe me dinner," Vicki said, smugly.

"What?" He attacked the first slice of pizza and washed it down with some Pepsi.

"You lost your bet. You said that I couldn't show you three women who didn't go after men for their money. Well, you're looking at them." She indicated her girls and they all nodded at each other proudly.

"Well, I know that you don't," Gary said, "but, you have to give me some type of proof that they don't. I mean, am I supposed to just take your word for it?"

"What kind of proof do you need?" Tresica asked.

"Well, what do y'all do? I mean, what's your occupation?" He glanced at Janelle. "I can probably guess. You consider yourself independent, huh? You don't need a man for a damn thing, right?" She gave him an amused smile.

"Sure don't."

“What about you?” he asked Tresica.

“I’m not gonna lie and say I don’t need a man for anything. Hell, I need one when I want some dick,” she said. Gary’s brow rose. He liked the turn of the conversation.

“What’s your line of work?” he asked and she told him. “Oh, it was your Benz that got fucked up? Were they able to clean the oil out?”

She twisted her mouth. “Yeah, but it took a lot of work. Anyway, I don’t want to get on that idiot Terrence.”

“Me either,” Gary said quickly. He grabbed another slice of pizza. “And Miss Independent, what do you do?” he asked Janelle.

“I’m a field sales executive for a major Fortune 500 company,” she said proudly.

“I guess that means you travel a lot?”

“Yes, quite often.”

“So, in other words, you don’t have time for a man anyway because you’re always on the go.”

“That’s not necessarily true. I know how to make time for the things that are important to me,” she said.

“I guess having a man isn’t that important?” he pressed.

“She decided to become celibate,” Tresica tossed out. Janelle threw her a look of betrayal.

“Stop telling my personal business,” she said tightly.

“Oh, that explains the crankiness.” Gary smiled. He was up for the challenge. If he had anything to do with it, she wouldn’t be celibate for long. First, he had to break down the walls of resistance she put up.

“Do I get my dinner, Gary?” Vicki piped up. “You lost.”

“I guess so,” he grumbled. He was already calculating how much it would cost him. He hoped she picked some place with reasonable prices.

“I love the Olive Garden.”

“Oh, I can work with that.” He was all smiles now. He had feared she’d pick some overly expensive restaurant like Byrnes Steakhouse. He wasn’t trying to spend eighty bucks on one dinner.

“You’re all up in our business, so it’s only fair to get up in yours. What do you do?” Janelle asked.

“I do as less as possible and just enough to get by.” They all laughed again.

“He flirts with all the women on the job and stays in the mailroom gossiping with the other womanizers at Cobra Services,” Vicki said.

The group talked, joked and laughed for a while until everyone got tired. Gary was the last to leave.

“What do you think of my friends?” Vicki asked.

“They seem pretty cool. Janelle is quite a firecracker. I wonder if she’s that explosive in bed.”

Ex-boyfriend

“Gary, is sex all you think about?” She frowned at him.

“Er...yep, most of the time.”

“My friends are off limits,” she stated firmly.

“Why? You want to keep me all to yourself?”

Vicki ignored him and began stacking the empty pizza containers. “You want to take the rest of this cheese pizza home?”

“Sure. That means I won’t have to buy lunch tomorrow.”

Vicki laughed. “I know you can’t be this cheap for real. It has to be an act.”

“I’m not cheap, just practical.”

Vicki’s cell phone rang. She frowned when she glanced at the Caller ID.

“Oh no, is it your stalker?” Gary asked.

She nodded. “At least he only calls once every other hour now,” she said sarcastically.

Gary said nothing. He just got a tight look on his face.

“I’m gonna go. I’ll see you at work tomorrow.”

“Alright. You have a good night.”

“You, too.”

She watched as he walked down the sidewalk. He probably had to park a block away because it was a first come, first serve basis. When he turned the corner, she closed and locked her door.

Teresa D. Patterson

All of a sudden loneliness washed over her. The phone rang again and she sighed. No matter how alone she felt, she would not answer Terrence's call.

Chapter Thirteen

The following week, things got hectic in the forms processing department. Overtime was offered, so both Vicki and Gary jumped at the chance to earn some extra cash.

“Vicki, did you sign up for direct deposit?” Gary asked. Vicki had on headphones and didn’t hear him. “Vicki?”

“What do you need her for?” It was Sharon. She seemed to appear out of nowhere. She stood there looking delicious in a hip-hugging pants suit. Her perfume seemed to hypnotize him.

“I – I,” he stammered. “I forgot what I wanted her for.”

“Good, it must not have been too important. Are you ready to buy me lunch, yet?”

Gary stared her up and down. No matter how good she looked, she wasn’t going to play him like a sucker.

“No. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever. I’ll never be ready.”

She chuckled. “You’re a funny man, Gary. I like you,” she said, her eyes flashing in amusement.

“Hey, there’s your free meal ticket right there. You better catch up with him,” he said, watching Claiborne pass through their department.

Teresa D. Patterson

“Never mind him. He’s too boring for my liking,” she said. “But you...you are intriguing. What is the word you use in this country? Mystery? No?”

In spending time with Sharon, he learned that she was from Venezuela. Her father was black and her mother, Venezuelan. She had a very pronounced accent that made his dick jump every time he heard her talk.

“You think I’m mysterious?”

“Yes, that’s it. You are very mysterious. I try to figure you out and I can not.”

“Sharon, trying to figure me out will be like asking for a brain aneurysm.”

“A...neu...rysm? That word is not familiar to me.”

“It will make your brain explode,” he said, indicating his head bursting. She laughed uproariously, causing Vicki to turn around in her seat.

“What’s so funny?” she asked. Sharon ignored her. “Gary, did you call me earlier?”

“Yes, I was asking about the direct deposit. Did you sign up for that?”

“Yes,” she said.

“How long did it take human resources to set it up?”

“Not long at all. If you complete the paperwork, it should be direct deposited by your next paycheck. They are really fast.”

“Oh okay. I think I’ll go to HR and do that now,” he said, getting up from his chair.

“Just like that? You’re just going to stop working and go?”

“It’s not like anyone else is working.” He smirked. “Well, except for you. Besides, we got overtime. I’ll enter plenty of forms later.” He walked off with Sharon. They were deep in conversation by the time they turned the corner.

Vicki frowned. She didn’t like that stuck-up woman. She didn’t know if Gary was romantically interested in Sharon or not. She prayed the latter. The last thing Gary needed was to hook up with a trifling slut who could cause trouble for him on the job.

“There’s something shady about that one,” Rebecca, who sat across the aisle from her, said aloud.

“Excuse me? Did you say something?”

“Yes, I said there’s something shady about that new temp. You ever notice how she’s super friendly with the men, but barely speak to the women?”

“I thought it was only me,” Vicki said.

“Nope, honey. A lot of us take notice of things going on in this department. We may not say anything, but we do take notice.”

Vicki wrote herself a mental note to relay the news to Gary about being cautious around Rebecca. She seemed nice

enough, but she was too cozy with the manager. Vicki wouldn't put it past her to try and score brownie points by being a whistleblower. She knew that some people took their jobs entirely too seriously and tried to play department police.

When Vicki arrived home, she saw the note attached to her door. Her heart filled with dread. She instinctively knew that it was from Terrence. Snatching it off the door, she read it.

Please, Vicki, can we talk? I'm sorry for everything.

She crumbled the note up, opened her door, and went inside. She didn't want to see Terrence, and certainly didn't want to talk to him.

Maybe Gary was right. Maybe she should think about moving. She didn't see any other way to be rid of Terrence for good. Even though he'd calmed down, she still felt on edge.

She got ready to call Janelle but remembered she was out of town on one of her business trips. Tresica had reunited with her ex and was all crazy in love. She didn't want to disturb her with petty issues.

Without realizing it, she found herself dialing Gary's number.

“What’s up?” he answered.

“Nothing much. I haven’t seen much of you lately. I guess you’ve just kicked me to the curb since Sharon began working in our department.” It came out accusingly instead of jokingly as she’d meant.

“It’s nothing like that.”

“Whatever. You don’t have to explain yourself to me, Gary. It’s not like I care.”

“Then why did you bring it up?”

“Okay. I see this conversation is not going in the right direction. Let’s start over. Hello, Gary. How was your day?”

“Fine. And what about yours?”

“It was fine until I got home and found a note attached to my front door,” she said.

“Let me guess. It was from Terrence, right?”

“Of course.”

“Why are you telling me?”

“I don’t know. I mean, what should I do? I’m tired of walking around on egg shells, thinking that he’s going to just pop up.”

“You have a restraining order against him. Just call the police if he does.”

“How can I get him to leave me alone? I’m just so tired of this.”

Teresa D. Patterson

“Vicki, I’m not going to tell you what you want to hear. So, in order to avoid an argument, I’ll just keep my mouth shut.”

“Well, anyway,” she said, changing the subject. “Are you trying to hook up with Sharon or what?”

“What business is it of yours if I am?”

“You don’t have to get *salty*,” she said, tossing his term back at him. “I was just asking. You can date whoever you want. Just be careful. That’s all.”

“Thanks for caring,” he said.

“That’s the problem, I do care.” There was an awkward moment of silence. Vicki couldn’t believe she’d said that aloud. What the hell? Was she developing feelings for Gary?

“Okay, now that I know you care, can I hit it?” It was just like him to joke around when she was trying to be serious.

“Stop playing. Gary, really, just be careful and watch out for Rebecca, too. I think she takes notes on everybody and reports back to Eileen.”

“That nosey, old wench. She probably haven’t seen dick since she retired her vibrator.”

“Oh my goodness.”

“For real. That crusty heifer ain’t got no life. She lives vicariously through other people. Do you notice how she’s always in everybody’s business? She probably lives with about fifty cats. You see all that cat hair and shit on her seat

and clothes? If she got anything to say about me, I'll put a damn flea collar on her desk."

Vicki laughed so hard her sides ached.

"Gary, you are wrong for that."

"I'm serious. And she always trying to bake some shit and bring it in to share with everybody. I won't ever eat that shit. Cat whiskers and hairballs all baked in that shit. Paw prints in the icing. No way in hell. She can keep them cupcakes and brownies and pies. She probably put some voodoo in it, too. Y'all better stop eating everything other people bring in."

Vicki wiped the tears from her eyes. "Gary, you are too much."

"You know I'm right about this, Vicki. Do you like potato salad?"

"Well, yes. I like it. Why?"

"It has to be made a certain way. You can't eat just anybody's potato salad. You'll have stomach cramps for days."

"Gary, stop. You're about to make me pee on myself."

"You may need to get some Depends for that problem. Say, Vicki, what's up with dinner? When you want to go?"

She composed herself and answered. "How about Saturday? Is that okay?"

"Saturday's fine. You want to go later in the evening, make it like a real date?"

Teresa D. Patterson

“Well, sure. Why not?”

She was elated when she hung up. She kept hearing the word date. She wouldn't read more into it than necessary. Gary had a way of confusing her with his innuendos. She didn't want to embarrass herself by misinterpreting his words.

The next day was Friday, so everyone was in high spirits, ready for the weekend. Vicki saw Anthony Rodriguez, a handsome, Hispanic guy who worked in the mailroom posted up at Sharon's desk. The men flocked to that hussy like flies to honey. She just shook her head and went back to minding her own business.

“Hey, Vicki, you going on break?” Gary asked.

“Sure. What's up? Sharon too busy riding somebody else's jockey strap?”

Gary looked in the direction of Sharon's desk and just shrugged. “I told you, me and her are just cool. We ain't trying to hook up or nothing.”

“Okay. I just don't want no mess to pop off.”

“It won't. Hell, you and I have been going to breaks and lunch together since I began working here. That ain't gonna change for nobody.”

“If you say so, Gary.” She knew that if Sharon walked by right then and there, and said, “Jump.” Gary would ask, “How high?”

After Anthony left, Vicki noticed that Sharon got up and went to talk to Thomas. Thomas gazed at her with an adoring look on his face. Vicki could tell he had it bad.

“I hope Thomas doesn’t fall into her tangled web,” Vicki muttered.

“What was that?” Gary asked.

“Nothing. You ready?”

“Yeah. You want to go outside or to the break room?” he asked.

“Outside. I need some fresh air.”

While they sat on a bench talking, Sharon and Thomas appeared. They sat further away on another bench.

“What’s up with those two?” Vicki asked.

“I don’t know. It’s not my business,” Gary said.

“You think they have something going on?”

“I don’t really care.”

“One minute she’s with Claiborne. The next, she’s with Anthony. You turn around and she’s with Thomas. Where do you fit in this equation?”

“Didn’t I say I didn’t want to talk about it? If you can’t change the subject, I’m going back inside.”

“Ex-cuse me,” she said sarcastically.

“Why are you even concerned about Sharon and who she’s with? Are you interested in any of those guys? You like Claiborne or something?”

“No.”

“Well, it must be Anthony you’re feeling. You want a little Latin flavor in your life? He’s a bit young for you, though.”

“Boy, please,” she said.

“Must be geeky ass Thomas you salivating for then? You want Thomas?”

“No, I do not. Besides, he’s my supervisor. I’d never date someone I work under.”

“The only person left is me. You must be lusting after G-ball. You want me, Vicki? All you gotta do is say so, sweetheart.”

Vicki felt a blush creep into her cheeks. She was glad that she was brown-skinned, and Gary wouldn’t notice it. She got tongue-tied.

“What’s up, Gary? Vicki?” Thomas greeted on his way back into the building. Sharon had slithered off in another direction. They both spoke to Thomas, and it saved Vicki from having to answer Gary.

“Break time is over. Let’s get back in there and peck those keys,” she said.

“You can peck away. I’m just tapping.”

Ex-boyfriend

“Gary, I hope you make it past ninety days. You do know you’ll be getting an evaluation, right?”

“Thomas is doing it. So, I know I’ll be okay.”

“If you say so.” She just shook her head.

“There you go worrying about other people’s business, Vicki. I got this. Everybody around this joint loves me.”

Vicki’s mouth curled up at the corner. Some loved him more than others. She thought of Sharon, and it put a bad taste in her mouth.

Chapter Fourteen

Terrence hoped that Vicki would call him. He knew she'd gotten the note. He didn't mind kicking it with Tenesha, but he still longed for what he and Vicki had. He couldn't accept the thought that she'd totally erased him from her heart.

Even though he'd gotten his job back, and he'd found his own place, he wasn't happy. He wouldn't ever be happy until Vicki took him back.

He had to give Tenesha her props though. She went out of her way to please him. She'd even began cleaning up the apartment and dressing a bit more conservatively. She just wasn't Vicki. She'd never be Vicki, and he didn't want a replacement.

"Hey, boo, how was your day?" Tenesha asked when he used his spare key and let himself into the apartment.

"I spent the majority of it moving all of my stuff from storage and into my new place. You should come over sometime and see it."

"I really wish you'd just stay here with me," she said.

"We already discussed this, Tee. I like you. You're cool. The sex is great. But, I'm just not ready for anything serious right now."

