

*PART ONE*

*WHAT HAS PASSED...*

## ONE

### *Virginia 1968*

The pond was sparkling clear, almost translucent in its appearance. Perfectly round, it connected two vast properties. The estates were breathtaking to say the least. The grass was a vibrant green and spread out over scores of hilly acres. Towering, leafy trees offered a grand expanse of shade while cooling the area surrounding them. Travelers often stopped to take a closer look at the incredible outlay of land. Aside from its exquisite, raw beauty, the most unique aspect of the territory was its owners.

For generations, the land had been cultivated by the Gwaltneys and the Augustines. In addition to working the rich property, the two black families also defended their possession with great enthusiasm, pride and fierceness. Financial strife, inclement weather and, of course, man-made threats each played a role in those days especially.

Still, aside from the threats which often drew them together, nothing else seemed to unite the families. The Gwaltney-Augustine feud had outlasted three generations and was at work on a fourth. The battle had gone on so long many wondered if the feuding clans really remembered what started it. Some speculated that the unrest had to do with land disputes others thought it was simply competition for wealth and status. Still, there were those who felt the feud rose from more 'intimate' reasons.

Whatever the motivation that fueled the on-going unrest, one thing was certain: the quarrel showed no signs of ending.

Four year old Jonas Josiah Gwaltney scurried past the towering trees, past the heads of cattle grazing in the distant pasture. JJ's short, stocky legs carried him over the rolling hills and the lush greenery beyond the line which divided his family's property from the Augustine's. Of course, the adorable, chocolate skinned little boy was unaware of the fierce squabbles that existed between his family and their neighbors. What mattered to little JJ was that he was a free man. His parents were home and the field workers and house staff were all about their business. He was at liberty to do whatever he pleased and he intended to enjoy it.

The child found his way to the edge of the Gwaltney property. JJ stared out and saw acres of new play land. The heated debates and fights over the pond's rightful owners were

unimportant to the innocent boy. There was no big person there to shoo him away or scold him for having ventured so far from home. He inched closer, his small, sneaker-shod feet bringing him nearer to the crystal-like pond. A breathless giggle escaped his tiny mouth as the calm, cool water soaked his jeans and the hem of his T-shirt. Soon, he was splashing around like a wild fish. His carefree laughter filled the air.

Acres from where young JJ savored his freedom, there sat a gorgeous three story red brick home. A tiny man-made stream ran through the huge front yard, which was dotted by large, hanging-moss trees. Bushes bearing sweet berries and flowers skirted the base of the trees. Toward the back of the mansion, workers toiled beneath the afternoon sun. Those closest to the house pruned bushes, watered plants and maintained other areas of the front and back yard. Far off in the distance, the field workers tended the horses, cattle and crops. The men's wide chests and backs glistened with sweat as they completed the last of their chores and prepared to end another day's work.

Inside the main house, almost every room was bathed in silence. Per instructions from the mistress, the home was kept in pristine condition at all times. The furniture was polished each day, the cushions tossed and all rugs were vacuumed or swept. The frames of the portraits lining the halls were polished as were the banisters and doorknobs. Despite the extravagant efforts to maintain the untouched, elegant look, the place still retained its cozy, inviting appeal. The kitchen had to be the most tempting area, with a half dozen cooks bustling about, clattering pans and utensils in preparation for that evenings supper.

The second floor of the Gwaltney home housed the room of the eldest son, Tavares. There were at least six more lovely rooms, though they were unused at the present. The bed sheets were changed each week and the rooms were cleaned every other day. The home's third floor carried the grand master suite and playrooms. These were the only two rooms on the floor- each at opposite ends of the long hallway.

With JJ's absence, the master bedroom suite was the only occupied room. Rising past the imposing, double mahogany doors, were the unmistakable sounds of pleasure. Inside, a man and woman enjoyed the spacious four poster maple bed that sat catty-cornered in the chamber. The woman was small, yet quite voluptuous. Her complexion was an even molasses color that almost blended with her shoulder-length onyx tresses.

A giant, dark man was hunched behind the woman. His skin tone was as dark and smooth as his partner's. His head was shaved bald and shiny with sweat. Clearly, he had been so impatient to bed the lovely woman; he hadn't taken time to remove his clothes. He wore a pair of dusty gray overalls which sagged around his thrusting hips. A beige linen shirt was cut off at the sleeves to reveal his massive forearms and biceps.

The small woman clung to one of the tall bedposts. The bed shook from each thrust. She was leaning against the carved headboard as the man took her from behind. Her lilting cries only seemed to encourage him, causing him to increase the force of his movements. His big hands curved over his partner's slender hips and his perfect teeth gnawed the soft flesh of her shoulder. He withdrew after a while and his dimples flashed when he smiled in response to her moan of disappointment. He settled to his back and lifted her as though she were weightless. When she straddled his massive dark frame and eased down over his stiff manhood, they moaned in unison. The woman's long nails grazed the man's wide chest and flat abdomen. Her dark eyes sparkled wickedly when he gripped her hips and increased the speed of his upward thrusts. Soon,

overwhelming waves of pleasure drenched them as they simultaneously reached a powerful climax.

In minutes, the tiny woman had collapsed over her huge partner. At once, they began to laugh.

"Woman, your husband know you spend all day laid up in bed?"

The woman smiled and raised her head from her lover's chest. "He don't mind as long as I'm...ready when he calls me."

"You a bad woman Minerva Gwaltney."

Minerva inched closer to the handsome man lying beneath her. "And don't you forget it, Mr. Gwaltney." She cooed, smiling when her husband pulled her into another kiss.

Jason and Minerva were about to slip into another round of lovemaking, when a tentative knock sounded on the door.

"Georgia." They guessed. The cooks always sent the timid, housemaid upstairs to fetch Minerva when dinner was nearing completion. Georgia was somewhat dimwitted and innocent to the ways between men and women. The cooks believed an intrusion by the girl would be less embarrassing for their employers, should they be bothered during one of their many afternoon rendezvous.

"Coming Georgia!" Minerva called, easing away from her husband. "You'll just have to hold on until tonight, Baby." She teased.

Instead, Jason pulled her back onto the bed and pinned her beneath his heavy frame.

"Baby, I have to go check on dinner with the cooks."

"Hush." Jason whispered, cupping Minerva's chin to hold her in place for his kiss.

Minerva surrendered, her fingers curling around Jason's neck as his tongue stroked the even ridge of her teeth before delving into the sweet recesses of her mouth.

"Alright, go on and check on my dinner." Jason suddenly ordered, slapping his wife's bare bottom as he sent her on her way. He lounged back on the huge bed, watching her through narrowed eyes. Love and desire radiated from his deep-set onyx gaze, as he reflected on how far they had come.