Her lips jutted out in a pout. “You’re obsessed with your ex-girlfriend. I ain’t stupid, Terrence. I hear you whining on the phone, begging for her to take you back.”

“What the fuck are you doing eavesdropping on my conversations?” Terrence snapped, irritated.

“It wasn’t like I was tryin’ to overhear you. Why don’t you just play Keith Sweat for the bitch and let him do the beggin’ for you?”

“Tenesha, don’t ever let that word come out your mouth again,” he said tightly, glaring at her. “I mean it.”

“Damn, you must really be in love. Shit. What the hell can I do to compete with that? Not a fuckin’ thing. I just can’t do it, Terrence. I’m trying to be a better person and be the type of woman that you want. But, you won’t even give me a chance.”

“I’m sorry,” he said genuinely. “I’m just not ready, Tenesha. I really appreciate all that you’ve done for me. And, I want us to still be friends.”

“Okay,” she said, sucking air through her teeth in disappointment. “I guess if that’s all I can get, I’ll take it.”

“Where are the kids?” he asked, noticing the silence.

“I took them to my mama’s house. Sometimes she gets all grandmotherly and wants them to spend the night. I guess she’s feeling lonely since my daddy left her again.”

“What do you mean?”

Teresa D. Patterson

She shrugged. "My daddy is like that song say, a rolling stone. He jumps around from woman to woman. No matter what he do, my mama always take him back."

"That's rough," he said.

"So, what about you, Terrence? Your parents still alive?" she asked. Terrence's face became guarded.

"Yeah, as far as I know, they are."

"Are you close with ya moms?"

"No, not really. She...she.. .uh. ..she's a crack head," he finally said. It was the first time he'd ever shared that information. He hadn't even told Vicki.

"Oh, my bad. I didn't know," she said quietly.

"She's been hooked on drugs my entire life. I don't really see her that often."

"Do you worry about her? I mean, it's dangerous out there in them streets."

"All the time, Tenesha. I worry about her all the time.

But-" He cleared his throat. "Ain't a damn thing I can do about it. It's the path she's chosen to take."

"I feel so bad for you."

"I don't need your pity," he said, almost angry.

"It's not pity. My heart just aches for you. I mean, me and my mom ain't that tight, but at least I know where she is. It must have been rough growin' up."

“It was. But, I don’t like to talk about it. My grandma, she held it down. She and my uncle Frank looked out for me.”

“What’s he like, ya uncle?”

“He’s a fucking asshole, snobby, bougy motherfucker,” he answered truthfully. “But, growing up, he was the only father figure I had. I kind of looked up to him. Well, I did until I found out he got my mama hooked on drugs.”

“That’s fucked up.”

“Yeah. It is. I know I can’t really blame everything on him because he didn’t force her to use. But, he was a drug dealer and she went to him for drugs.”

“Sad.” Tenesha shook her head in disbelief. She could tell that inside Terrence was hurting. She wanted to erase his pain. “I know you got your own place now, but do you want to spend the night? We can get as loud as we want now that the kids are gone.”

“Hell to the yes. Girl, you gonna back that ass up on this dick?”

“I’ll do more than that. I’ll let you have it any way you want it. You can even fuck me in the ass,” she offered.

“Er...I’ll pass on that.” Terrence was freaky, but he wasn’t into anal sex. The thought of his dick going into someone’s anal canal made him get soft. It took a great deal of sucking, slobbering and blowing for Tenesha to get it back up. When she did, she rode his dick like she was at a rodeo.

She bucked, put her back, hips and pelvis into it. He thought he was about to lose his mind as she gyrated in a circular motion on his shaft. Just when he was about to bust one, she slowed it down. She planted her hands on his chest and just began popping her pussy on his dick. She did it over and over.

Swirl. Swirl. Swirl. Pop. Swirl. Swirl. Swirl. Pop. Swirl. Swirl. Swirl. Pop.

“Oh shit.”

“You like that, baby?” she asked.

Swirl. Swirl. Swirl. Pop. Pop. Swirl. Swirl. Swirl. Pop. Pop. When she added another pop to it, he was gone.

“Oh fuck. Shit. Shit. Shit. Uuhh,” he groaned as she milked him. He came so hard that he saw stars behind his closed eyelids. He felt dizzy and light-headed.

“Did I put it on you?” she asked.

“Hell yeah,” he breathed. “Let me catch my second wind, and I’mma put something on you.”

“Will you eat this pussy tonight?” she asked expectantly.

“I...er...I’m not ready for that just yet,” he said quickly.

“Why not?”

“That’s kind of personal for me. It takes time.”

“How much time do you need? I suck ya dick, lick ya balls. He’ll, I even licked the crack of ya ass. You can’t go down on me?”

“I never said that I wouldn’t do it. I’m just not ready to do it yet.” He was thinking about all the men Tenesha had no doubt been with. He was certain that she hadn’t practiced safe sex all the time.

“Why? I don’t have no STDs or nothing,” she said, reading his mind. “I got checked.”

“I know. Remember, I was there at the clinic with you.” They’d both gone to take the HIV test as well as have a VD screening. Even though she hadn’t been sexually active with anyone since he’d moved in with her, he hadn’t performed oral sex on her. He had qualms about doing it. Vicki had been his first and only in the oral sex department. He reserved eating pussy for the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with.

“Nigga, if you won’t eat my pussy, I’ll find someone who will,” she said defiantly, getting out of the bed.

Terrence quickly leaped up and towered over her. His face was twisted in anger.

“Don’t ever threaten me like that, Tenesha. I’m fucking you raw dick. You better not ever endanger my life by fucking some other nigga.”

“I didn’t say I was gonna fuck nobody else. I said I was gonna let a nigga eat my pussy.”

“When a nigga eat pussy, he wanna fuck.” Tenesha crossed her arms and tapped her foot, agitatedly. “Come on back to bed. I’m ready again.”

“I’m not sucking ya dick,” she said.

“Did I say you had to?”

“Let me take a quick shower. I’m all sticky,” she told him and went into the bathroom.

As he waited, he stroked his dick, not wanting to lose his erection.

Terrence didn’t know why he was so upset about what Tenesha said. If she wanted to let somebody else eat her out, it was her business. What did it have to do with him?

In less than ten minutes Tenesha returned, toweling herself dry. Her pussy lips hung like a tantalizing peach. Terrence got up from the bed.

“I know I’m going to probably regret doing this,” he said more to himself than to her. He knelt in front of her, grabbed her ass cheeks, and pulled her toward him. He could immediately smell her womanly scent. He planted a sweet kiss on her clit, and her body shivered.

“Terrence. Oh. Damn,” she moaned.

He used his thumb and caressed her button in a circular motion. He found himself getting turned on by her reaction and planted more kisses. He ran his tongue up and down her juicy lips. Her pussy glistened with moistness. He then began

Ex-boyfriend

to suck and slurp. Pretty soon, he forgot all about being cautious and just went with the flow. It wasn't long before Tenesha's legs buckled, and he felt her juices roll down his chin. He kept at it until she was trembling and calling his name. He lost count of the number of times she reached an orgasm. When he finally got up off the floor, she was like putty in his arms. He carried her to the bed and lay her down gently.

"Is that what you wanted?" he asked. Tenesha's eyes were closed. She didn't answer. Silent tears slipped down her cheeks.

Tenesha woke up early the next morning and fixed Terrence breakfast. She threw down in the kitchen. It was Saturday, and her mom wanted to keep the kids all weekend. She had no problem with that. She was determined to play housewife and win Terrence over. He had to forget about his ex-girlfriend and realize that she was the one he wanted.

She made pancakes, grits, scramble eggs, sausage, and bacon. She had it waiting for him when he woke up.

"Good mornin', baby. I hope you hungry 'cause I made you a big breakfast."

"Thanks. I'm starving after that workout from last night."

"I know that's right."

“You okay?” he asked, remembering the tears. She nodded and looked away. She didn’t want to appear vulnerable in his eyes.

“I’m fine. You just took things to a whole notha level, that’s all. I wasn’t expectin’ that.”

“Well, now you know not to ask for what you can’t handle.” He stuck his chest out, bragging a bit. “I guess I should have warned you about this snake tongue.”

“Yeah, maybe you should have.” She served him up a huge helping of food. “So, what are your plans today?”

“I have to work until three. My day is pretty much shot.”

“My kids are gone for the whole weekend. You coming by after you get off, or you goin’ to ya own place?” she asked.

“I’ll probably be worn out. If they need me to, I’ll do a double. I have to put in as much time I can since I’m the low man on the totem pole again.”

Tenesha glanced down. “I’m sorry for clownin’ on ya job and causin’ all that mess.”

“I’m not blaming you. I made my own choices. I should have held my temper in check,” he said.

“You do have some anger issues. You ever thought about dealin’ with that?”

He shook his head. “Not really. For so many years, I just held everything inside. Until one day...I just lost it. I...I almost killed a man and I ended up in jail.”

Tenesha stared at him in fear and fascination. “What happened?”

“It was because of my mama. She was out there prostituting, and some men were trying to run a train on her. I just so happened to walk up on it. At first, I thought it was just some scally wag they were trying, until my mama called my name. When I realized it was her, I just lost it. When I saw her like that...clothes all half torn, beaten and bruised...I snapped. I swear to God, I tried to bash both of those motherfuckers’ heads in.” He pushed his half eaten breakfast away and gave Tenesha a regretful smile. She understood the reason his appetite had deserted him.

“They arrested you for that?” she asked.

“No. I got arrested because of my mama. Even after I beat those niggas down, she wanted to get in the car with them and smoke crack. She tried to attack me because I wouldn’t let her. She was fuming, ranting and raving and shit. When the police got there, she said *I* was the one who jumped on her. I was so fucking mad. I wanted to choke the life out of her. I got charged with aggravated assault, battery on a law enforcement officer, and resisting arrest with violence. I hit one of them weak ass motherfuckers dead in his jaw. I think I broke that bitch, too. I tried to pay the other one back for what they did to Rodney King. I spent four years in Lake Butler prison.”

“That’s fuck up. All because you was tryin’ to help ya mama. What made you turn ya life around?”

“I fell in love.” Tenesha’s face fell when she heard that. The last thing she wanted was to hear him profess his love for someone else. “I don’t want to hurt your feelings or nothing, but I still love my girl, Vicki. If I hadn’t cheated on her, we’d still be together.”

“Terrence, she doesn’t want to be with you though. Why can’t you just move on? I’m here for you.”

“Like I said, you’re cool and all. But, my heart belongs to Vicki. If I can’t get her back...I don’t know what I’ll do.”

“You can’t force her to take you back, Terrence. You just lose ya head when it comes to that woman. Why can’t you just let go?”

“Because loving her makes me crazy,” he said. “When I think about living without her...I just don’t want to. I’ll do whatever it takes to get her back and no one can stop me.”

Looking into the depths of his eyes, she knew he’d spoken the truth. God help her or anyone else who ever blocked his path to Vicki.

Chapter Fifteen

“Tasha, where have you been?” Frank asked in a harsh tone. He looked his sister up and down.

“I’ve been around, you know, doing me. You’ll let me in, Frank? I just want to take a shower and get something to eat.” She shook and ticked nervously, as drug addicts were accustomed to doing.

“You know Mama don’t want you in her house.”

“Please,” the bedraggled woman begged. “I’m so hungry. Can I please take a hot shower?”

Frank exhaled loudly. He never could say no to Tasha. “Where have you been?” he repeated.

“Same place I always be.” Tasha shuffled into the living room. Her eyes darted around. “Where’s Mama?”

“She’s at bible study and it’s a good thing, too. Hurry up so you can be gone before she gets back.”

“I’m not gonna steal nothing, Frank. You ain’t got to be rude. I just wanted to check on Mama and see how she’s doing.”

“She’s fine. At least she was until that no good son of yours ran her blood pressure up.”

Tasha’s eyes continued to dart around. She couldn’t look Frank in the eye. “Terrence? How’s my baby doing?”

“I don’t know and I really don’t give a shit. He got arrested for something, and it stressed Mama out. Her blood pressure went up sky high. I told Terrence he had to go.”

“Why you do that, Frank? Why you put him in the streets? He’s blood.”

“He ain’t my responsibility. He’s a grown ass man.”

“Well, I hope he’s doing okay. I want to see him, but I don’t think he wants nothing to do with me.” Her shoulders slumped dejectedly.

“Why would he, Tasha? It’s not like you’ve been the world’s best mother.”

“I tried, Frank.”

“No you didn’t. All you tried to do was find another piece of crack. You’ve been a junkie for as long as I can remember.”

She glared at him. “Who made me the junkie, Frank? Huh? Can you remember that?”

Frank scowled at her. “Go take a shower. You smell like rotten fish.”

She hesitated. “I need some money, Frank...just a few dollars.” She licked her lips and stared at him.

Frank smirked. He knew she’d get around to that. It happened every time she showed up.

“Why do you keep coming back here, Tasha? Why do you have to tempt me?”

“For the same reason you keep punishing me.”

They glared at each other in silence.

“You punish yourself,” Frank said, breaking the tense silence. “Your love for crack outweighs your love for anything else. You’ll do anything to get it. When are you gonna give that shit up?”

“Why you always got to preach at me, Frank?” she asked, irritated. “Just give me the money.”

“You already know that I’m not going to *give* you anything, Tasha.” His eyes traveled over her. Suddenly, the way he looked at her changed. Even though she was clearly strung out, she wasn’t a bad looking woman. At one point in time, she’d been beautiful. He wanted her to be that woman again, but he had to take what he could get. “Go take your shower and meet me in your old bedroom. Hurry up,” he commanded. She obediently went to do what he’d instructed. After she’d finished bathing, she joined Frank who sat on the edge of the bed. She wore only a towel.

“You know what you have to do, Tasha.” Like a robot, she sank to her knees between his legs.

Tasha and Frank had been committing incest since he was fifteen and she twelve. Frank always bullied her into submitting to him in one way or another ever since he molested her during their childhood. Frank repeatedly told Tasha that he would kill her if anyone found out.

He had money for crack; she had the ability to satisfy his sick sexual urges. At one point, he'd vowed to never let anyone come between them. But, someone had....Terrence.

After Frank finished with Tasha, he tossed some money at her. Her eyes brightened when she counted it.

"Don't get too comfortable," Frank snarled.

"We're going to have to stop doing *this*." She gestured toward the rumpled sheets on the bed.

"You going to stop sleeping with me? I don't think so." He smirked.

"I have to. It's just not right. We never should have started this when we were kids. I know you didn't know any better back then. But, it's gone on long enough. You know better now and it's time for it to stop."

Frank charged toward Tasha and slapped her across the face several times.

"Bitch, who the fuck do you think you talking to? I determine when it's time to stop, and don't you forget it." His eyes coldly bore into hers. "I own your pussy. Now say one more motherfucking thing," he warned. Tasha cowered on the bed, holding her arm up to fend off any more blows.

The front door opened, causing both of them to jump.

"Frank? I'm home. Who you talking to? We got company?" They heard their mother's voice calling out. Her

footsteps headed toward the bedroom. Frank hurried to the door before she could enter.

“Hey, Mama. Nobody’s here. It’s just the TV,” he lied.

“Oh. Alright.” She carried a brown paper bag that held two bunches of greens. “I’m getting ready to fix supper. You want some collard greens, baby?”

“Sounds good, Mama.”

“I wonder where Terrence at. I ain’t heard from him since he got arrested.”

“He’s around. He’ll call when he’s ready.” She didn’t know that he’d kicked Terrence out. What she didn’t know wouldn’t hurt her.

“I worry about that child. He’s just as flighty and strange as his mama. The apple didn’t fall too far from the tree. I warned him about chasing after that gal, and he went and did it anyway. Now he’s in a heap o’ trouble.” As she talked, she shuffled toward the kitchen.

“He made his bed, now he has to lie in it,” Frank said.

“What be ailing these youngins these days? Why would you try to hang on to someone who doesn’t want you?”

“I don’t know, Mama.” She disappeared around the corner and he glanced back at Tasha. His eyes warned her to remain quiet. He pointed at the window. “And don’t forget what I told you,” he said lowly. “If I don’t see you next week, I’ll come looking for you.” Tasha threw him an annoyed look as

she pulled on one of his clean tee-shirts and some shorts he'd given her.

"Ain't you listening to nothing Mama saying? Why do you keep doing this to someone who don't want you?"

"You want my money though. And as long as you come to me with your hand out, you're going to keep giving me what I need."

"You need your head examined."

"That's real deep, coming from a crack whore," he spat.

"Frank, can you come help me cut up these greens?"

Mama called.

"Yes, ma'am," he called back. "It's time for you to go," he told Tasha coldly.

"Why can't I leave out the front door?" she asked meekly.

"Crack whores exit out the window," he said in a demeaning tone. "Don't forget what you are, trick."

Tasha hung her head as shame flooded over her. "I'll be back next week," she said, defeated.

"I thought so." Frank walked over and kissed her roughly. "Don't ever forget who you belong to."

Tasha scaled over the window sill and dropped to the ground. She'd done it so many times before that it was like second nature. She kept thinking about what Frank said. She didn't want to listen to her brother, but in a sense he did own her. He'd taken her innocence at age twelve. When she was

fifteen, she'd gotten addicted to cocaine which he'd provided for her. He'd keep her supplied with cocaine as long as he could come to her bedroom every night.

She'd tried to break the hold he had on her through the years, but couldn't. She'd left home when she turned sixteen and worked the streets. Prostitution didn't bring in nearly enough money to cover her cocaine habit. She soon had to settle for smoking crack.

Time after time, she'd been down on her luck so she'd had to depend on Frank to bail her out. His help came with a price.

She couldn't understand his obsession with her. He was an extremely handsome man and could have almost any woman he wanted. Yet, he craved her with a sickness.

She knew she couldn't keep doing this. Her body wasn't just being used up by nameless men. Her soul was being devoured by her own flesh and blood.

She couldn't keep the secret much longer. It had already cost her too much.

Chapter Sixteen

It was quiet in the Cobra building. All of the other departments were closed for the evening except for forms processing and customer service. The customer service department remained opened until ten every night. Since they were offering overtime, forms processing would be opened until ten as well.

“They must have been clowning in the mailroom earlier this week. Why are we just getting a shitload of forms on Friday?” Gary griped.

“I don’t know,” Vicki said. “You won’t be complaining when you see that fat paycheck next Friday.”

“I sure won’t. But, this has to be the duller job in the world. Sitting here, typing all day. Man, I have to move around.”

“Why don’t you go check the mailroom and see if we got anymore New Hire Notification forms? Thomas is too busy flapping his gums with Sharon to go check. When she’s around him, he forgets he’s a supervisor.”

“Let that man try to get some. Hell, it’ll probably be his first piece of ass,” Gary said, jokingly. “I’ll go check the mailroom. Where are the forms at?”

“Just ask Claiborne or Anthony. One of them should know.”

“Okay. I’ll be back.”

He got up and headed for the mailroom. First, he made a stop at the men’s restroom. Once he left there, he got on the elevator and punched two. When he arrived on the second floor, he went through the doors and glanced around. Not seeing anyone, he walked further into the room. There were cubicles set up like a maze. He walked past a few. It appeared that everyone had left the mailroom for the day. He was getting ready to head back out when he saw Sharon.

“Hey, Sharon,” he called.

“Hello, Gary.”

“Have you seen Claiborne or Anthony?”

“Claiborne left early today, and Anthony must have just left.” She held a sticky note in her hand.

“What’s that?”

“I was coming to get the New Hire forms for Thomas. You have any idea where they are?”

“I was coming to get them, too. And no, I have no idea where they keep stuff down here.”

“You think we might be able to find them?” she asked.

“We can look around. I don’t see any harm in it.”

“Where would they keep them?”

“Maybe they’re over there where they have the bins for the different departments,” he suggested.

They walked into the enclosed space together. There were various bins with labels for the different departments.

“Do you see Forms Processing?” Gary asked over Sharon’s shoulder. She was bending over in order to read the different labels.

“No, not yet.”

“I think that’s it right there,” he pointed. “Data Entry.”

“I think you’re right, Gary. Words confuse me sometimes. So many words with the same meaning, you know?”

“You’ll get used to it. You’ve been in the US for how many years now?”

“Since I was sixteen. So, that will make six years,” she answered, grabbing the forms from the bin. When she turned to look at Gary, she noticed that his trousers had a bulge in them. “Are you always that excited to be around me?” she teased, looking down at him. Gary followed her stare.

“Not really. It must be that little skirt you have on, and you did just bend over. I saw all of Vicky’s secrets and yours, too.”

Sharon smirked seductively. “So, did you like?”

“I don’t know. How about you let me get a closer look?”

“How much do you want to see?” she challenged.

“Everything,” he said, boldly.

Sharon reached down and slowly slid her skirt up her thighs and over her hips. She didn't stop until Gary got a full view of her gold colored laced panties. The word that came to Gary's mind was "beautiful."

"Can you turn around and let me see the back of those?" Sharon complied. "Bend over." She did that, too.

"Do you want to touch me?" she asked.

"Hell yes." Gary wasted no time in getting close. "Are you sure?"

"Touch me, Gary. My body is on fire. The lust in your eyes is turning me on."

"Er...okay." He touched her. He ran his hands over her bare thighs and hips. She moaned.

He couldn't believe his luck. Sharon was bending over for him in the mailroom and inviting him to touch her. She was even telling him that he was turning her on. It couldn't get any better than that, but it did.

"Do you want me, Gary? Do you want to fuck me?"

"Can I?" he asked excitedly.

"You better," she breathed. "Right now, Gary. Fuck me. Right here. Right now."

Before he could talk himself out of it, he reached in his back pocket for his wallet. He found the Magnum that he kept there, and ripped it open. He unzipped his pants and slid the

protection on. His pants dropped to his knees as he bent Sharon over a stack of boxes.

“Is this what you want?” he panted, driving into her from the back. He grabbed a hand full of her hair. She gasped and trembled.

“Oh yes. Yes, Gary. Give it to me. Fuck my brains out.”

He pounded into her, excited and nervous at the same time. They were in the mailroom and anyone could walk in on them. That thought made it even more thrilling. He could feel Sharon getting ready to reach a strong climax. She was a firecracker. As soon as she exploded, he did, too.

He let out a long groan, and she squealed. He grew soft inside her as she caught her breath.

“Damn,” he exhaled. “That shit was crazy.” He hurriedly fixed his clothes, looking around. “You okay?”

“Yes, I’m better now,” she said, adjusting her skirt. She swore when she saw the tear in her stocking. Gary looked at it guiltily and shrugged.

“I’m gonna head on back upstairs. They’re probably wondering what happened to me,” he said quickly, awkward now that he’d actually hit it without really trying.

“See you later.” She smiled triumphantly, picking up the forms she’d dropped during their tryst.

“See you.”

Gary made another stop at the men's bathroom. He discarded the condom and released himself. He still found it hard to believe what had just happened. His head was spinning from the pumped up adrenaline. When he got back to his seat, Vicki was just returning from a late break.

"What's wrong with you?" she asked, staring at him strangely.

"I- uh-well. I –" Sweat beads popped out on his forehead.

"Did you get the forms?"

"They- I put- yeah."

"Gary, what's going on?"

"Um...er. Nothing. I just have to go," he said, sitting down to log off his computer.

"I thought you were staying until ten?"

"Something came up. I gotta go," he said. As soon as the computer shut down, he got up and left. He didn't even say bye.

Vicki finished the batch of forms she had on her desk and logged off. There was no sense in staying because it would be boring without Gary to keep her company. She got her purse and headed for the exit. She encountered Sharon on the way out.

“Have a good weekend,” Sharon surprised her by speaking. Vicki stared at her. She looked flushed. Her hair was a bit wild, and she had a run in her stocking.

“Looks like you already started,” she mumbled.

In her car, Vicki checked her voicemail. Of course Terrence had called. He sounded pitiful with his begging and numerous apologies. She was so tired of hearing his voice.

Her phone rang and an unknown number showed up. Without thinking she answered, “Hello?”

“Vicki, don’t hang up,” the voice said pleadingly. It was Terrence.

“Terrence, why do you keep playing these games? I don’t want to talk to you. Stop calling me and stop leaving me messages.”

“Please, Vicki, just hear me out.”

“What Terrence? What?” She finally relented. “You have five minutes. Talk fast.”

“I’m sorry for cheating on you. I mean it. I don’t know where my head was.”

“Your *head* was inside that bitch, remember?” she said sarcastically. “Whatever happened to her anyway? Are you two still messing around?” Terrence didn’t answer right away, and that gave her the answer she needed. “You’re still fucking her, aren’t you?”

“Vicki, hold up. I didn’t call you to talk about Tenesha. I want to talk about us. Is there any chance of you and me getting back together? If so, Tenesha will be out of the picture for good.”

“So she is still in the picture? Is she? Terrence, will you answer me? Are you still screwing her?”

“Well, it’s not like you’re giving up any ass, Vicki,” he snapped. “What the hell do you think I’m supposed to do, jack my fucking dick?”

“You no good motherfucker. And you have the nerve to call me begging and pleading, pretending to want me back. You don’t miss me at all. You got that bitch. This conversation is over.”

“Wait, Vicki, don’t hang up.”

“Fuck you, Terrence.” She clicked the phone closed. She was so mad. For a minute, she had fallen for his lies. She’d almost been lured right back into his web.

She didn’t know if her anger came from him having tricked her into talking to him, or from knowing that he was still with Tenesha. She sat in her car for a few minutes, fuming.

Chapter Seventeen

Saturday rolled around. Vicki woke up late, and not really having any plans until later, she stayed in the bed. She ate popcorn, rainbow sherbet, and Oreos. She watched some of her old DVD's like *Beaches*, *Pay It Forward*, and *Angel Eyes*. An all time favorite of hers was *Imitation of Life*. No matter how many times she watched that movie, she still cried at the end when Mahalia Jackson sang "Troubles of the World" and they zoomed in on the funeral scene.

She was wiping her eyes when Janelle called.

"Hey girl, what's up?"

"Nothing."

"What's wrong? You sound a little down."

"I'm okay. I've been watching sad movies all day."

"What the hell for? You need to get out of the house. It's not like you to be sitting around all depressed. I just made it back in town. You want to go out tonight?"

"I would, but I have a date with Gary."

"Oh, with him, huh?" Her voice changed from cheerful to disdain. "Girl, please take enough money to catch a cab if that cheap bastard tries anything."

Vicki chuckled. "He's not that bad, Janelle. If he was, I wouldn't be going out with him."

“Just be careful. He’s a slick one.”

“I’ll be okay. I’ll call you later, okay?”

“Okay. I guess I’ll interrupt Tresica and her man. She’s probably fucking with her horny ass.”

“Girl, you are a mess. Tell her I said hi.”

“I will. Bye.”

“Bye.”

After hanging up with Janelle, Vicki called Gary just to confirm their date. She wanted to make sure they were still on. He assured her that he’d be there to pick her up at six that evening.

At a quarter ‘til six she was ready. She experienced a small amount of nervousness. She hadn’t been on a date since she’d gone out with Terrence almost three years prior.

Gary impressed her by being on time. When she answered the door and saw him wearing a blazer, button-down shirt, and jeans, it took her breath away. He was so handsome.

“You look nice,” he actually complimented her. She smiled her appreciation. She wore a sexy black dress with the back out. She draped a shawl over her shoulders because it was a bit chilly outside. “You ready?”

When she saw his car, her mouth literally dropped opened. It was an old Chevy Caprice. It looked blue, but she couldn’t tell from all the rust.

“Er..Gary, I can’t get the door opened,” she told him as she struggled to pull it open.

“Just kick it three times. It’ll pop open.”

“I have on a dress and heels,” she reminded him.

“Oh, my bad.” He came around to her side and kicked the door. It didn’t budge.

“Gary, let’s just take my car,” she suggested. “What happened to the other car you were driving?”

“The Durango? Oh, that’s my mama’s vehicle. She let me drive it when I need to.”

“That’s nice of her. Here, you drive.” She handed him the keys.

“Okay. You think my baby is gonna be safe in this neighborhood?”

She gave him an incredulous look. “You don’t have to worry about a thing. I’m sure it will be quite safe.”

Once they arrived at the Olive Garden, Gary reverted into a perfect gentleman. He actually opened her door for her and escorted her into the restaurant. The wait wasn’t long because he’d made reservations in advance. They were led to a quiet table near the back of the restaurant.

They placed their orders and sipped on water with lemon slices while they waited for the appetizers.

“So, Gary, tell me something about yourself that I don’t know,” she said to get the communication flowing.

“Let’s see,” he exhaled and pursed his lips. “Nope, I won’t reveal that just yet. Okay. I was a professional gambler for a few years,” he finally said, and stared her straight in the eye.

“Okay. What do you mean by professional gambler?”

“I traveled to different states and gambled. It’s how I made my living.”

“You actually made enough to live off?” she asked.

“Yes. I made more than enough to live off and then some.”

“Why did you stop?”

“Because, just like with any other dangerous profession, I got tired of fearing for my life, looking over my shoulder, not being able to trust anyone.” He stopped talking when the waitress came back with the appetizers and drinks. He waited until she’d placed everything on the table. “Thanks,” he told her and she nodded then left. “I also got tired of being robbed.”

“You got robbed?”

“Hell yes. When you win all that money, people get jealous and envious. Not to mention the niggas that just plain hate. They thrive on taking what’s not theirs, especially from who they consider to be an outsider.”

“Seems like leaving that behind was a good decision.”

“It was. But, it was kind of hard to just go back to a regular life. I mean, I was living high off the hog, so to speak.

The more I had, the more I seemed to spend. Going back to a regular nine to five was humbling.” Vicki said nothing, just grabbed a biscuit and spread some butter on it. “Your turn,” he said. “Now, you tell me something about you that I don’t know.”

“I don’t know-” she hesitated.

“Come on, Vicki. Don’t be like that. We’re getting to know each other on another level. Come on. Reveal one thing that I don’t already know.”