As a young married couple, they had opted to work the land left to Jason and his brothers when their parents passed away. The brothers set off for parts unknown, leaving their elder brother behind. Jason had no complaints. In fact, he had secretly dreamed of being king of the vast property and populating it with crops and children. His sexually enthusiastic wife raised no protests about helping him accomplish the second task.

Minerva was buttoning a light blue frock as she made her way down the stairs. The smile on her lips was a mixture of pride and satisfaction. She glanced at the lovely artwork and rugs lining the grand hall and stairways. Her life was just as she would have it. With their son Tavares, daughter Demetria and now their youngest, JJ, even more joy was added to their already full lives. There would be more children, but JJ was such a bundle of energy and excitement, Minerva and Jason decided to wait a while before adding to the family.

"Miss Minerva, you just in time!"

"What's in store for tonight, Gladys?"

Head cook Gladys Wickers, beamed with pride as she stood near the huge, nine burner stove. An iron pot simmered on each eye. "I think you'll be pleased, Miss."

Minerva waved her hands in the air. "Please, I know I will be. What have we got?"

"Slow-cooked baby lima beans with ham hocks, we got fried okra with onions, pineapple glazed ham and stew beef with rice and cornbread. The girls are putting the pumpkin pies in the oven now."

"I hope my plate is ready." Minerva sighed. Her mouth watered from the list of items mentioned.

Gladys chuckled as she loaded a side of the plate with a generous helping of the seasoned baby limas. Although the Gwaltneys immediate family only consisted of four people, Minerva always made sure dinner included everyone. Even though the majority of the staff felt their employers spent too much time 'indisposed', they loved Jason and Minerva for the respect they always showed every employee. The couple had enough food prepared to feed the entire staff if they chose to dine. Otherwise, the leftover untouched food was packaged and shipped to the local mission.

"Oh goodness..." Minerva drawled, as she closed her eyes. "Another success ladies." She complimented, marveling at the tender stewed beef that practically melted on her tongue. The cook staff always prepared a plate of the main course for Minerva. She rarely, if ever, had a complaint.

"Willett, where in the world, did you find these huge sweet potatoes?"

Another cook, Willett Mannis, smiled and tossed one of the big potatoes in her hand. "These are from Mr. Jason's store."

Minerva's eyes widened. "They're growin' that big out there?" She gasped.

"Mmm hmm, Mr. Jason's got the best produce selection in town." Willett declared. "Lotta white folks mad 'cause he's gettin' all the business from black *and* white customers."

"Well, well that's always good to hear." Minerva admitted, brushing Willett's plump shoulder with hers. She and the tall, middle-aged woman stood talking a while longer. Then, Minerva strolled out the back screen door. She stood on the wide brick steps and gazed up at the late evening skies. For several minutes, her dark gaze was held captive by the comforting shades of purple, blue and orange fusing together.

"Evenin' Miss Minerva."

"Evenin' Charles," Minerva called, waving to the head gardener as she smiled. "Charles you seen JJ around here?" She asked.

Charles pulled the worn, gray cap from his head and wiped his brow. "Saw him runnin' around here earlier, but I can't say how long ago it was."

"That lil' boy..." Minerva groaned, propping one hand to her hip.

"Aw Miss Minerva, he's probably gettin' in some mischief 'round here someplace." Charles determined.

"Yeah..." Minerva sighed. "Thanks Charles." She called, smiling from the door as the man walked on. The assurances could have been true enough. For some reason, they did nothing to calm her.

Minerva stopped a few of the gardeners and asked if they had seen her son playing around the house. Few could remember having seen the child. Eventually, she was pulling aside the field workers as they headed towards the main house. Panic began to rise in her luminous deep brown eyes.

Jason was on his way outdoors when he spotted his wife heading into the kitchen. His double-dimpled smile faded, when he noticed Minerva wringing her hands. He could see the nervous look in her eyes when she approached him.

"What?" He demanded, his large hands curving over her small ones in an effort to stop their shaking.

Minerva shook her head, sending several curls bouncing into her face. "JJ...I don't know where he is."

Jason's soft, deep chuckle rushed forth. "That all Minnie?" He queried, pulling her into a light embrace. "Girl, you know how that boy is. He's probably gettin' in some devilment 'round here somewhere."

Minerva shook her head against Jason's chest. "I talked to everybody. I asked all the field hands. Being that far out, surely they would've seen him."

Jason grimaced, when he looked down into Minerva's upturned face. Her eyes glistened with tears and her lips trembled. "Baby, he's fine. You know he's done this mess before-"

"But, no one has seen him Jason and I have a bad feeling!" She blared, just as the tears burst forth.

A low, frustrated growl rose in the depths of Jason's wide chest. He pulled Minerva into his arms and carried her the short distance to one of the chairs at the kitchen table.

"I'm goin' outside to round up some hands to go look for the boy." He told the staff, who watched him and Minerva with wide eyes, "Get her upstairs and into bed." He ordered and stormed outside. The screened door slammed shut in his wake.

Before anyone could touch Minerva, she was out of the chair. "Y'all forget about me and this dinner and search this damned house for my baby!"

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Before an hour passed, everyone on the estate shared Minerva's concern: Little JJ was definitely missing and had ventured far from the main house and property. Several interested neighbors helped with the search. Some brought dogs to the Gwaltney estate and, due to the hour, torches had been lit.

"JJ! JJ Gwaltney!" Minerva called, running like a banshee across the lush property. She carried no torch, but some unseen force was certainly directing her. She opened her mouth to call out again and realized her throat had become too dry to form the words. Her frantic gait slowed, and soon she was wandering-despair filled her eyes. She had reached the edge of the land and there was no sight of her son.

Then, she saw it: The pond-The pond which separated the Gwaltney and Augustine properties. It was an incredible body of water, twinkling and glittering beneath the silvery glow of moonlight. Minerva smoothed both hands across her face and strolled closer to the inviting pool. After a quick glance across her shoulder, she decided to rest her aching feet.

Easing down on the grassy bank, she removed her hard sandals and drew her knees up to her chest. After a while, the sound of the water's gentle ripple began to calm her raging nerves. Unable to resist any longer, she gave into the desire to soak her feet. She stood and sauntered to the edge of the water and trailed her big toe against its translucent surface.

A tiny shiver raced up her spine when the coolness touched her skin. She walked further into the pond, until the water just reached her calves.

"Mmm..." She sighed, brushing both hands across her arms and smiling at the simple treat. When she glanced down at the darkened body of water, she could just make out a figure beneath the thin steam of moonlight.