“Okay.” She looked down into her salad. “I like to role play.”

“What?” He had to ask because he couldn’t be sure she meant what he was thinking. “Did you say you like to role play?”

“Oh, never mind, Gary, forget it,” she said feeling a little embarrassed.

“Vicki, come on, you can tell me. It’s just you and me.” Gary lowered his voice and smiled. “Now what exactly do you mean?”

“As in dressing up for, you know, sexual intercourse,” Vicki mumbled.

“What type of costumes you got tucked away in your closet?”

“Whatever you want, I can become in five minutes.”

“A naughty nurse?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“An officer?” She nodded. “A maid? A playboy bunny?”

“Yes to all. I have just about every costume you can think of. I have handcuffs, feathers, vibrators, oils, lingerie.”

“Whips and chains?”

“If that’s what you want, I got that, too,” she said.

Gary looked to the left and then right before putting his hand over the side of his mouth and lowering his voice so that only she could hear him. “Vicki, you’re an undercover freak. No wonder you got niggas stalking you and shit.”

She laughed. “That’s the problem, though. I’ve never showed any of that stuff to Terrence. He didn’t even know about it.”

“Are you fucking serious? He didn’t know?”

“Clueless. To be truthful, I don’t think that Terrence really knew me at all.”

“I guess not.”

The waitress returned with their main course. Vicki had ordered shrimp pasta and Gary requested blackened grouper. Everything looked and smelled delicious. As they ate, their eyes keep meeting. The sexual tension between them could be cut with a steak knife.

Terrence felt the anger swell in his chest. He'd managed to talk to Vicki by calling her on his home phone from a number she didn't recognize. She'd ended up hanging up on him again.

He wouldn't let that deter him. Right after he got off work, he headed over to her place to talk to her face-to-face. A restraining order wasn't enough to keep him away.

When he pulled up, he saw her and that light-skinned dude getting into her car. They were both dressed up like they were going somewhere important. He followed them and ended up in the parking lot of the Olive Garden.

He sat in his car contemplating what he'd do. He wanted to talk to Vicki and he would. He got out and went into the restaurant.

He sat at a booth not too close to the unsuspecting couple. He watched their every move. He got angrier and angrier the longer the two stared at each other all googly eyed. When he saw the guy reach out and stroke Vicki's cheek with his index finger, he lost it.

He flew out of the booth and marched over to them.

"Vicki, what the hell is going on?" he demanded to know, breathing hard through his nostrils.

Vicki looked up in alarm, and Gary pushed back his chair.

"What are you doing here?" Vicki asked.

“I want to know the same thing? Why are you here with this nigga? Is this your new man?”

“Terrence, you need to leave.”

“I’m not going anywhere until I get some answers.”

“I got some answers for you,” Gary said tightly, standing up.

“Man, this ain’t got nothing to do with you. It’s between me and my girl, Vicki.”

“She’s not yours, man. At least, she won’t be after tonight,” Gary said smugly.

“What the fuck do you mean?” His eyes bulged. “What the fuck is he talking about, Vicki?”

“Tell him, Vicki. We’re leaving here and going back to your place. Aren’t we?”

“Gary-” She glanced at Terrence nervously. “I don’t think this is the place to discuss this.”

“You were just telling me about it before this clown showed up. So, now you’re singing a different tune? We gonna fuck or not?” he asked, impatiently.

“You’re making plans to fuck this nigga?” Terrence barked. “You’re gonna fuck this nigga who you just met? What about the three years that we were together? Don’t they mean nothing to you?”

“Go away, Terrence. You’re causing a scene,” Vicki said.

“I’ll do more than cause a motherfucking scene,” he said angrily. “I’ll turn this whole motherfucking place out.” With that, he grabbed the edge of the table and flipped it over. Vicki screamed as plates and glasses crashed to the floor, shattering.

A man wearing a manager nametag walked up to Terrence. “Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to leave. The police have already been notified,” he said sternly.

Hearing that, Terrence snapped back to reality. He was already on probation and didn’t need to add anymore charges to his record. He glared at Vicki.

“This ain’t over,” he hissed. He threw Gary a sour look and stalked from the restaurant.

“Sir, ma’am,” the manager stared from one to the other. “Are you two okay?”

“I’m fine,” Vicki managed to answer.

“Hell, no, I ain’t okay. Vicki, what the fuck just happened? Why in the hell you just standing here like nothing’s wrong? You should be the one on the phone calling the cops. You gonna let that motherfucker control your life forever? You can’t even go out on a date. You have got to be fucking kidding me. I can’t believe this shit.” He looked at the shattered glass and spilled food and drinks on the floor. “This is fucking unbelievable.”

“Calm down, Gary.”

“Calm down my ass. See, I warned you that something like this was gonna happen. I told you to make sure he was out of your life for good before you even thought about moving on. But, you didn’t listen. See, that’s what’s wrong with you damn weak-ass women. You don’t know how to listen when somebody is telling you something for your own good.”

“I’m not a weak woman,” Vicki denied hotly.

“The hell you’re not. If you weren’t weak, you wouldn’t have wasted three years of your life with a man who doesn’t even know you. You wouldn’t have allowed him to instill so much fear in your heart. The reason he keeps coming back is because you’re giving him some signal that it’s okay. Vicki, I’m not down with this type of bullshit at all. I don’t need this. Until you make up your mind about who you want and what you want don’t fucking call me. Don’t speak to me. Don’t even look my way.”

“Gary, wait-”

“Wait for what? For that asshole to come back with a machete? Whatever. I’m out.”

“You drove my car,” she reminded him. “You can’t just leave me here?”

He turned around. “You’re right.” He took the keys out of his pocket and threw them at her feet. “I’ll walk home.”

Teresa D. Patterson

The entire restaurant was silent. Everyone looked on, listening to the exchange. Vicki's face burned with embarrassment. She grabbed her shawl off the back of the chair and ran, completely humiliated.

As she got into her car, all kinds of thoughts went through her head. How could Terrence show up at the restaurant and embarrass her like that? And Gary. She didn't even want to think about him. His verbal attack had been uncalled for. How could he blame her for Terrence's actions? She wasn't responsible for what a grown man did.

She arrived home furious. Men. They made her sick. Her cell phone rang. It was the unknown number from earlier. Knowing it was Terrence, she didn't answer.

Even though she was livid, she was worried about Gary. She'd tried to follow him but didn't know which direction he'd taken off. After driving around for fifteen minutes looking for him, she'd given up and driven home. His car was still parked in her driveway. She tried his cell, but it went straight to voicemail.

After she got into her pajamas, she curled up with a bowl of rainbow sherbet and went back to watching old movies. She felt angry so she put in *Unforgiven* and watched it all the way to the end when Clint Eastwood's character came back blazing and shot up everyone in the saloon. He told the entire town off, and said if he ever heard of them cutting up whores

again, he'd come back and burn their houses down. He even threatened to kill their wives and children.

Even after watching the movie, it was still early. She didn't want to begin watching another one. She just went to bed. She tossed and turned thinking about the events of the evening.

How could she get Terrence to leave her alone for good? Would talking to him one final time do the trick or would it just make him more determined to get her back?

Would Gary hold a grudge? How were they going to interact at work? She didn't want the air to be strained between them. She'd try to reach him again in the morning. She'd just give him some time to cool off.

She must have drifted off to sleep because the doorbell woke her. When she peered through the peephole, she saw Gary. She cracked the door.

"Hey," she greeted sleepily.

"I just wanted to let you know that I'm getting my car," he said gruffly.

"Okay," she said, watching until Gary cranked the car and pulled off. She closed the door, locked it and went back to bed.

Chapter Eighteen

Terrence felt restless. He paced across his living room. He knew Vicki wasn't going to answer her phone, so there was no point in continuing to call. He hadn't been able to stop himself from acting a damn fool in the restaurant. He kept thinking about that pretty boy touching his woman. He'd wanted to hurt him, but instead, he'd flipped over the table. He was pissed because Vicki had treated him so casually. She looked at him like he meant nothing to her and never had. It hurt.

His doorbell rang and he tensed up. It could be the police. That anorexic-looking manager said he'd called them.

Hell no. The St. Petersburg Police weren't polite enough to ring the damn doorbell. They'd kicked in the door and asked questions later.

"Who is it?" he called.

"It's Tenesha." He breathed a sigh of relief and opened the door.

"What's up?"

"Nothing. I just got lonely and wanted to see you," she said, stepping into the apartment.

"I just saw you this morning." Even though he didn't feel like it, he found himself smiling. Tenesha was actually

wearing something decent that wasn't cutting into her crotch or all up her ass. It was a pair of Apple Bottom jeans and the tee-shirt that matched. They fit perfectly.

"This is nice, Terrence," she said, gazing around his apartment. The apartment was furnished with a leather couch and loveseat. There was also a large plasma television, and a computer.

"It's alright. It needs a woman's touch though."

"I can help out. I think a nice rug would go perfect under that table right there," she pointed. "And of course, some African statues would fit in the corners. Oh, and candles would be nice, too."

"Since when did you become an interior decorator?" he asked, taking a seat on the leather couch. He patted it, and she came to sit beside him.

"I do a lot of things. You'd be surprised," she said.

"Oh really? Like what?"

"I can sew."

"Sew? For real? You talking about like with a needle and thread? Like my grandma?" He laughed.

"Stop jokin' around. I'm serious. I sew on a sewing machine. I even know how to fix zippers and all that."

"No shit?"

"I'm gonna knit you something one day."

“Oh shit. You gonna knit me some of them colorful ass socks? You know the kind with the individual toes?”

“Hell Nah. I don’t make no wack shit like that.” They laughed.

“Hey, I’m ‘bout to roll up a blunt. You feel like smoking?” he asked.

“I didn’t know you smoked weed, Terrence?”

“I’ve been trying to quit, but today was rough. I need to get my mind right.”

“What you waiting for? Fire it up,” she said, excitedly.

“Okay.”

Once he’d cut the blunt open, emptied all of the tobacco out of the cigar and replaced it with marijuana, Tenesha took it.

“Let me finish rolling this while you fix me a drink. I know you got some kind of liquor in this bitch.”

“I have some Hennessy,” he said, heading to the kitchen.

“That’ll work.”

The two of them drank and got high. Smoking weed made Tenesha horny, so she was all over Terrence. She got butt naked and rode his dick backwards. He could watch her juicy ass and see his dick ease in and out of her wet pussy at the same time.

For some reason, he felt like treating her like a prostitute. He told her to get on the floor on her hands and knees. He

jacked his dick until he skeeted all in her face. He rubbed his sticky dick all over her lips and cheeks. Tenesha just accepted it, not complaining at all. When he finished, she just licked him dry. She lapped it all off him like a hungry cat. Once again, his dick was back rock hard and he fucked her from the back. He loved how she took all of him in. He could hear her soaking pussy making sucking sounds. It made him blow his load quicker than he ever had.

After they got out the shower, Tenesha pulled on a pair of his boxers and a tee-shirt. She went and checked the refrigerator.

“You ain’t got nothin’ in there except ice,” she said, disappointed. Terrence was reclining on the couch, channel surfing with the remote.

“I haven’t had time to go grocery shopping.” He found a boxing match, put the remote down and turned to Tenesha. “Are you hungry?”

“Yes. Smoking weed gives me the munchies.”

He chuckled. “I feel ya. What you want?”

“I could go for some barbeque ribs right about now.” She joined him on the couch, glancing at the clock on the cable box. “Connie’s Barbeque is still open until 2 am.”

“I’ll go get you some ribs. You just keep it tight for me,” he said.

“I will, boo.” She leaned over and gave him a kiss. “Hurry back.”

Terrence smiled as he headed out. He didn’t know what was happening. Tenesha was beginning to grow on him. If he wasn’t careful, he’d soon forget all about Vicki. Maybe that was the best thing to do anyway. He knew that if he kept chasing after Vicki, he’d either end up in jail again, or someone would end up dead.

Connie’s Barbeque wasn’t too far from his new apartment. There was only one other person in line so it didn’t take long to place his order. He was glad to have beaten the club crowd. He ordered a slab of thin end ribs and debated about whether or not to buy some sweet potato pie.

“Who makes those pies?” he asked a large man standing behind the counter. His apron was stained with barbeque sauce and other stuff.

“Green’s Bakery. We get ‘em from there.”

“Oh snap. Green’s Bakery’s pies are the bomb. Give me two slices.” The man reached inside the display. Terrence noticed that his hands looked like pig’s feet. His big ass needed to lose some weight.

“Next.” someone called out. Terrence stepped up to the counter and paid for his food. “Don’t forget my two slices of pie.”

“Got it,” the slim woman who looked like an ex-crack smoker smiled at him. “Enjoy. Have a good night.”

“Thanks. Good night.”

Terrence stepped out the door into the cool night air. He shivered as he headed for his car.

“Excuse me, sir. You got any spare change?” a timid voice asked.

He looked at the junkie who held her hand out.

“What the fuck?”

“You ain’t gotta cuss. If you ain’t got no change, just say so,” she said, insulted.

“Mama? Is that you?” He looked closer. Yes, it was. Terrence couldn’t believe the woman standing in front of him was his mother. She looked rough, like life had beaten her down several times.

“Terrence?” When she recognized that it was her son, she threw her hands in the air. “Thank you, God. See, God is good. I been looking for you. I been up and down these streets all day long looking and praying that God will lead you to me. God answers prayers,” she said. He thought she was going to begin shouting and jumping up and down like they do in those holiness churches.

“What you need me for, Mama?” He looked at her warily. He just wanted to get back to the apartment with Tenesha’s

food. The last thing he'd expected was to run into his cracked-out mother.

"Terrence, God, I am so glad to see you, baby. You just don't know."

"Is it money that you need? You ain't getting one dime from me. Not if all you gonna do is put it in a crack pipe and smoke it."

"Don't be like that, baby. I don't want nothing. I just need to talk to you. Can we talk? Please?"

"Whatever. What you got to say to me after all these years? Nothing you can tell me is gonna change things." His heart filled with so many emotions that he thought he'd burst. Years had gone by and he hadn't even known if she was dead or alive. Every time he asked Uncle Frank if he'd heard from her, he told him he hadn't seen her.

"There are some things that you need to know. It's time for certain deep, dark secrets to come out."

"Stop talking in riddles, Mama," he said impatiently. "I ain't got time for this." He walked toward his car.

"Wait. Please." She grabbed his shirt with a bony hand. "Do you want to know who your father is?"

Terrence stopped dead in his tracks. "Why the hell should I care?" He pried her fingers from his shirt. "He's a deadbeat that left when I was born. He never gave a shit about me, so why should I care who he is?"

“It’s Frank,” she blurted out.

“Frank who?” His mother must be high off more than crack if she’d just said who he thought she’d said.

“Your uncle got me pregnant when I was seventeen,” she said in a hurry. “I swear to God he did. I swear.” Her eyes desperately searched his.

“Frank’s my father?” Terrence was shocked almost speechless. “He’s my fucking biological father? My uncle is my father? I can’t believe this shit.” Suddenly, he felt nauseous.

“I couldn’t tell you. I couldn’t tell nobody. All these years, I knew you were his son, but I couldn’t let that get out. I wanted to protect you.”

“Protect me? Protect me from what?” He was so angry that tears sprang to his eyes. “How could you sleep with your own brother?”

“It wasn’t by choice,” she told him. “At least it wasn’t when I was twelve years old.”

Terrence felt weak at the knees. “I got to sit down before I fall down.” He leaned on the hood of his car, shaking his head. “I can’t comprehend what you’re saying.” He paused. “Are you for real?” He looked down, then began to pace. “Nah, this has got to be a sick joke.” He laughed nervously. “Please tell me that you’re lying, Mama.” He squeezed his eyes closed tightly to keep the tears from spilling over.

She sat on the hood of his car and told him the whole story. Terrance sat next to her. As she spoke, his face filled with rage.

“Your own brother got you addicted to drugs? Your own brother tricked you out?” He asked once she’d finished talking.

“He didn’t make me work the streets,” she defended, quickly. “I did that on my own. I needed the drugs.” She rocked back and forth, hugging herself.

“But, he got you hooked on drugs in the first place. Wait ‘til I see him again. I will kill that motherfucker.” He always had thought there was something shady about his uncle. Now he knew why. His uncle was a foul ass child molester. It didn’t matter to him that his uncle had been fifteen. He’d taken advantage of a twelve-year-old, and his own sister, at that.

“Too late,” she said in a flat tone. “That’s why I need you to help me.”

“No way, Mama. Remember what happened the last time I tried to help you? I got arrested and charged with a felony. I spent four years locked up because I tried to help.”

“But I really need you. Frank’s body is in my apartment.”

“What the fuck?” he almost screamed. He stared around to make sure no one had overheard him. He lowered his voice.

“What is he doing there? What did you do?” he whispered loudly.

“I couldn’t keep doing what he wanted me to do. I just couldn’t.” She kept wringing her hands and shaking them nervously. It irritated him.

“Stop that, Mama,” he snapped and she did. She had to sit on her hands to keep them still. “Tell me, what did Frank want you to do?”

“What do you think? How do you think he became your father? It’s been going on for years.” Her wild eyes stared into his and he read the truth.

“No. No. No. This shit can’t be happening. Why me? Why the fuck, me? Fuck.” He swore angrily. After he’d calmed down a bit, he turned to his mother. “So, are you saying that you killed Uncle Frank?” She nodded. “Shit, shit, shit.” He jumped off the hood of the car and began pacing again.

“I didn’t want to, but he said as long as he was alive, he wasn’t going to stop fucking me.”

Terrence’s stomach lurched. His mother was telling him some sick, twisted shit. He couldn’t retain too much more.

“Mama, I’ll take care of everything,” he told her. “What I need you to do is check yourself into a treatment program. That’s the only way I’m going to put my freedom on the line for you. You have to get clean and get your life together. You can’t let what Uncle Frank did to you destroy you anymore.”

“I can’t. I can’t. I can’t,” she chanted.

“Stop it, Mama,” he said firmly. “You can. Operation PAR is right on Martin Luther King Street. I’ll take you there in the morning. But, you have to agree to it. Otherwise, I’ll call the police and report what you told me.” He stared into her face. “What’s it gonna be, Mama? Are you willing to give up drugs or give up your freedom?”

“I don’t know.” She stood there trembling. She was pencil thin, her skin ashen. She had dark circles underneath her eyes. Seeing her in that horrible condition caused his heart to twist painfully. It was all because of his uncle Frank.

“You need help, Mama. Will you at least come home with me? Let me get you off the streets.”

“Okay. I can do that,” she finally agreed. He put his arms around his frail mother and walked her around to the passenger’s side of the car. “I’m sorry, Terrence. I’m sorry I couldn’t be the mother that you deserved.”

“It’s not your fault, Mama,” he told her, closing her door. He walked around to the driver’s side and got in. So many thoughts ran through his head. His uncle was his father. He had raped and molested his mother for years. Now, his mother had possibly killed him. If Uncle Frank was dead, what was he going to do?

Chapter Nineteen

Monday rolled around. People dragged in to work looking hung over. Gary noticed that Vicki arrived late. He wondered why and almost asked, but remembered that he wasn't speaking to her. When he thought about what happened at the restaurant, he got mad all over again.

He put on his headphones and actually worked the entire morning. If he didn't slow down on entering, management would expect top performance from him on a daily basis. He stopped and clicked on the Internet. When it was near break time, Sharon popped up.

"Hello, Gary," she said, smiling at him brightly.

"Oh, hey, Sharon," he said dully.

"Why didn't I hear from you this weekend?" She stuck her lips out in a pout.

"I don't have your number. Besides, I was busy."

"Oh, okay, well here it is." She bent over his desk and wrote it on a sticky note. "Program it in your phone and use it."

"Yeah, sure," he said absent-mindedly.

"Are you finally going to buy me lunch?" she asked.

"No." He threw her an annoyed look. "I don't mean to be rude, Sharon, but I have things to do."

“Oh. Okay.” She gave him a hurt look and stalked off. It wasn’t long before she was in Thomas’s face, giggling and batting her eyelashes. She kept tossing glances Gary’s way, but he ignored them. He went down to the mailroom on his break.

“Hey, what’s up, Gary?” Anthony greeted. He stood at Claiborne’s desk. Claiborne was reclined back in his office chair. It was obvious that they weren’t hard at work.

Must be nice, Gary thought. Since he didn’t have to apply himself either, he really couldn’t complain.

“Not much. What’s good with you?” he asked and nodded at Claiborne.

“Man, I was just telling Claiborne about that girl who works with you. You know, the new temp, Sharon?”

“What about her?”

“She is a freak,” he volunteered.

“What?” Gary egged the conversation on. “Why do you say that?”

“I took her out Friday and check this, I already hit that,” he said, his chest swelling. He stared from Gary to Claiborne, expecting a reaction. Claiborne just shook his head.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah man. Check this yo,” Anthony went on in his Hispanic accent. “She was all over me. I bent her over the

hood and banged it out real good. She was a screamer, too, yo.”

“For real?” Gary purposefully gave him a blank expression. It was a move he’d learned while gambling; never give anything away. He thought about his heated encounter with Sharon that same Friday afternoon in the mailroom. And here Anthony was practically beating his chest as his ego swelled. Anthony now thought he had one up on every man at Cobra Services. If Anthony only knew that he’d already fucked Sharon over the same stack of boxes that he stood next to. He wondered how macho Anthony would feel if he knew how he’d fucked the shit out of Sharon just hours before she was bent over his hood.

“So, y’all two kicking it now or something?” he asked casually.

“Psshhh. Hell Nah. That girl is crazy, yo and she’s a fucking gold-digger. I don’t make enough money to keep her happy, man.”

“Why you think she’s a gold-digger?”

“I left my paycheck stub in the car and she saw it. She told me to my face that I didn’t make enough. She saw that they deduct my child support payments, and she didn’t like that at all.”

“That’s low,” Gary empathized.

“For real,” Claiborne interjected. “I tried to warn Anthony about her, but he wouldn’t listen. He couldn’t see past the banging body and pretty face.”

“Aw, come on, Claiborne, you been buying her lunch every day since she came here, and now you’re the church pastor who warns Anthony about his lustful eye? You know you hit that, too,” Gary said teasingly. Anthony laughed.

“No way, man,” he denied quickly. “I don’t even play around like that. I take my job seriously. Contrary to popular belief, I don’t mess with anybody around here. I’m engaged,” he added proudly. “I just buy her lunch every now and then, but that’s about it.”

“If you say so,” Gary said skeptically. “I’m just sayin’, I ain’t seen you buy a broad like Rebecca lunch, and she seems cool. You know she’ll bake brownies, cakes, and cookies for you if you would buy her lunch just one time. Hell, she’ll be happy if you bring her a can or two of cat food. And who knows? You might even get lucky that day too.” Gary winked.

Anthony laughed uncontrollably at that point.

“Hell Nah, Gary. Rebecca is old as hell. I thought we were cool,” Claiborne said in an attempt to hide his embarrassment.

“We’re as cool as penguin feet,” Gary quipped. “But think about what I said. I bet your fiancée would feel a lot better

about you buying Rebecca lunch as opposed to buying Sharon lunch.”

Anthony was now curled against the wall struggling to get a sentence out and breathe at the same time. “Gary... stop it... I’m dying over here,” he managed to wheeze.

“Well, I gotta head on back. Y’all take it easy,” Gary said before Claiborne could mutter a response.

“Peace,” Anthony said.

“See you later,” Claiborne told him.

Gary wasn’t surprised by what he’d found out. He knew that Sharon had the capacity to be manipulative for the sake of getting what she wanted, ranging from \$5.00 lunches to emptying men’s wallets. He just hadn’t pegged her as a slut. Not that it would stop him from hooking up with her on a regular basis because he didn’t care one way or another. In fact, he liked her company because she was very easygoing and uninhibited. From his perspective, her sleeping with Anthony was no different from the women who rotated between three and four men.

He’s witnessed how promiscuous women could be during his high roller gambling days. When he ran an illegal poker game in West Memphis, Arkansas he knew scores of wives who sucked dick to settle gambling debts. In the name of a dollar, women would do just about anything.

He laughed at the thought of Sharon trying to gold-dig from Anthony or Claiborne. That was like trying to draw blood from a tulip. Gary didn't necessarily hold her actions against her. He saw her as a young, attractive woman who hadn't quite learned how to identify her mark.

He went to the break room to get a Pepsi and saw Vicki sitting at a table alone. He decided to just wave the white flag and bring the awkwardness between them to an end.

"Hey, Vicki. What's up?"

She glanced up from the magazine she'd been reading and smiled warily. "Nothing much. What's up with you?"

"Not much." He sat down across from her. "About the other night-" Before he could finish his statement, Sharon came out of nowhere.

"What's going on, Gary? You can't take a break with me, but you're sitting here with her." She stopped in front of him with her hands on her hips.

"Sharon, don't even start with me," Gary said. "Don't you see I'm busy right now?"

"Are we going to lunch together?" she insisted, glaring at Vicki.

"Hell no. How many times I got to tell you? Get one of those other simp ass niggas you trying to fuck to pay for your lunch," Gary snapped.

Vicki's mouth dropped open, but she said nothing. She pretended to be engrossed in the magazine in front of her.

"What?" Sharon's face turned red. "I can't believe you're talking to me like this."

"I agree, so for now I'll refrain from talking. I don't need to entertain your bullshit, anyway," Gary responded.

"I'll talk to you later after you've calmed down," she said and walked off in a huff.

"What the hell just happened?" Vicki asked, closing the magazine and pushing it away.

"It's a long story. I don't even want to get into it. Besides, my break is over," he stood and grabbed his Pepsi off the table.

"Mine, too. We better get back to our desks because Rebecca is taking notes on everybody."

"That nosey, liver spotted bitch needs to mind her own business. She'd get so much more accomplished if she didn't have her nose in everybody else's shit," Gary griped.

"I know, right?"

"I'm telling you, I don't know how much longer I can put up with working in this department. I'm just not reaching my potential."

"We're entering data, none of us are reaching our full potential," Vicki said. They saw Sharon glaring at them from

her position up front in the receptionist's area as they headed for their seats.

"Hey, if I dip out for lunch, and you don't see me, don't take it personal."

Vicki gave him a strange look. "Okay," she said, sitting down.

The day passed pretty fast. Gary spent his lunch break dodging Sharon. Every time he looked up, he'd catch her glaring at him from her seat. He didn't know how to handle it, so he just ignored her. He wished they'd move the receptionist area from his view.

"Hey, Vicki, let's go outside for our last break," he called to Vicki at three o'clock.

"Alright. You ready?"

"Yes." He got up and headed for the exit so fast that Vicki had to increase her pace to keep up with him. "Dang, Gary, you trying to run a marathon or what?" she asked, out of breath.

"Oh, my bad. I just need to get out of there."

When they got outside and sat down Vicki asked, "Are you going to tell me what's going on?"

"Nothing's going on," he denied. He didn't think he should drag Vicki into his problems. He'd handle things on his own. "I probably shouldn't even bring this up, but did

your ex try to contact you again after that episode at the Olive Garden?”

Vicki frowned. “No, thank God.”

“At least one positive thing came out of that night.” Gary gave her a sheepish grin. “I got out of paying for dinner since he turned over our food.” They laughed.

The good mood was broken when Sharon appeared.

“Gary, I want to know something?” she insisted. “Why are you avoiding me?”

“I’m not. I’m on a break,” he snapped.

“You have been rude to me all day, and I know it’s because of this black bitch,” she said viciously.

Vicki stood. “Who the hell are you calling a bitch?”

“Vicki, don’t entertain her bullshit. This is my problem, so I’m going to deal with it right now,” Gary told her. If looks could kill, Gary would be arrested for first degree murder. He got up and looked at Sharon like she was the lowest form of life on earth. “Don’t you ever disrespect Vicki or any of my friends like that again. When you disrespect my friends, you’re disrespecting me.”

“But-”

“But hell. Who the fuck do you think you are? You don’t call anybody a black bitch, with your Jennifer Lopez wannabe ass.” Gary didn’t look the same at that point. His face was glacier cold, and his eyes burned with rage. “You

are to walk the other way when you see me, and when I accidentally glance in your direction, turn your motherfucking head. If you see me having lunch with Vicki in the cafeteria, you pick up your shit and walk the fuck out. I don't give a fuck if you're eating with Donald Trump. Do you motherfucking understand me?"

Sharon sensed that Gary wasn't playing. She knew that she'd brought out his dark side, something she'd never thought to witness. She choked back tears as she hurried into the building, away from his wrath.

"Whoa," Vicki exclaimed, staring at Gary in astonishment. "Gary, I know you keep telling me that nothing's going on between you and that woman, but I find that hard to believe. Why is she acting like a jealous lover?"

"Look. It's like this. Something happened," he finally admitted. "But, I'll tell you all about it in due time. Right now, I'm too angry to talk about it. Let's put it this way: I made a big mistake."

"Well, handle your business. Don't end up losing your job over some floozy."

"How was I supposed to know that she was psycho?"

"I warned you about her from the beginning."

"If only I could turn back the hands of time," he said. "I hope I don't get home and find a bunny boiling on top of the stove."

“Oh my goodness,” Vicki exclaimed. “I hope it ain’t even that serious.”

“If you only knew,” Gary drawled as they headed back inside. He prayed that Sharon got the point and would squash everything right then and there.

When he sat down, he checked his emails and found one from Sharon. It stated he’d hurt her feelings and how she wasn’t used to being talked down to. He didn’t respond and deleted it. By the end of the day, she’d sent him several more that he ignored as well.

“Excuse me, Gary?” Rebecca called to him.

“Are you talking to me?” He was surprised because Rebecca rarely spoke to him. He thought she was afraid of black men.

She got up and came over to whisper. “I thought I should let you know this. That temp girl, she was on your desk looking for something.”