Minerva peered closer, certain that the shadow was a turtle, duck or some other animal. The figure traveled closer to the pond's edge and bumped right next to her against the bank. Something brushed her foot and her mouth fell open as the tears returned. She knelt closer-closer

to the tiny hand brushing her ankle. Slowly, she reached down and pulled the tiny body into her arms. Minutes passed as Minerva knelt there on the bank and rocked her dead son in her arms. The pained sobs rose like a terrible bile in the back of her throat. In seconds, her voice had returned and her wounded cries filled the air.

"Julius, I want you and your group to start searching in them woods skirting the pasture. Corvell, you Montez and Rico take your group and go up the trail leading into that mess of hills behind the barn."

"Mr. Jason! Mr. Jason!"

Jason raised his hand towards the group of men who raced towards him. He finished delegating duties to the search groups, and was about to send them on their way, when he heard the cries.

"Mr. Jason-"

"Hush!" He ordered, his hands poised in the air. "Minerva." He whispered.

The group made way for Jason, lest they be trampled. The man broke into a frantic run, headed in the direction of his wife's wailing. Somehow, he knew where to go. His heavy steps carried him to the hilltop overlooking the valley where the Augustine pond was located. There, beneath the moonlight, he could make out the form of his wife and son huddled together.

"My boy is dead." Jason muttered, as though he couldn't quite believe it. He broke into a sprint once again and headed for the pond. By now, a crowd had gathered around Minerva and JJ. Jason cut through the mass of bodies and pulled the boy's limp body from his wife's arms.

Minerva gasped and jumped to her feet the instant JJ was taken from her. The sight of her powerful husband crying profusely shocked her only for a moment. Those in the crowd prayed for the child. Minerva sobbed against JJ's back, while Jason squeezed him and cried out into the night.

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On the opposite side of the Gwaltney property, Ophelia Augustine was tossing a dishcloth to the counter.

"Dammit." She hissed, a small furrow forming between her sleek, jet-black brows. "Gumbo don't taste the same when it's cool. Where the devil are they?" She muttered.

Seven year old Charles Henry Augustine Jr. ambled into the kitchen. There was an over exaggerated look of aggravation on his cute chocolate-toned face.

"Mama, can we eat yet?" CJ whined, leaning his slender form against the rectangular mahogany kitchen table.

"As soon as I find out where your Daddy and Sister are." Ophelia told her first born child.

"Daddy's on the back porch with Steph." CJ supplied.

Ophelia frowned and leaned over the double sided porcelain sink. She saw no trace of her husband or daughter when she peered out the window. "They must be out in the yard."

"I'll go get 'em!" CJ volunteered.

"Oh no!" Ophelia decided, catching her energetic little boy before he got too far. "Uh uh, Mista. I got one of you in here and I'm keeping you."

"Aw Ma..." CJ whined, when his mother placed him in his usual chair at the table.

Ophelia removed the apron that covered her pink and white pedal pushers and matching short-sleeved blouse. She ventured outside. Her waist-length jet black hair lifted around her face the instant it was touched by the evening breeze.

Ophelia Augustine was independence personified. She held her tongue for no one, except her husband whom she loved dearly. Her striking features left most people staring. Huge expressive dark brown eyes, a tall lithe body and a sense of intelligence, produced a very smart woman, firm mother and incredible wife.

"Don't y'all smell that gumbo out here?" She called, spotting her husband and daughter standing in the middle of the huge back yard. Charles "Chick" Sr. and Stephanie Karina Augustine seemed to be transfixed on something in the distance. Wondering what held their attention so reverently, Ophelia walked closer to the quiet twosome.

"Hey," she whispered, setting her chin against her husband's broad shoulder.

"Something's goin' on at the Gwaltneys." Chick noted, his thick dark brows drawn together as he stood with his arms folded across his wide chest.

"Maybe it's a party, Daddy." Stephanie shared from her leaning stance against her father's long legs.

Chick's deep set onyx eyes twinkled with love when he looked down at his six year old daughter. "I don't think so, Babygirl." He disagreed with a smile.

"What are you thinking?" Ophelia asked, intrigued as she caught sight of the flickering firelight in the distance.

Chick shook his head and smoothed one hand over the soft crop of curly hair covering his head. "I don't have a good feeling about it, whatever it is." He whispered and slipped an arm around his wife's small waist.

Chick, Ophelia and Stephanie stood in silence a few moments longer. The firelight illuminated the otherwise black expanse of land. The effect of the glow was as hypnotic as it was eerie.

"Well, let's get inside for dinner before CJ has a fit." Ophelia decided, turning her family towards their home. "I'm sure the commotion'll be over soon." She added, casting an uncertain glance across her shoulder.

The gumbo was still piping hot and perfectly seasoned. The four Augustines ate heartily and quietly. With the exception of grace, dinner usually passed in silence. Ophelia had to smile as she watched her family concentrate on the food. They cleared their plates after each refill and it made her proud to take care of them and to ensure their safety and well-being.

Her gaze slid down to the head of the table to her husband. In ten years of marriage, they had been through a lot. Still, Ophelia knew she wouldn't have traded a minute of her life with Chick Augustine. He was an incredible man; mentally and physically. Standing over six feet, his skin was a flawless, rich brown. Heavy black brows lay in a sleek line over his midnight eyes. A beard and mustache covered the bottom of his handsome face. Though Chick lacked nothing in the brawn department, he was more of a thinking man. Still, he was revered as a no-nonsense type of man. When he spoke, people listened.

Charles and Ophelia met and fell in love during their college years in North Carolina. Chick wasn't about to let the devastating beauty get away and asked her to marry him after they graduated. Their families were quite comfortable financially, but the couple was determined to make it on their own. They moved to Virginia after Chick's grandmother passed and left the family estate to his care. Chick was no farmer and preferred a job that would allow him to use brains instead of muscles.

With a degree in accounting, Chick did the books for a sewing factory. He quickly caught the eye of his superiors. Ophelia made use of her teaching degree and worked as a seamstress to bring in extra money.

The young couple thrived in the struggle and they were determined to show their families they could really make it. When the owner of the factory died, Chick was working as the man's first assistant-an incredible accomplishment for a twenty-something black man. It proved to be just the break the newlyweds needed. Ophelia quit teaching and went to work with her husband. Through their combined efforts and seemingly endless hours the factory acquired several jobs from the new businesses rising in town. The factory had been commissioned to produce uniforms for the local black hospital and hotel. The money and recognition began to pour in. Of course, it was only the beginning.

Ophelia shook back to the present. A soft smile clung to her lips. "Has anyone saved room for dessert?" She asked.

"Meeee!" CJ and Steph both squealed.

"Baby?" Ophelia whispered, watching Chick expectantly.

"Nah, thanks Fe, but I'm gonna go sit in the front room for a while."