“What did she want from my desk?” He looked puzzled. “Ain’t nothing on here but forms, and she don’t process.”

“I don’t know. I just thought I’d let you know.” She went back to her seat and gathered up her things to go.

“Thanks, Rebecca,” he said as she headed out. Maybe she wasn’t such a busy-body after all. In this instance, he was glad she’d been nosey.

“You’re welcomed.”

Gary looked around, taking inventory of everything on his desk. He spotted his cell phone. Shit. He'd left it behind when he'd taken his break. Had Sharon gone through his numbers? He shook his head at the thought. She couldn't be that bold. However, he knew some young women did immature things like that. He logged off the computer and left. He was walking across the parking lot to his car when his cell rang.

"Hello?"

"Gary, this is Sharon. Why won't you answer my emails?" she asked.

"Wait. Wait. Wait. Hold up. How did you get my number?" He knew she must have gotten it off the screen of his cell phone. The sneaky bitch.

"Never you mind that. Why are you treating me so badly after what we shared?"

"Look here, we didn't share shit. You hear me? That lil romp in the mailroom was nothing. It doesn't give you a right to assume that I belong to you," Gary said harshly.

"I really like you, Gary. You are so different from the other men that I have met. I just thought we could be something more than just friends."

"Sharon, chill with that bullshit, okay? First, we work together. Second, you got a problem with disrespecting my friends. I don't appreciate how you've been acting since we fucked. I can't deal with you."

“How can you treat me so badly after you’ve fucked me, huh?” Her tone was angry. “How dare you treat me like some common whore?”

“What the fuck ever, Sharon. Don’t call me anymore with this bullshit. Lose my number.”

“Don’t hang up on me Gary, or you will regret it,” she hissed, her accent more pronounced because of her anger.

“Meet my friend, Click.” He disconnected the call.

When Gary got home, he was aggravated. His mood didn’t improve when he received several more calls from Sharon. He finally turned his cell phone off to avoid cursing her out.

Later, he began working on his company’s website. He needed some ad copies that would stand out. He’d tried writing his own, but they seemed dull. Building his own website was getting to be frustrating. It would be so much simpler if he’d let someone else do it. He wracked his brain trying to figure out someone who could assist him. He gave up, turned his cell phone back on and dialed Vicki’s number.

“Hey, Gary, how are you?” she greeted.

“I’m, grrr, okay.”

She giggled. “You don’t sound okay. What’s going on?”

“Not much. I’ve just been working on this website and ran into a blockade. I need somebody who can write eye-catching

ads. You wouldn't happen to know a copy editor, do you?" he half-joked.

"Actually, I do," she said seriously. "Janelle does all that stuff. She has a bachelor's degree in communications. She used to work for the St. Petersburg Times as a copy editor. She'd probably be able to help you out."

"I don't know about that-" he said, dejectedly. "She didn't really seem to like me that much."

"She just doesn't know you. I'm sure my girl will help. Let me call her and I'll call you back. Ok?"

"Okay," he said half-heartedly, and they hung up.

After their interaction at Vicki's place, he wasn't sure if Janelle could stand to be around him. He'd just wait and see.

He went to take a shower. Just as he walked back into the room wearing only a towel, his cell rang.

He almost ignored the unfamiliar number, thinking it was Sharon calling to bother him. Sighing in frustration he snatched up the phone. He'd have to deal with her once and for all.

"Hello?" he practically barked into the receiver.

"Um- hello? Is this Gary?"

"Yes, this is he. Who's calling?" he asked, recognizing that the voice wasn't Sharon's.

"Hello. This is Janelle. Vicki called me and said you needed some help. What's up?"

“Oh, Janelle. How are you?” He switched to his pleasant voice.

“I’m fine. What about you?” she asked hesitantly.

“I’m better now that you’re on the phone,” he flirted, but she didn’t fall for it. She got straight to business. The conversation was brief. Gary described what he need for his website, and she said she’d come over in about an hour. As soon as he hung up, another call came through. He answered.

“Gary, I hope you like eggs.” It was Sharon, but before he could answer, she hung up.

“What the hell does she mean by that?” he thought aloud.

Chapter Twenty

When Terrence showed up with his mother, he was glad Tenesha was there. She took over and tended to Mrs. James like she was a wounded bird. After Mrs. James fell asleep in the guest room, Terrence sat down to talk.

“Tenesha, I just found out some heavy shit. I need you to do me a favor.”

“Anything, boo. What is it?”

“Can you stay here and make sure my mother doesn’t disappear? I have to go tend to some business.”

“It’s kind of late, Terrence. What kind of business you got to tend to?”

“Look, Tenesha. Let’s get one thing straight. You don’t question me. You need to learn how to let a man be a man. If it’s something that you need to know, I’ll tell you.

Understand?” She nodded, looking hurt. “Now, will you stay here and look after my mama?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Okay.”

“I got them ribs that you wanted,” he said more gently. “I got you a slice of sweet potato pie, too. It’s on the table.”

“Thank you, boo. I love me some sweet potato pie.” She beamed at him, forgetting all about her feelings being hurt. Terrence’s moods were something she had to get used to.

“I’ll be back,” he repeated and left.

Terrence drove around looking for the address his mother had given him. The apartment was down a dark alley off Martin Luther King Street and 18th Avenue South. The place looked seedy. Broke pimps and small-time drug dealers sat on the steps. They sized Terrence up as he walked up the stairs. He wanted one of those young motherfuckers to try him so he could crack his head open. He’d make an example out the nigga and teach him how to respect his elders.

He used the key that he’d gotten from his mama and let himself in. The living room was damn near bare, without much furniture. Newspapers and of course, crack pipes, littered the floor. There wasn’t even a television. If she’d ever had one, she’d probably sold it for dope.

He walked to the back and pushed opened the door of the bedroom. He didn’t know what he expected to find. His heart pounded in his throat as he hit the light switch.

“Shit.”

He didn’t see Uncle Frank, but the room looked a mess. Clothes and shoes were everywhere. A small garbage can was

filled with used condoms and hypodermic needles. A cracked lamp was overturned. He saw a trail of blood leading from the bedroom to what he assumed was the bathroom.

“Uncle Frank?” he called. “Are you in there?” He didn’t get an answer.

Checking the bathroom, he found it empty. He saw a bottle of Peroxide and some cotton gauges on the lid of the toilet. Bloody tissue paper had been thrown in the garbage can. Uncle Frank must have cleaned himself up and bandaged his head.

The motherfucker wasn’t dead, but when Terrence finished with him, he would wish that he was.

Even though it was late, he headed to his grandmother’s house. Since Uncle Frank had allegedly left the drug gang, he sponged off his mama. He was sure he’d find him there.

Terrence leaned on the doorbell. Frank answered with a scowl on his face.

“What the fuck is your probl-” he began, but Terrence cut off his words with a hard, right cross. Frank fell back into the living room. Terrence was on him like a pit bull on a Chihuahua. He picked his uncle up and flung him on the glass coffee table. It shattered as he went through it.

“My Lord. What in the world is going on?” Mrs. James hurried into the living room and struggled to pull Terrence off

Frank. "Terrence. Terrence. Child, why are you fighting your uncle?"

"This ain't my uncle," he snarled. "This no good mother-" He had to catch himself. "This no good bastard," He glared at Frank, and lowered his voice so only he could hear "is my daddy."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Frank shouted, not bothering to respect his mother's house.

"Mama told me the whole story. She told me everything. And don't you dare try to stand here and deny it. If you do, I swear to God, I'll kill you." He was breathing hard, nostrils flaring, as he stared his father in the eye.

"This ain't the time or place to talk about this," Frank hissed. "I don't want Mama to get upset." He glanced at his mother, who'd placed her hand to her heart.

"It's too late for that. I'm already upset. All this racket and carrying on," Mrs. James said.

"Mama, it's okay. I'll handle this. You go on back to bed."

"I don't think so. Y'all acting like heathens in my house, and I want to know why," she said stubbornly.

Terrence looked at his grandmother whom he loved dearly and knew he couldn't break her heart. The news about her son being a rapist would probably kill her. He hated his

father, but the love he had for his grandmother outweighed that hate.

“Everything’s cool, Grandma. I’m sorry for clowning in your house, but Uncle Frank and I have a bone to pick. We’ll do it some other time. Go on back to bed. Everything is okay. I promise.” She stared from him to Frank, shook her head and went back into her bedroom, closing the door behind her.

“Terrence, I don’t know what ya mama done told you, but it’s lies,” Frank said hurriedly.

“I don’t think so. She wouldn’t lie about what she told me. You, you rat-slime motherfucker, are my biological father.”

Frank stared at Terrence. He looked at him as he’d never done before. That’s when he saw the resemblance. It didn’t really move him, even though he hadn’t known the truth. For the most part, he’d treated Terrence like an uncle treated a nephew. There really wasn’t any bad blood between them.

“What the fuck are you staring at?” Terrence got tired of being scrutinized.

“So she said that you’re my son, huh? There ain’t no way in hell I could produce a weak ass punk like you.” Frank got in his face, reverting back to the big-time drug dealer tactics he used to intimidate others. “Your lying ass whore of a mother is addicted to crack. All types of men done fucked her. How in the hell can you believe the word of a crack whore? Huh?” he hissed. “You a bold motherfucker trying

me like this. Do you know who the fuck I am? Do you, punk?”

He was so close that Terrence could feel the spittle from the words land on his face. “Nigga, if you ever bring this shit up again, I’ll beat your ass and your mama’s ass. I will put you and that crack smoking bitch in an early grave. I ain’t never was and ain’t never going to be your daddy.” He pointed in Terrence’s face menacingly. “Now, get your pussy ass out of here and go beg your ex-bitch to take you back.”

Terrence was so filled with hatred for Frank at that moment he had difficulty swallowing it down. If his grandmother wasn’t in the next room, he probably would have lunged at him and grabbed his throat. He wanted to tear him apart with his bare hands.

“Your day is going to come, Uncle Frank.” He curled his lips in disgust. “You’re not worthy enough to be called Daddy anyway.” He walked out of the house with his head held high. He’d be damned if he’d ever let any motherfucker see him sweat.

When Terrence got back to his apartment, Tenesha was asleep on the couch. He walked quietly past her and went into the guest room. He gently shook his mother awake.

“Mama. Wake up. I need you to do something for me.”

“Huh?” she mumbled sleepily.

“Mama. Uncle Frank ain’t dead. I saw him and he’s very much alive. I need your help.”

“What baby?” She sat up rubbing the sleep from her eyes. “What is it, Terrence? You been crying? What’s the matter? What happened?”

“I don’t want to talk about it, Mama.” His face was stone hard, with traces of dried tears. “I believe everything that you told me. It’s time for Uncle Frank to reap what he has sown.”

The next morning, Tenesha left after cooking breakfast. His mother remained undecided about checking into the drug treatment center. Terrence didn’t want to pressure her. He knew in order for it to work she had to decide to do it for herself.

“I want you to stay here with me, Mama,” he told her. “Now that I know you’re safe, I want to keep it that way.”

“What about Frank?” she asked nervously.

“He doesn’t know where you are, so he can’t get to you. He’ll have to go through me to do that anyway, and that ain’t happening.” He kept thinking about how Frank had disrespected him, trying to make him feel little and insignificant. He didn’t like that.

“He’s always been a bully,” Tasha told her son. “He’d just make me do whatever he wanted. If I didn’t, he’d beat me

up.” As she took a sip out of her cup of lukewarm coffee, her hand trembled. “I remember one time I refused to let him have his way. He went outside and filled a pillowcase with grapefruits. He came back in the house and beat me with that pillowcase full of fruit. It was the worst beating I ever got in my life. I was sore and could barely walk for a week. I had bruises all over my body.”

“Damn.”

“And some of the mean, horrible things he would do to me...you wouldn’t believe it.”

“Yes I would,” he said bitterly. “I’d believe anything you told me about that low-life.”

“He’d torture me just for the hell of it. He would burn me with a cigarette lighter or matches. He’d put cigarettes out on me. Once, he even shoved a lighter up my pu-”

“Mama- please, I can’t listen,” he said quickly.

“Oh, okay. I’m sorry, baby. I know it must be hard for you to hear all of this. Think about the hell I went through, living it.”

“Mama, I know it’s not your fault, but why-” He hesitated. “Why didn’t you tell somebody? Why?”

Her eyes became glazed as she spoke. “I remember that first time when he got into my bed. He pressed a butcher knife to my throat and said he’d kill me if I ever told. He raped me repeatedly that night, made me do some despicable

things. Twelve-year-old girls shouldn't ever have to do things like that. But, he said he'd kill me and I believed him." She took another swallow from her cup and cleared her throat. "Later on, he'd press a gun to my head...or...he'd put it...put it between my legs. I just couldn't tell, Terrence. I just couldn't tell anybody...not even Mama. Especially not Mama," she shook her head. "You know how Mama is. Frank can do no wrong in her eyes."

"Oh, Mama." Terrence sighed. His heart bled for her. He now understood, somewhat, why she tried to block out the pain by using drugs.

"When I started using cocaine, it made me numb. When I was high, I couldn't feel him on top of me. I could forget all the vile things he did to me. While I was high, I just didn't give a shit no more."

"Mama, you're gonna be okay. I really want you to get straightened out. A drug treatment program is the best thing for you," he told her seriously. "I'll help you get through it. I missed out on knowing you all these years. We got a chance to reconnect...if you want it."

"This life is the only one I know, Terrence."

"But, it doesn't have to be."

"Drugs or no drugs, I'll never be free as long as Frank is around."

"He doesn't deserve to be alive," he said aloud.

Ex-boyfriend

And I know how to be rid of him for good, he thought.

Chapter Twenty-One

Janelle arrived and Gary invited her inside.

“Do you drive a big car? A Chevy or something?” she asked as she followed him into the living room.

“Yeah. Why?”

“I think somebody egged your car.”

“What the fuck?” Gary rushed outside and stared in disbelief at the gooey mess on his front and back windshields.

Janelle had followed him, and she stared in amusement. “Who the hell have you pissed off, now?” She smirked. “I promise you, I didn’t do it.”

Gary actually laughed. “I know you didn’t do it. This psycho bitch that I work with did it.”

“What did you do to her?”

“If I tell you, you’ll think I’m an even bigger jerk.”

“Try me.”

“Let me rinse this shit off my car. You can go on inside and make yourself comfortable.” His eyes traveled up and down the form-fitting sweater dress she wore. He took in the leather boots with the five-inch heels. “My bed is very inviting,” he added. She just rolled her eyes and went back inside.

Gary wasn't as upset about the egged car as he was about Sharon finding out where he lived. She really had taken things to another level, and she didn't want to go there with him. He was the wrong one. She, just as others in the past, mistakenly took his easy-going ways and handsome looks for a sign of weakness.

He rinsed the car off and went inside. Janelle sat at his computer. When he looked over her shoulder, he saw that she'd already come up with some capturing titles for his website. It impressed him.

"You're good at this," he said.

"I'm good at a lot of things," she replied sassily.