Ophelia's expressive brown gaze followed her husband, until he left the kitchen. She cut slices of the homemade sweet potato pie and served the kids.

"Are you gonna eat some pie, Mama?" Stephanie asked her dark gaze focused on her mother.

Ophelia smiled and smoothed her daughter's sleek hair pulled back into a ponytail. "Just going to talk to Daddy a minute, Babypie." She promised.

The Augustine home matched the Gwaltneys in size, but there the similarity ended. The Gwaltney's fabulous mansion carried the appearance of some grand plantation. The Augustine home was just that, a home. Ophelia's presence could be felt in each room. She had placed a loving effect on each of the large, comfortably furnished rooms. The color scheme was a relaxing mix of earth tones. The furniture was finely crafted, but remained unpretentious in its appearance. The gleaming hardwoods in the upstairs bedrooms and hallways were covered by the loveliest rugs. Portraits of family and friends lined the walls and decorated all the rooms.

Ophelia's steps slowed when she neared the arched doorway leading to the sitting room. She folded her arms across her chest and watched Chick intently. He had the evening paper perched on his lap, but it was clear that he wasn't looking at it.

"Baby?" Ophelia called, waiting for Chick's midnight eyes to move to her face. "Honey what is it?" She asked, walking further into the room. "What has you so upset tonight?" She whispered.

Chick massaged his temple and leaned his head back against his favorite burgundy armchair. "I wish I knew what was goin' on over there." He admitted.

"This is about the Gwaltneys?" Ophelia asked, her slightly husky voice holding a trace of disbelief. "Baby please don't waste your time worryin' about them people." She said and rolled her eyes towards the chandelier in the ceiling.

"Fe..." Chick sighed.

"Honey, they are not worth it. Do you really think Jason or Minerva would be sitting around worrying about you?"

"Ophelia." Chick called again. This time, he pushed himself out of the armchair and fixed her with a hard glare.

Of course, Ophelia rarely hesitated to reveal there was no love lost between her family and their neighbors. Chick usually listened to her ravings about the Gwaltneys with little more than a raised brow. That night, he was unusually on edge and Ophelia advised herself to curb her tongue.

Instead, she closed the distance between them and linked her arms around his lean waist. "Why are you so upset about what's goin' on over there?" She whispered, smoothing her mouth along his jaw, while toying with the empty belt loops on his jeans.

Chick bowed his head and inhaled the soft scent of his wife's perfume. "I wish I knew, Fe. I wish I knew."

## TWO

"Here, let's sit you down." Ophelia whispered, guiding Chick back to his chair. She was very concerned by the expression on his face and prayed it would pass. In all the years of marriage she had seen the look more than once. This time, the look seemed more haunting.

"How's that?" She cooed, rubbing his neck and shoulders in brisk fashion.

Chick closed his eyes and allowed his head to slope forward. "Mmm..." He replied.

Ten minutes later, a quick, hard knock sounded on the front door. Ophelia smothered a curse over the interruption, when Chick went to answer the door. She took a seat on the arm of the chair and waited.

Out in the night, three men waited. Chick recognized each of them and nodded towards George Mooney, Felix Durant and Jesse Simpson.

"Y'all come in." He invited, stepping aside so they could enter.

"Hey y'all." Ophelia called, standing when she saw the men walk into the sitting room.

"Can I bring in something to drink?"

"Oh no, Miss Ophelia we don't need anything." Felix Durant spoke for his friends.

The sitting room was bathed in silence for several moments, it seemed. Finally, Chick cleared his throat and looked down at each man's dirtied clothing.

"You boys look like y'all been fightin' a fire." He noted.

"Chick man, I wish to Sweet Lord we had been fightin' a fire." Felix told him, the smile on his face a cross between faint humor and terrible sadness.

"What happened?" Ophelia asked when she stood next to Chick.

George Mooney twisted the brim of his brown hat in his hand. "It's somethin' terrible, Miss Ophelia."

"Is it Minerva or Jason?" Chick asked leaning against the maple paneled wall as his three guests took their places on the long, forest green sofa.

"It's there youngest boy." Jesse Simpson informed them, shaking his head as the words left his mouth.

"JJ?" Ophelia whispered, resuming her seat on the arm of Chick's chair.

"The boy ran off...sometime in the afternoon." George Mooney explained, his saddened expression matching the look in his eyes. "He was dead when they found him."

"Dead?" Ophelia gasped.

"Drowned." George clarified his round wide gaze solemn.

The Augustines absorbed the information with growing horror. The circumstances of the child's death struck them like a blow to the face.

"Where'd they find him, Jess?" Chick asked his onyx stare riveted on the man seated closest to him.

Jesse glanced at Ophelia and his friends before responding. "They found him in your pond." He revealed, becoming flushed beneath his vanilla complexion.

"My Lord." Ophelia cried, her warm gaze pooling with tears. Her heart began to ache as she imagined the couple's grief over such a loss.

The rumbling sound of sneaker-shod feet, racing across the hardwood floor, caught the adult's attention. CJ and Stephanie ran into the sitting room, unaware of the serious moment they had just interrupted.

"Hey Mr. Simpson, hey Mr. Mooney, hey Mr. Durant!" They bellowed.

"Have you two finished that pie?" Ophelia called, hurrying towards her children. "Did you rinse those plates?" She asked when they nodded. "Well, let's get upstairs and let Daddy talk." She said, hustling the boy and girl from the room.

"How did he get all the way out to that pond? Was he alone?" Chick asked, once his family had left the room.

Each man appeared reluctant to answer.

"It appears he was there alone." George said after a while.

Chick was baffled and angry. "How the hell did he get all the way out there with no body noticing?"

George, Felix and Jesse exchanged glances. "We were wondering that ourselves."

"You'd think with all those hands they have over there, somebody would've seen something." Chick remarked, massaging his light beard.

The men went back and forth over the incident. None of them could believe such a terrible thing could happen. Moreover, no one could fathom how the incident would affect the two most powerful black families in their community.

Ophelia returned downstairs after getting CJ and Steph settled. The look on her lovely face still appeared haunting. Chick noticed and extended his hand.

"Are you all sure the baby is dead? I mean, had the doctor even been called?" Ophelia asked when she sat perched on the arm of her husband's chair.

The three men nodded.

"We're sure Miss Ophelia." Jesse confirmed. "It took a while to get Miss Minerva to let the boy go, but before we left, they were making plans to carry him into town."

"They should be announcing the funeral any day." George added.

The room was silent, with the exception of Ophelia's shuddery breaths. Further conversation seemed unnecessary then. After about three minutes, Felix reached for his hat and stood.

"We better be gettin' on." He said, offering Ophelia a small, sympathetic smile.

Ophelia could not return the gesture but managed a shaky nod for the tall, dark man and his friends. "Thank you all for coming." She whispered.

"I'll show y'all out." Chick offered, watching the men head for the front. He stood and moved closer to his wife. "You alright?" He asked, his big hands cupping her flawless caramel-toned face.

"Mmm hmm," She lied her lashes fluttering madly when he pressed the softest kiss to her mouth.

Ophelia waited until Chick left the house with the other men. She tried to focus on clearing the table, but her thoughts got the better of her. It was as though a recorder had been switched to play in her mind. She could recall every nasty event that had occurred between herself and Minerva Gwaltney. She also heard every evil thing she'd wished on the woman. Despite all that; however, despite all the anger and dislike, she had never wished for something so terrible. Tears of sorrow and regret formed in her eyes, then. Soft sobs worked their way through her chest and up her throat. She was crying heavily by the time Chick walked back into the house.

"Fe?" He called, seeing his wife at the kitchen table with her hands covering her face.

"Mmm. Hey baby," Ophelia whispered, faking a light tone of voice. She quickly brushed the wetness from her face and left the table.

"You alright?" Chick asked, already knowing the answer. He folded his arms over his chest and tilted his head a bit as he stepped further into the kitchen.

Ophelia was running dishwater and had her back turned. "Yeah, I'm fine. Did you change your mind about some pie? I'm surprised CJ and Steph didn't gobble down the whole thing." She rambled.

"Hey." Chick whispered, covering Ophelia's hands. Beneath the running water pelting their skin, he could feel her shaking.

Ophelia turned and raised her sad eyes to his face. "Chick all the things I've said about those people. I've wished for the most horrible things. Chick is this my fault? Did I bring this on them?"

"Shh..." Chick commanded softly. His heavy black brows drew close as he pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Stop this. You know that's crazy."

"Is it?" Ophelia snapped, sniffing loudly as she blinked tears from her eyes.

Chick leaned back and watched her in disbelief. "You know it is. You didn't drown that child, Fe."

"I know that, but..."

"But what?"

"He died in our pond." Ophelia whispered, so low, she could barely be heard.

Chick didn't need her to repeat the statement, though. The same words had replayed themselves in his mind all evening.

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The heavy, back screened door slammed and drew the attention of everyone in the kitchen. Jason Gwaltney stormed through the house and upstairs. The cooks and housemaids all flinched when the man walked past, but they would not look at him.

Jason had been in the most evil mood since his son's death, and no one could fault him for his attitude. Still, with Jason it was more than that. The man had never experienced such intense hurt and feared he would never recover. More importantly, he feared his wife would never be the same.

Minerva had been in a trancelike state since the night she found JJ in the pond. The doctor saw no need to give her sedatives or anything to help her sleep. She didn't appear unsettled or upset at all. Still, Dr. Farius Byers left the sleep medication. Minerva took it faithfully. Unfortunately, her mood appeared unchanged no matter how much she rested.

Jason slowed his steps as he approached the closed door to his bedchamber. He twisted the knob and entered the room quietly. The heady scent of Minerva's perfume brought a smile to his dark face. He closed his eyes and uttered a brief prayer that he would find his wife trying on some decadent article of lingerie she'd purchased to surprise him with.

No such treat, met his eyes, but he was pleased to find that she was out of bed. The last couple of days had been murder on his mind, not to mention other areas of his anatomy. Minerva slept well past the crack of dawn when Jason woke. When he returned to bed after sundown, he found her asleep as well.

"Minnie!" Jason called, scanning the large bedroom suite. Silence met his greeting and his steps led him to the bathroom. There, he was favored with the familiar, yet missed sight of Minerva lounging in the white porcelain claw foot bathtub.

"Want some company, woman?" He playfully bellowed, going to his knees next to the tub. He watched Minerva fight to produce a smile that just wouldn't blossom. He loved her all the more for trying.

"Talk to me Minnie." He whispered, cupping her round, dark face in his massive hands.

Tears appeared instead. Minerva covered her face in her hands and deep sobs shook her small frame. Jason reached into the bubbly water and pulled her close. They held each other for the longest time.

The day of the wake finally arrived and Minerva appeared to be a changed woman. She was out of bed, dressed and downstairs before Jason even turned over. The house staff felt as though they were caught in a whirlwind. Minerva Gwaltney always demanded her home be kept in nothing less than spotless condition. On this day, the furniture in all the ground level rooms had been moved aside so that the hardwoods could be scrubbed and polished. Long buffet tables were moved into the ballroom and all the windows were opened to allow the house to "breathe".

"Jana make sure to tell Miss Gladys to use my white China casserole dishes from the top cupboard!"

"Yes, Ms. Minerva!" Jana called over the wind whipping around their heads.

Minerva turned back to her chore of hanging table and bed linens on the clothesline. She was completely involved with her task and didn't notice her husband approaching her until he had grabbed her around the waist.

"Jason!" She gasped, her fingers stalling on the line.

"Come with me." He whispered against her hair.

Minerva struggled against the unbreakable hold. "Come where?"

"Shh...don't ask questions." He ordered, pulling her away from the clothes.

"Where are you taking me?" She asked, already noticing that they were headed for the woodshed. "Jason?"

"Do you know how many nights I've done without you?"

Minerva's lashes almost fluttered close in response to the suggestive question. "This isn't the time." She softly reminded him.

"I'll make it the time." Jason decided his big hands folded over Minerva's waist as he guided her inside the deserted shed.

"And this is hardly the place." Minerva criticized, eyeing her dirty surroundings with clear distaste.

Jason chuckled. "You never had a problem with it before." He reminded her, a smug grin triggering his deep dimples.

Minerva turned to watch him when he released her. "We got almost the whole town comin' over here in a few hours."

"I thank you for your compliment Ma'am." Jason purposefully misunderstood and bowed his head. "I promise not to take quite that long."

Minerva raised her hand to offer more resistance, but she never had the chance. Jason took her hand and hauled her against his massive frame. He dipped his head and gnawed the side of her neck while his fingers found the zipper in back of her plain burgundy dress and eased it down.

Minerva began to struggle, but it was useless against Jason's superior strength. Her dress was unzipped to her waist and he was at work on the lacy bra she wore.

"Jason don't." She demanded.

The plea fell on deaf ears. Jason was so hungry for his wife, his handsome face practically buried in her lush buxom. His big hands fondled and squeezed the dark mounds possessively and he growled at the missed sensations firing his arousal.

"Jason..." Minerva called again. She felt herself being lowered to one of the wooden tables in the shed. She tried to move Jason aside with her knees. That was an impossible task with her legs apart and his heavy frame situated between.

Jason's found a rigid nipple and his lips closed over it. He could feel Minerva pounding against his back as her passion awakened. His arms encircled her small frame as he intensified the motions of his lips and tongue.