"I just bet you are," he said seductively.

"Gary, if you're one of those player types, let me get one thing straight, don't mess with me. You'll end up getting played," she warned.

"Sweetheart, I'm far from being a player. I just want what I want when I want it."

Their eyes meet. The chemistry between them was strong.

"Exactly, what do you want?" she challenged.

"Right now, I want you." Gary smiled.

"You couldn't handle a real woman like me, Gary," she said, shooting down his ego. "Now, let's get back to this website." She focused on the computer screen. "What I've gathered from what you have so far is that you're selling

audio books. Therefore, the goal of your ad copy is to sell.” He nodded. “What I want you to do is make me a list of the benefits your product can offer your customers. I’ll use that as main points in the copy.”

Gary couldn’t argue about Janelle knowing her stuff. He sat and jotted down what she wanted then gave it to her.

“What now?” he asked.

“What I’m going to do is work with what you already have, and what you’ve given me. Generally the major components of ad copy should include: a compelling and captivating headline,” she explained. “There should be a description of the features and benefits of the product or service. And you’ll want to have the unique selling proposition, USP, of the product or service.”

“What’s that, USP?” he asked out of genuine curiosity.

“It’s what makes your product stand out from others like it. What can you offer above and beyond your competitors?”

“I get it. It’s like what makes me unique. In a sense, why would they want what I got to offer as opposed to someone else who’s selling something similar?”

“You catch on quick,” she teased.

“Hey, I’m serious about generating enough income to quit my fucking boring ass job- eventually.”

“What are your audio books about?” she asked.

“If I tell you, I’d have to kill you,” he joked.

“Since I don’t want to be murdered, I think I’ll just read this description that’s right in front of me,” she said. She took a few minutes to browse his site. “Impressive,” she told him. “I guess there really is more to you than a pretty face.”

“Well, if you say so. If you followed me to my bedroom, I could show you so much more.”

“I’m not going there with you, Gary.”

“Why not? We’re both consenting adults. I’m single. You’re single. Why shouldn’t we help each other out?”

“I’m not some booty call or loose woman,” she told him. “Besides, you’re Vicki’s friend.”

Gary slowly approached Janelle and leaned in close when she looked back at the laptop monitor. “I never said you were, sweetie. The operating word in you describing me and Vicki is *friend*. We’re friends and co-workers, nothing more,” he said, lowering his voice. “You’re a responsible adult and I’m a responsible adult, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Gosh, this is so uncharacteristic of me, but I’m really feeling you,” she admitted.

“I’d like to be feeling you, if you know what I mean.”

“Ooh, you ain’t right. You know I’ve been celibate for a while. Why are you tempting me?” she asked.

“Because you tempted me from the moment I first saw you, even with your sassy attitude. Now look, I have some good news for you. You don’t have to remain celibate for

another month, week, day or hour. I'mma slide this dick in you tonight."

Janelle's demeanor changed, and she quickly rose from the chair. "You ain't sliding shit in me, you rude motherfucker," she snapped. "You're a bit too cocky and arrogant for your own good. Don't assume shit concerning me."

"Don't be like that, baby doll. It's just me and you here," Gary assured, not quite understanding why she'd gotten offended.

"I'm not your fucking baby doll. Who do you think you are?" she asked hotly. "You're talking to me like I'm one of those hoodrat bitches you're used to fucking."

Sensing Janelle's frustration, Gary backed down. Maybe he'd been coming on too hard and going at things the wrong way. She was, after all, a classy woman. He decided to kill her with kindness and his sense of humor. He didn't want to run her off. He'd read that she really wanted him, and he usually wasn't wrong when it came to reading women.

"If you have half the fire in bed that you have in your attitude then you're a bad motherfucker," he teased. "Come on, you can tell me the truth. Your secret's safe with me," he quipped jovially.

Janelle giggled and relaxed a bit. "You're something else, Gary."

“Looks like we got something in common after all,” he said, wrapping his arms around her waist and looking seductively into her eyes. She sighed, which convinced him that he’d guessed correctly: she wanted him.

“It’s okay to give in, Janelle. I’ll give in to you, too,” he whispered. He leaned in and kissed her. At first she stood still, not responding. He slipped his tongue past her lips, and she moaned. Finally, she kissed him back.

As they French kissed, tongues playing tag, the sexual tension switched to raw passion. Overcome with emotions, they quickly undressed. Butt naked, they took turns kissing each other’s bodies.

Gary palmed Janelle’s ample ass and sucked her perky breasts into his mouth. Her dark, chocolate colored, smooth skin turned him on. He lifted her up and she instinctively straddled his waist while still embracing him. He carried her into his bedroom in-between kisses and playful slaps on her ass cheeks. Janelle moaned in anticipation, kissing his neck and nibbling on his earlobe. She was soaking wet by the time Gary laid her down on the bed, reached for a condom, and eased into her. She cried out in pure ecstasy.

“Ooh, Gary, it feels so good. Um.Um.Um,” she moaned, licking her lips as he stared into her face. Seeing the expressions of joy and pleasure excited him. He plunged into her faster, gradually increasing the speed. Her tight vaginal

walls hugging his thick stiff penis turned him on even more. He continued to thrust into her. The combination of her moistness and the tension from her tightness drove him wild.

“Shit,” he swore. “I’ll do more than just give in. I’ll surrender.”

In response, Janelle rose to meet him, rotating her hips like a locomotive. She was gone, clawing at his back with her sharp nails and screaming his name as she reached an explosive orgasm. Gary came so hard that he saw bright lights.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Gary thought long and hard about how to handle Sharon. The little vixen wouldn't let up. He could deal with her acting catty on the job, but when she attacked his property, she crossed the line. No one got away with fucking with his personal shit.

Monday morning, he arrived at work early. Only a few people were already working, having arrived between 7:00 am and 7:30 am. Since Sharon's shift didn't begin until 8:00, it gave him time to have a talk with Thomas.

Thomas sat at his desk, working diligently as he always did. He really did put his all into his job, just like a square. It wasn't like the manager was even in, so he wasn't trying to impress her.

Gary approached his desk. "What's up, Thomas? How's it going?"

"Good morning, Gary. What's going on?"

"Not much, man. I know I'm not supposed to complain about my job to my boss, but entering claims all day is dull," he admitted.

"I know what you mean. I entered claims when I got hired three years ago. It was pretty monotonous. Hey, listen. This is between you and me, but I may be transferring to Flexible

Spending Accounts. So, this position will be vacant. I've looked you up, man. You're more than qualified for this job. Why don't you go for it?"

"I don't know."

"It pays about \$35,000. The benefits are great, and it's not hard to do at all," he said. "You really should go for it. It's better than data entry."

"Well, I'll think bout." Gary seemed to contemplate something. "Hey, what do you think about the new temp?"

Thomas's face immediately brightened. "Sharon? She's amazing. She does a great job as the receptionist. Actually, she's the best receptionist we've had so far."

"Really?"

"Yes. She's really a hard worker. She gets here on time every day. She stays late if I need her to, and she has a pleasant attitude."

You just haven't pissed her off.

"There's something else that I'd like to keep between us," Thomas said lowly.

"You don't say? What is it?" Gary was amazed how people just trusted him with their personal business.

"I've been dating her outside of the job. She's the best, Gary. She's everything I've ever wanted in a woman. I think she's my soul mate."

“No, no, no, no, no.” Gary shook his head in the negative.
“Dating her is not such a good idea, Thomas.”

“Well, why not?” Thomas seemed truly shocked.

“Thomas, look around you.” Thomas did as instructed.
“See all these brown, dark-brown, beige, and light-skinned sisters? If word gets out that you’ve bypassed them for a Latino, all hell could break loose.”

“I kind of see what you’re saying.” Thomas didn’t sound too sure.

“Man, I’m telling you, sisters can cause a lot of problems when they think they’ve been shunned. Trust me, if word got out, you can kiss that promotion goodbye.”

“What should I do, Gary?” He looked troubled. “I kind of told her that she could expect to be hired on permanently.”

“Hire her on permanently only if you want to kill your own career,” he warned. “The best thing you can do is to have her transferred to another company. That way, you can save your own ass, and you can still keep dating her. You feel me?”

Thomas brightened. “I think I do. So, how should I go about doing that?”

“Just call up the agency and tell them funding got cut and the position is no longer available. Give her a glowing recommendation though. With her skills and qualifications,

she'll have no problem getting another assignment right away."

"I knew there was a reason I liked you, Gary. You seem to have all the answers," Thomas said brightly.

Gary smiled secretively. What he had was game. Soon, he'd have his peace of mind without Sharon staring him down all the time. He'd like to be a fly on the wall when Thomas gave her the news. She had some nerve egging his car. Payback would be a bitch.

Later that day, he found Vicki in the break room. He wondered why she wasn't speaking to him. She'd been behaving peculiarly all morning.

"Hey, what's up?" She gave him a look, but didn't respond. "Dang, what the hell did I do?"

"It's not what did you do, but *who*," she stressed the last word.

"Oh, I get it. This cold shoulder is about your girl Janelle. I guess she filled you in on what happened between us last night."

"Gary, how could you? I thought I told you that my friends were off limits."

"Vicki, you don't control my dick, and until you start giving me some pussy, I can fuck anybody I want to," he said defensively.

Vicki crossed her arms and sat in silence. They stared each other down until Sharon entered the break room. Gary took his eyes off Vicki to watch his back. Sharon's eyes were red-rimmed and puffy like she'd been crying. She got a diet Coke from the vending machine. She was heading back out, but suddenly spun on her heels and confronted Gary.

"I know you had something to do with me not getting hired on permanently," she hissed. "I just know it."

Gary gave her an innocent look. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I just bet. *Beso mi culo.*" She flung her hair over her shoulder and stalked off. "*Puto.*"

"Did that bitch just cuss me out in another language? She got some nerve. She egged my motherfucking car and now she wants to play victim. What the fuck?"

Vicki's anger toward Gary dissipated. He seemed to be catching hell from Sharon. She didn't need to add to his stress. She just raised her brow quizzically.

"Vicki, I'm sorry for snapping at you," he apologized. "Let's meet up later, clear the air, and talk about some things."

"We can do that," she agreed.

"How about we meet at Borders? We can talk over coffee."

"That's fine. What time?"

Teresa D. Patterson

“Right after work, unless you have other plans,” he added, not wanting to assume anything. He had a bad habit of doing that, apparently.

“My schedule is clear. I’ll meet you there.”

“Good. Since that’s settled, I pray that I make it through the rest of this week without getting my throat slit by Attila the Hun.”

Vicki couldn’t help but laugh. “Are you referring to Sharon?”

“Talk about misreading a person. I was way off with that one.”

“Oh, well it happens sometimes. Did you hear the good news?” Vicki asked, getting up.

“You saved on your insurance by switching to Geico?”

“No you silly goose. Rebecca is retiring.”

“Holy shit. Now, that’s the best news I’ve heard this month. I hope she didn’t bake a damn cake for the occasion. We’ll be choking down hair balls, cat paws and all types of nasty shit.”

“Not this time. It’s being ordered from Publix. I made sure of that.”

“Vicki, you’re a genius.” He grinned her way as he held the door so she could walk through. Slyly, he brushed against her.

“I try my best,” she grinned back and winked, not missing the move he’d made.

At Borders, they ordered coffee and found a secluded table toward the back of the store.

“Tell me something, Vicki,” Gary began. “Why should it matter to you that I slept with Janelle?”

“It’s just...well, kind of trifling...on Janelle’s part,” she said slowly.

“Wait a minute. Why would you say that? Has Janelle always been trifling? She ever slept with any of your past boyfriends?”

“No. She’s not like that,” Vicki admitted.

“Then why in this instance would you refer to her as trifling?”

“I don’t know. I guess, when I think about it, she isn’t trifling at all. She didn’t even know.”

“Didn’t know what?” he pried.

“She didn’t know how I felt about you.” She avoided his gaze.

“Look at me, Vicki. How do you feel? The time to put all the cards on the table is now.”

Teresa D. Patterson

She stared him in the eye. "I'm not sure, Gary. I mean, at first, I just liked you as a friend. The more I began to hang around you and get to know you, I realized that I cared."

He held her gaze for a moment. "Is that nigga Terrence out of your system?"

"I haven't given him a second thought. And for the record, I've changed my home phone number. As soon as my contract with Sprint is up, I'm switching to AT&T and will have a new cell number. He won't be able to contact me anymore."

"You ready to pull out that sexy lingerie for me?" he asked with a glint in his eyes.

She blushed shyly. "I'll even do a strip tease."

"On a serious tip, you shouldn't let what happened between me and Janelle come between y'all. You and she were friends before me, and you'll be friends after me. Don't ever let some dick break up a bond like that. True friends are hard to come by."

"You're right." Vicki took a swig out of her vanilla latte. Their eyes met again.

"Now back to us. What outfit you gonna pull out for G-ball?"

"How about the French maid costume?"

"You want to be the clean up woman tonight, huh?"

"Tonight?" she asked, hesitantly.

Ex-boyfriend

“Why wait? Don’t you think we’ve wasted enough time already? Besides, I want to suck you up like you’re doing that vanilla latte.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

“It’s done,” a raspy voice whispered through the phone. Terrence hung up and reclined on the couch, smoking a blunt. In a few minutes, he’d act out his biggest role. The stage had been set; the characters predetermined.

He finished his blunt, put the bud out in the ashtray and pulled on a pair of leather gloves. The ski mask was tucked away in his pocket. He’d put it on once he arrived at his destination.

Terrence didn’t feel any emotion. He knew he had to carry out what he’d already set into motion. There would be no turning back.

He thought it would be easy: just pull the trigger, put a couple of bullets in his head. It would all be over. He could walk away and not look back.

It didn’t happen like that, though. Frank begged and pleaded like a little bitch. Terrence finally lost his temper and pistol whipped him. While he cowered in the tub, bleeding from his nose and mouth Terrence stood over him.

“Please don’t kill me. Just get the money and drugs and go. Just don’t kill me. Please.” Frank thought the robber was some random thug, but he was mistaken.

“Did you have any mercy when Tasha begged you to stop raping her? Did you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Frank said.

“Don’t fucking insult my intelligence, Uncle Frank,” Terrence snarled through the ski mask.” Frank finally recognized the voice and knew it was Terrence when he stared into the cold eyes. “Or should I call you *Daddy*?”

“Terrence, I’m sorry for what I did to your mother. I swear to God.”

“No the fuck you’re not sorry. You never even admitted it. You called her a liar and you denied that I’m your seed.” He aimed the gun right between Frank’s eyes. Those eyes were so like his, and he never wanted to stare into them again. “That hurt me more than you’ll ever know.”

“I’m sorry, Terrence. Don’t shoot. I’m your father.” Frank stood up in the tub and backed against the wall, his hands out, pleading. “Don’t kill me. Please.”

The silencer stopped the bullets from resounding through the air. They connected with Frank’s flesh and he slid down the tile, leaving a bloody trail. He grabbed onto the shower curtain and it popped from the hooks from his weight. His body hit the bottom of the tub with a thud. Terrence stared into his father’s eyes until all the life seeped from them.