"I can't." Minerva groaned, though she felt herself weakening beneath her husband's powerful persuasions. When she felt his hand slip beneath the hem of her dress, her ineffective pounding against his back, grew stronger.

A few moments passed, before Jason raised his head. A frown came to his face when he realized the blows to his back were not an outlet of his wife's passion, but resistance. With a low growl of frustration, he braced himself on massive forearms and glared down at her.

"Dammit, what the hell is the matter with you?" He demanded.

Minerva was not intimidated. She shoved at Jason's chest with one hand and clutched her dress to her bare chest with the other. "This is all you think about, isn't it?!" She spat while inching off the table.

Jason smoothed one hand across his shaved head. "What the devil are you talkin' 'bout?"

"Sex! Sex Jason. Lord, we just lost our baby. Why don't you act like you remember that?!"

Realization flashed in Jason's dark eyes. Slowly, he took a seat on the edge of the table. "What are you sayin' Minerva? Are you sayin' that I don't care that my son is dead? Are you sayin' that I don't think about how my baby looked comin' out of that pond?"

"Jason-"

"Hell no!" The big man snapped, pushing himself off the heavy table with such force it inched back. "What the hell kind of man do you think I am, Minerva? I miss my boy like hell, but I miss you too. I miss havin' my wife in my arms-lovin' me."

Minerva squeezed her eyes shut and turned away. "Jason, I can't talk about this now."

"Then when, dammit?!"

Minerva could offer no response and only shook her head. Seconds later, she had run from the dark shed.

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The elegant glass chandelier bathed the spacious kitchen in soft, golden light. Ophelia Augustine stood at the hardwood counter and grated the fifth and final block of cheddar cheese.

Stephanie arrived in the kitchen and strolled over to watch her mother work. After about two minutes of studious gazing, she looked up at her mother. "When can we eat dinner, Mommy?"

Ophelia smiled and tapped the cheese grater against the side of the blue and yellow ceramic mixing bowl. "Dinner will be early tonight, but I'm not making this for us."

"Oh." Steph whispered, taking a closer look at the mound of cheese in the huge bowl. "What's it gonna be?"

"Macaroni Casserole."

"Mmm...who are you making it for?"

"The Gwaltneys," Ophelia replied, setting the bowl aside.

Stephanie watched her mother pull eggs and milk from the icebox. "Why?" She called.

"It's for the wake tonight."

"A wake?" Steph queried, clearly confused.

Ophelia smoothed both hands across her apron and returned the dairy products to the icebox. She predicted her daughter would soon be bubbling over with questions. Ophelia, who believed in explaining everything to her children, prepared to explain just what a wake was.

"Is somebody waking up, Mommy?" Steph asked, twisting her sneakers on their sides as she frowned.

"Not exactly, Baby." Ophelia sighed, trying to decide the best way to discuss the situation with her little girl. She removed the green apron protecting her black and gray striped sundress. Then, she waved towards Stephanie. "Come sit on Mommy's lap, Baby." She instructed.

Steph skipped across the polished floor and moved up to share the high backed kitchen chair with her mom.

"Now, a wake is when a group of people who know someone get together to remember that person."

A tiny frown marred Stephanie's cute, flawless brown face. "Remember them?"

"Mmm hmm, because they've gone on."

"Are they taking a trip?" Steph inquired.

Ophelia's brows rose a bit. "Sort of. But, it's a trip they never come back from."

Stephanie's brown eyes grew wide. "Ever?" She gasped.

"Afraid not, Sweetie."

"Why aren't they coming back?"

"Well...Sweetie, they can't come back."

"Why?"

Ophelia patted her hand against Steph's tummy pushing against her pink cotton T-shirt. She couldn't help but smile at the child's inquisitive nature. Steph had gotten it honest.

"Honey, remember when Chester...went away?"

Steph's eyes registered recognition when she heard the name of her beloved cat. After a moment, she managed a nod.

Ophelia nodded as well. "Remember what we told you about him?"

Stephanie rested her head against her mother's chest and nodded. "You said Chester was living with God and he wouldn't be back."

"Mmm hmm...well that's where Mr. and Mrs. Gwaltney's little boy is."

"JJ." Stephanie whispered, looking up into her mother's face.

"That's right, Sweetie." Ophelia confirmed, hoping the child wouldn't be too upset by the reality.

"JJ's dead?"

"Yes Baby."

Stephanie looked out over the kitchen as she absorbed the news. She remembered the little boy, remembered seeing him in the distance. Though he always played alone, he seemed to have the most fun.

"Mommy? Why didn't I ever get to play with him?"

Ophelia never expected the question and was at a loss for words. She turned grateful eyes on the back screened door when Chick and CJ returned from the morning of fishing. "Look Baby, dinner's here." She whispered, pressing her forehead against Stephanie's.

The question was forgotten as Steph's brown gaze brightened. Fish was her favorite meal and she scrambled off Ophelia's lap to inspect the catch her father and brother brought home.

Chick noticed the solemn expression on his wife's face and strolled over to the table. "What's wrong?" He asked, taking her by the hands and pulling her up to stand before him.

Ophelia shrugged and tossed her head back. "Steph wanted to know what a wake was and why she never got to play with JJ."

A single tear slid down Ophelia's cheek and Chick kissed it away. "Shh...stop it now." He urged, pulling her into a protective embrace. "You in any shape to go to that thing tonight?"

Ophelia almost melted in the man's arms. "How do you do that? Always read my mind like that?" She marveled, tugging on the hem of his black shirt.

Chick brushed her lips with his thumb. "I guess I have a thing for reading pretty faces." He whispered and pressed a kiss to the tip of Ophelia's nose.

"I'm making a Macaroni Casserole." She said, a sniffle following her words.

"I'll make sure it gets there in one piece." Chick promised, his gorgeous smile appearing.

Arm in arm, they strolled out of the kitchen. "Anybody still messin' with that fish is gonna be in charge of cleaning 'em!" He warned CJ and Stephanie.

\*\*\*

The front and side yard of the Gwaltney home was filled with cars. The wake began just before sunset and there were as many people outside as there were inside. Most of the attendants held plates or glasses as they held low-volume conversations.

Chick arrived about a half hour after the gathering was underway. Everyone greeted him warmly as he made his way inside the house.

"Chick, where's Ophelia?" Marci Henry asked, her round brown face showing concern.

Chick handed the casserole to one of the maids near the buffet and turned to face his wife's secretary. "She's feelin' sort of down, so she stayed home."

Marci nodded and patted Chick's arm. "Tell her, I hope she feels better."

Chick only nodded as the woman walked away. Several people questioned his wife's absence and he gave the same excuse. Of course, they all assumed Ophelia was sick. He didn't correct them.

One of the maids served him a glass of lemon iced-tea. Chick took the cold drink and headed further into the house. He found Jason Gwaltney greeting a few new guests and walked over to pat the man's shoulder.

Jason turned and fixed his neighbor with a slow smile. "Chick." He whispered.

"I'm sorry man." Chick whispered back, shaking Jason's hand as he nodded.

"Thanks man. Thanks for coming." Jason replied, his robust voice sounding tired and hollow. His dark eyes narrowed when he glanced past Jason's shoulder. "Where's Ophelia?" He asked.

Chick shrugged. "She wasn't feelin' up to it. How's Minerva?"

The drawn look on Jason's face grew more haggard. "I don't know Chick...I don't know. One day she's runnin' around here like a banshee-cleanin', makin' sure everything's in its place. The next day, she won't even leave the room. I don't see an end to it."

Chick clapped the man's shoulder. "She's hurtin' man."

"I know." Jason softly acknowledged pushing his big hands into the pockets of his black trousers. "I just wish I knew how to handle it," he confided, dropping the strong demeanor for Chick, "she was up at the crack of dawn getting this place together and now-"

"Jason! Jason!"

All conversation silenced when Minerva Gwaltney appeared in the huge ballroom-hands on her hips and feet spread. Since the wake began, she had remained out of sight. People had begun to wonder if she would even make an appearance.

"Oh Lord." Jason groaned, spotting the fierce glare on his wife's dark face.

"Give her my best, man." Chick urged, taking note of Minerva's confrontational stance. Of course, he was sure she wouldn't want his heartfelt condolences. Chick always believed the Gwaltney-Augustine feud could have ended had it not been for his wife and Minerva. He and Jason had always been close despite the tension between their families. The closeness had always come easily between the two men. Ironically, it was that bond which fueled the anger for so many years.

Minerva waited for Jason at the doorway of his office-the only secluded room downstairs. When he stepped into the room, she slammed the heavy maple door shut behind them.

"What the hell were you telling Chick?" She demanded.

Jason turned to stare at his wife. His mouth formed a perfect O and his expression was one of stunned disbelief. "Is this what that foolishness out there was about?"

"I hope you weren't puttin' him in our business, Jason?!"

Suddenly overheated, Jason whipped the black suit coat off his back. "I don't believe you havin' a fit over that. Hell, the man was offering condolences like everyone else in the room!" He snapped, tossing his tie to the big pine desk in the corner.

"Condolences my behind." Minerva retorted.

"What the devil is it, Min?!" Jason roared, fast approaching the end of his patience. "You run around here all day, getting this place in order and when folks start to arrive, you disappear. What is it gonna take to get you out of this mood?!"

"Certainly not any condolences from Chick Augustine!"

"Min!"

"Nosy bastard!"

Losing the last restraint on his temper, Jason stormed across the room and grabbed Minerva's shoulders. "Dammit woman," he growled, shaking her fiercely in hopes that it would bring her back to him, "we just lost out boy and all you can do is hang onto this blasted hate!"

Minerva was not intimidated by her husband's anger and refused to heed his warnings. "I don't need Chick Augustine or anyone from his damned family comin' over here offering apologies for what happened. They could never do anything to make up for that!"

"What in God's name are you talkin' about Min?" Jason whispered, looking as though he didn't recognize his own wife.

"You know what I'm talking about, but you so damned close to Chick Augustine, you won't see it!"

Jason's long lashes closed over his pitch black eyes in a brief gesture. He could never remember being so angry with Minerva. His palm actually ached with the need to strike her. Muffling a savage curse below his breath, he turned away. He had never hit Minerva in all the years he'd known her and he wasn't about to start.

"I'm goin' to find the doctor." He decided, smoothing one hand over his bald head as he turned toward the door.

"I don't need no damned doctor!" Minerva raged. Her ample buxom heaved beneath the demure white blouse she wore with the black pinstriped coat of her skirt suit. She followed Jason out the office, like the devil was at her back.

Conversation in the ballroom had silenced again. Most of the guests could hear the raised voices. Everyone tried to avoid the argument, but it was impossible to dismiss Minerva's high-pitched ranting and Jason's powerful bellowing.

When the couple stormed into the ballroom, the crowd stood in awe of the tiny woman who fought to get past her husband.

"Let go of me, dammit!" Minerva ordered, when Jason held her waist in his iron grip.

Chick was halfway through his plate of collard greens, macaroni, chicken, biscuits, dressing and yams. The commotion near the front of the room pulled his attention away from the delicious meal.

"Get off me Jason!" Minerva demanded, still struggling against the man's overpowering hold. "Get off me and let me go tell this nigga what to do with his phony condolences!"

Someone gasped. Then as if on cue, everyone turned to look at Chick.

"I don't know what gave you the notion to come over here! You and your damned family done enough already!"

"Minnie!" Jason roared.

"Jason please! You know damn well what I'm talkin' about. You know if it wasn't for them JJ wouldn't be dead!"

Chick tilted his head to one side, his dark eyes registering shock at Minerva's accusation. Slowly, he turned and set his plate aside. "Jason." He said, with a curt nod before turning to leave.

Jason's hold around Minerva's waist loosened, giving her the opportunity to scramble out of his embrace. She rushed over to the buffet and picked up the dish of macaroni. "And take this shit with you!" She cried, and threw the heavy white China bowl across the room.

### THREE

"Are you sure it's okay for the kids to stay at your house today, Vonda?"

Ravonda Cornell chuckled over her friend's question. "Honey, you know it is. I've got my neighbor's teen-age daughter watching my two and the girl can certainly handle two more. She's very responsible."

Ophelia smiled and finished placing the last few items in her black strapless clutch purse. "That's good. I really didn't want them going with us to the funeral. I can just imagine how emotional it will be."

"Ophelia..."

"Hmm?...What Vonda?" Ophelia prompted, setting her bag to the nightstand. She could hear the unease in the woman's voice.

"Um...did Chick tell you about the wake yesterday?"

Ophelia slipped her feet into the black patent leather heels and frowned. She remembered how rattled Chick seemed when he returned home. "I didn't ask him about it. He didn't seem to be in the mood to discuss anything when he got back." She finally replied.

Ravonda had attended the wake and witnessed the awful scene at the Gwaltney home. Still, she decided it would be best to remain silent and she prayed Minerva had calmed down from the day before.

"Ravonda? Is there anything I should know?" Ophelia was asking.

"Oh no!" Ravonda quickly replied, grimacing at the anxious tone to her words. "It's nothing like that. I was only asking. Um, I'll be looking forward to seeing CJ and Steph."