“That’s for Mama,” he whispered.

He went into his mother's living room and handed a roll of money to a man. "It's been nice doing business with you," he said through the mask.

"Bet it up," the unknown man replied, counting the money Terrence had given him. "What do you want me to do with the body?"

"Handle trash like trash," he told him, and exited out into the night.

He'd come by foot. Nothing would be traced back to him. He'd carefully planned it all out. They'd never find out what had happened. It would be ruled as a drug deal gone wrong. One thing about the hood: drug deals went bad all the time. It would be nothing new. It probably wouldn't even make the paper.

Now that it was over, he thought he'd feel something: happiness, sadness, remorse. He just felt empty. At least one good thing had come from all the bad: his mother checked herself into the drug rehabilitation center. For that, he was grateful.

She'd have a chance at a real life. They'd have an opportunity to build a mother-son relationship. He could finally gain some peace. He'd chased his demons for long enough. Now it was time for him to rest.

He wanted to call Vicki one last time and apologize for the hell he'd caused in her life. He now knew that he'd been

trying to hang on to her for all the wrong reasons. Trying to control someone's life wasn't right. Taking someone's power away from them was wrong and sadistic. Frank had done all those things to his mother, and look at how it had ended. He considered himself a better man than his father. He wouldn't follow in his footsteps. He had to let Vicki know how sorry he was, and to let her go.

He dialed her cell phone.

"Hello?" a gruff voice answered.

"Vicki?" It didn't sound like her unless she had a cold.

"Vicki, is that you?"

"Hell no this isn't Vicki, but you got the right number," the man on the other end said. "Vicki's in the bathroom trying on some sexy lingerie to model for me. In a minute, she'll be standing in front of me doing a strip tease. She's no longer your woman and I'm about to make her mine. Terrence, do you and Vicki a favor, stop calling."

"What? Who the fuck is this?" he demanded. "Put Vicki on the phone."

"Fuck you." Terrence heard a dial tone. Once again an all consuming rage overcame him. Instantly, he began to run at top speed through the streets, heading for Vicki's place. It didn't take him long to get there because he was in the vicinity.

Out of breath, shaking with rage, he stood on her doorstep and rang the doorbell. After ten minutes of ringing and knocking, it became obvious that she wasn't going to answer.

"This is some bullshit," he swore.

He went to the side of the house where her bedroom was located and peered in the window. The curtains were thin, so he could see the two figures entwined on the velvet sheets. He could hear Vicki moaning in ecstasy. He wanted to hurl himself through the glass.

Back at the front door, he thought about kicking it in like the five-o, but that would cause a commotion. He didn't want any nosey neighbors to show up. This time, that nigga was his, and nothing would stop him from whipping that ass.

Vicki hadn't locked the deadbolt. He used a credit card to pick the lock and crept in silently. The living room was lit up with candles. He saw a bottle of champagne on the coffee table. Roses littered the carpet and a trail of petals led to the bedroom. On his way, he recognized a French maid outfit and his heart nearly stopped. For a minute, he couldn't breathe. Vicki never wore a French maid outfit for him.

He heard Vicki calling, 'Gary, Gary, Gary. Oh shit, I'm coming' and screamed as she climaxed. It infuriated him.

He threw the door open and barged into the room. They were lying in each other's arms, spent from their lovemaking. They didn't even hear him enter.

He hit the switch and flooded the room with light. They jumped apart, startled.

“Vicki, what the fuck is going on?” he yelled.

“Terrence, how did you get in here?” Vicki gasped, pulling the sheet over her nakedness. Gary jumped up and put on his boxers. He turned to confront Terrence.

“Nigga, you done fucked up,” he said, coming toward Terrence.

“No, you’re the one that’s done fucked up, fucking my lady. I guess I’m gonna have to kill two motherfuckers tonight.” Terrence reached for the gun hidden in his waistline. When he pulled it out, Gary didn’t even flinch. Vicki screamed and hit the floor. She tried to crawl under the bed just in case Terrence began shooting.

Within seconds, the gun was on the far side of the room and Terrence lay in a heap on the floor. Gary had round-housed him with little effort. Now, he stood over him glaring into his face.

“What the fuck possessed you to come in here on us like that? Nigga, don’t you know that I have a right to kill you?”

Terrence got up and tried to go hand-to-hand combat with Gary. He was no match. Gary hit him so many times that he resembled a bobble headed doll. His head just rocked back and forth.

“Oh my God. Oh my God.” Vicki screamed from her hiding place. “Should I call the police?”

“No, I can handle this,” Gary assured her. “You go on in the other room and let me deal with this chump.” Vicki hurriedly did as instructed.

Terrence tried to head for the door, but Gary put a few stealth moves on him that landed him on the floor again. He pounced on him and commenced to beat him like he’d stolen from his mother. “This will be the last time you disrespect me. And, it will be the last time that you ever fucking lay eyes on Vicki again. Do you understand that motherfucker?”

“Uh, uh,” he shook his head. “No.”

“What the fuck do you mean no?” Gary grabbed him by the throat and squeezed. “Nigga, you ain’t got a choice in the matter.”

“Vicki...I can’t...I can’t live without her.” Gary released him when he began turning blue in the face.

“I should kill you...but I won’t.” He clenched and unclenched his fist, contemplating hitting him one final time.

Once Terrence caught his breath, he looked Gary straight in the eye. “You might as well take that gun and blow my fucking brains out right now. I don’t want to live if I can’t get Vicki back.”

“You ‘bout one sorry motherfucker.” Gary glared at him in disgust. “I thought you were all big and bad the way you came at me on the basketball court that day. You ain’t shit.”

Unexpectedly, Terrence burst into tears. He cried like his heart was breaking. Gary almost felt sorry for him, but he wouldn’t allow that.

“Shut up that damn crying, shit. Man up.” Terrence continued to whimper and curled into the fetal position. “Nigga, you want me to hit you in your motherfucking chest? If you don’t stop crying like a lil bitch, I’ll chop your ass in the throat. Get your ass up off that floor, sit up like a man and face me.”

Terrence pulled himself together somewhat. He continued to wipe away the tears with the palms of his hands.

“You look like a hot, ghetto mess. Who ever saw a grown fucking ass man cry like that? What’s wrong with you? Do you need me to call the folks with the padded wagon?”

Terrence shook his head. “You sure ‘bout that? They got a straight jacket with your monogram on it. You on medication or something?” Again, Terrence shook his head. “The way you’ve been carrying on, I think you might need a prescription for Prozac or some shit. Your ass is crazier than bat shit.”

“You can’t be all that together yourself,” Terrence finally managed to say, sniffing. “Not the way you just attacked me.”

“Attacked you? Are you fucking serious?” He glared at Terrence menacingly. “What the fuck would you have advised me to do? You broke into the house and pulled a gun on me.”

“You was fucking my lady.” His face bawled up like he would cry again. Catching the furious look on Gary’s face, he sucked it down.

“She’s not yours, man. Don’t you get it? If you don’t, then I’m dialing Horizon Health right now to have them Baker Act your ass.”

“Man, I am not crazy,” Terrence said in exasperation.

“Then explain what the fuck you’ve been going through for the last couple of months. Let me see, first you fucked another woman and got kicked to the curb. Then, you decided to stalk Vicki and make her take you back. You tried to run her off the road. You sliced her fucking tires. You attempted to snatch her at the mall. Next, you poured oil in her friend’s car. You showed your ass at the restaurant. Last but not least, you broke in here.”

Terrence hung his head in shame. “I can’t explain it,” he mumbled. “I don’t know what happened. All my life, I just felt so alone...until I met Vicki. She was the only woman

who made me feel worth something. I mean, I changed my whole life, the way I did things, the way I thought, my outlook, everything because of Vicki. Man, I love her.”

“Did you think about love when you fucked the project bitch?”

“Are you talking about Tenesha? Man, Vicki been telling you too much of my business.” He sucked air through his teeth in irritation.

“We’re friends. That’s what friends do,” Gary said. “Well, did you think about love, then? Hell no, you didn’t,” he answered for himself. “While you slid your dick all off up in Tekita, Tiquanesha, whatever her name was, you weren’t giving Vicki a second thought. Tell the truth.”

“Man.” Terrence didn’t want to admit it, but finally he sighed and answered. “No, I wasn’t thinking about Vicki when I fucked Tenesha.”

“What does Tenesha do for you that Vicki doesn’t?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Come on now. You can do better than that. You claim to love Vicki so much. You said she changed your whole life around and all that Oprah type of shit. What made you give all that up to fuck another bitch?”

“I don’t- I guess, I just wasn’t sexually fulfilled.”

“Why not? Vicki is the type of woman that would do anything to please her man. Weren’t you her man?”

“Yes, for three years.”

“Why couldn’t you just tell her she wasn’t meeting your needs sexually?”

“I didn’t want to run her off,” he admitted. “I have a huge sexual appetite. I like to do things that I don’t think Vicki is down with. Tenesha does all that freaky type of shit and I don’t even have to ask.”

“Instead of having a simple conversation with the woman that you love, you decided to cheat. How did that work out for you, Terrence?”

“I fucked up. I told Vicki that. People fuck up all the time in relationships. I wanted to get past it, but she wouldn’t even talk to me. So, I got mad.”

“Mad ain’t the word. You flipped out. Did you really think that violence, making threats, and stalking, oh don’t let me forget breaking and entering—did you really think those things would make her take you back?”

“When you put it like that....no. You right man. I just lost my fucking head. I realized that tonight. After what I found out about my mother...and finding out the fucked up shit that my uncle did to her...I just didn’t want to be anything like him.”

“I don’t get it. How can you be anything like your uncle? Where are you going with this?” Gary asked.

“Man, I learned some fucked up shit. My motherfucking uncle turned out to be my daddy. His bitch ass has been raping my mama since she was twelve. He had some kind of sick control over her all these years. She’s been strung out on drugs because of that shit. But, it’s all over with now. He can’t control her anymore. I took care of that.”

Gary looked at the fierceness in Terrence’s eyes and decided not to ask anymore questions. “Whatever you did, I don’t want to know about it. Seems to me, he might have gotten what he deserved.”

“The weirdest thing is,” Terrence said. He was suddenly chatty. He forgot that minutes before Gary had beaten his ass. “I began thinking about everything and going over the way I’d been acting toward Vicki and I wanted to apologize. See, I was going to call her one last time. After that, I planned to move on with my life.” He stared Gary straight in the eye. “But, you answered her cell phone.”

For a minute, the room grew silent.

“So, what you plan to do, man? You calling the police?” Terrence finally asked.

“I should. But, I’ll make a deal with you.”

“What kind of a deal?”

“I’ll let you leave out that door. But, you have to promise me that you’ll never bother Vicki again. If you do, you’ll

have to deal with G-Ball. And G-Ball isn't as nice as Gary. G-Ball is known for bashing niggas' heads in."

Terrence thought for a second. Where had he heard that name before? Suddenly, he remembered. His friend Jimmy had mentioned him that day at the basketball court. Jim had warned him that G-Ball wasn't wrapped too tight.

"So, I can just walk out of here?" He didn't seem to believe Gary.

"I'm a man of my word. Go ahead. I won't do anything to you." Terrence got up off the floor and faced Gary. "Don't expect to get the gun back, though."

"I wouldn't want it back anyway," he said sourly, suddenly thinking about what he'd done earlier. All of a sudden, he was all teary-eyed again. "I had to do it man... for my mama. I couldn't stand seeing her all strung out on crack like that...not for another motherfucking day."

Even though Gary didn't know and didn't want to know the details of what had gone down, he could feel Terrence's pain. He empathized. If anything like that happened to his mother, neither hell nor high water could keep him from ripping the nigga's nuts off.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Hey Vicki, you want to do lunch today? It’s on me,” Gary said, peering into her office. She had been promoted to key account executive, handling major accounts for Cobra Services. She loved the job and the sense of pride it gave her.

“Hey Gary.” She smiled. “Come on in. How are things going in forms processing?”

“Great. I actually think I’ll stick around.” He took a seat in one of the three chairs that faced her desk.

“I guess now that you’re the supervisor, you aren’t so bored?”

“You know, money is what propels me,” he said.

“Must be making a whole lot more since you’re offering to buy me lunch,” she teased.

“Well, my audio book has taken off. It’s selling like hot cakes and I’m getting some real positive feedback about it.”

“Well you should. It’s very powerful. As a matter of fact, it’s life-changing.” She smiled at him brightly. “It helped me. *You* helped me.”

“Glad I could be of some assistance.” He smiled cockily and winked at her.

Vicki blushed. “You know I was talking about the audio book and not about last night.” They’d been hooking up on a

regular basis for the past three months. The previous night, Vicki had experienced multiple orgasms for the first time. Gary was proud of his accomplishments.

“Oh. Speaking of last night, did you get a chance to listen to my show?”

“Of course I listened. I wouldn’t miss an episode. You know something?” She stared at him sideways. “You’ve really changed in the last few months.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“It’s all good. You’ve grown. When I first met you, I thought you were so obnoxious and full of yourself,” she admitted.

“Really?” His brow lifted. “But, there was something about me that you just couldn’t resist, right?”

“Right,” she said sarcastically. “What I was getting at is that you have really proven that you can’t judge a book by its cover. Never in a million years would I have believed that you and G-Ball are the same person. You are just so different than that person that you told me about.” Over the months, he’s shared with her some of the horrendous things he’d done. However, that was all in the past.

“Hopefully G-Ball is gone forever. But, I always keep him in my card file, just in case.” His face got serious. “Speaking of which, have you heard from your ex-boyfriend lately?”

She shook her head. “No. After that night he broke in, it’s like he’s disappeared from the face of the earth.”

“Good.” He stared at her. “And you and Janelle? How’s the friendship?”

“It’s good. We’re as cool as cucumbers. Oh, I forgot to tell you, Tresica is getting married. Will you attend the wedding with me?”

“Oh no. Once one friend decides to tie the knot, the rest will want to follow suit.”

“What’s wrong with that, Gary?”

“Nothing. But, I hope you’re not getting any ideas.”

“What are you trying to say? I’m good enough to bed but not to wed?”

“I didn’t say that at all. Vicki, you’re wife material. I just know that I’m not ready to get married. As a matter of fact, I probably never will be,” he said honestly.

“Don’t you want a family?” she asked.

“Not particularly. I can see myself having kids one day, but I don’t think I want a wife.”

“I’m sure you’ll find the perfect match for you one day, Gary. Whether you want to admit it or not, you’re a nice guy.”

“If you close that door and lock it, I’ll show you just how nice I am,” he said suggestively.

Teresa D. Patterson

Vicki only hesitated for a split second. Nothing serious would come of her involvement with Gary, and she was fine with that. After what Terrence put her through, she just wanted to have fun and experiment for a while. She knew she'd get back into the dating scene, but for the time being she had Gary to stroke her fire.

With the door closed and locked and the blinds pulled, no one could see inside her office. She sat on the desk, pulled her skirt up and spread her legs.

“Show me,” she dared.