"Oh yeah, we'll be by soon." Ophelia said, already forgetting her suspicions. "The two of them can't wait to get over there."

"Well, I'll see you then."

"Alright and thanks."

"Where are you takin' the babies?" Chick asked, the moment Ophelia set the brown phone receiver to its cradle.

Ophelia jumped at the sound of her husband's deep voice. "I um, arranged for the kids to go the Ravonda Cornell's while we're at the funeral." She explained her brown eyes wide as she watched him from the bed.

Chick dropped the log books he carried to the desk which sat in the rear of the spacious sun-drenched bedroom. "No need for you to take them over there."

"No need? Why?"

"We're not going to the funeral."

Ophelia turned on the bed in order to face her husband more fully. "What are you saying? We have to go."

"No Fe, we don't."

"Chick-"

"Ophelia." He snapped, turned his mellowed black stare towards her. "I said we won't be going and I meant it. I don't want to discuss it anymore."

Ophelia swallowed past the huge lump in her throat and chewed her bottom lip. "Don't you think I deserve to know why?" She probed, using her softest voice.

"Don't you think I mean it when I say I don't want to discuss it?"

Ophelia took heed that her husband's mood was steadily worsening. Still, she had to know what was going on. His mood was completely changed when he returned home the night before and curiosity had gotten the better of her.

"Baby, what happened at the wake yesterday?"

Chick's fingers paused over the record books. "What happened?" He parroted. "It was a wake, Fe." He replied, faking a light tone of voice.

"I know something happened." Ophelia told him, moving off the bed to check her appearance in the floor length mirror. "Ravonda didn't go into details, but I know there was something she was just itching to tell me."

Suddenly, Chick slammed his fists to the desk with such force the furniture squeaked. "Dammit woman, I don't want to go. Can't you leave it at that?"

Ophelia ignored her heart's fierce pounding and forced herself to meet Chick's angry glare. "That's fine, Baby. You certainly don't have to go. I'll go." She coolly decided, giving one last look at her stylish ankle-length black button down dress. Satisfied with her appearance, she headed out the bedroom.

"Ophelia."

"Chick," she groaned, bracing her hand against the doorjamb and bowing her head. "I didn't go to the wake. You can't ask me not to go to the funeral."

"I'm not asking Fe Fe."

There it was. He'd said it. Ophelia turned to watch her husband. She hated when he pulled the overbearing husband-my word is law-act on her. There was more going on besides that, though. She couldn't put her finger on it and since Chick wasn't talking, she would have to find out on her own.

"I'll be leaving with the kids in another hour." She informed him, clasping her hands tightly as she prayed for courage. Chick rarely lost his temper, but when he did it was best to be as far away as possible. She turned towards the door and began to walk out of the room again. When he called out to her again, she closed her eyes. She turned and he was standing right before her. She prayed he couldn't detect how much he intimidated her then.

Chick stepped even closer a dimple appeared in his cheek when he smiled at the look on Ophelia's face. "Don't leave without me." He whispered, squeezing her hip before he stepped past.

\*\*\*

Jason grimaced as he tugged on the navy blue and black tie around his neck. He was on the way downstairs when he met cook Cora Dealy on the last step.

"How is she Mr. Jason?" Cora asked, her soulful brown eyes turned towards the upper level of the house.

Jason patted the woman's small hand. "It's hard to say." He whispered, glancing toward the ceiling as well. "At least she's up, getting dressed for...the funeral."

Cora bowed her head and nodded once. "Did she sleep?"

Jason breathed deeply. "Thank God Doctor Byers was here yesterday." He said, remembering the horrid scene. Minerva seemed to calm a bit once Chick Augustine had gone. Jason carried her to the bedroom with the doctor close behind. "The doc gave her something to make her sleep and since she woke up she's been real quiet." He confided.

"She's grievin' hard for that baby, Mr. Jason." Cora said, pressing one of the man's massive hands in both of hers.

Jason pulled the older woman close and they hugged. "I'm grievin' too Cora." He whispered, his eyes closing.

"Mr. Jason, the car's all washed and gassed up!"

Jason kept one arm around Cora's shoulders as he smiled at the field hand who called up from the kitchen. "Thanks Fred!" He replied, waving towards the slender dark man. "I guess we better head on out." He told Cora.

"I'll see y'all at the church." She whispered, patting his arm with quick soft taps.

Jason watched Cora waddle off. Then, he dropped his head and went back upstairs. His steps slowed, and then halted completely when he stood before the bedroom door. Walking inside, he found Minerva seated on the window sill that overlooked the grand, rear expanse of the estate. He stepped behind her and massaged her shoulders through the satin material of her black dress. When he pressed his face against her wild curls and kissed the top of her head, she moved away.

Jason balled a fist and pressed it against the sill. His patience was past its end and he didn't know how much longer he could allow Minerva to shut him out. He ached for her physically yes, but also emotionally. After all, he had lost his child too.

"You ready?" He called, finally turning from the window. He watched Minerva take a sweater from the closet as she nodded in response to his question. When she brushed past him, he caught her arm and pulled her back against his chest.

"Why are you doin' this to me?" He groaned into her hair, his huge hands lowering to massage her hips.

Minerva wrenched herself from the sensuous embrace and rushed to the door. Jason took several deep breaths, but they did nothing to calm down. Instead, his fist connected with the huge vase on the mahogany stand next to the door. The burgundy vase shattered into countless pieces. Shards of glass glittered amongst the vibrant petals of the flowers.

\*\*\*

The front and side yard of New Bethel Church was filling with cars. JJ Gwaltney's body arrived at the church in a white and gold horse drawn carriage. The massive crowd made a

pathway as the carriage drew closer. Sniffles and soft prayers could be heard as the pall bearers removed the tiny, silver casket from the rear of the carriage.

Ophelia and Chick were leaving their car as the procession began to move inside the church. Blindly, Ophelia reached for her husband's hand. Of course, Chick was right there to offer his support. He knew his wife would surely need it before the end of the day.

Ophelia smoothed her other hand over the perfect chignon she wore and managed a smile and nod for the familiar faces she spotted. Her intuition told her they all knew what Ravonda Cornell had been unable to confide. She squeezed Chick's hand even tighter.

Inside the church, Chick took hold of her upper arms and moved her into a pew near the middle of the church. The exquisite house of worship was complete with beautiful stained-glass windows, red-velvet cushioned pews and red carpeting throughout. The soft, melodic voices of the sixty person choir provided a relaxing mood as they performed. "Blessed Assurance".

Several minutes passed before Pastor James C. McClendon began the eulogy. His strong, heartfelt words of encouragement drew cries into the air and sent heads nodding. When the beautiful speech reached its end, no eye was dry.

The announcement was made that the body would be committed at the nearby cemetery where all the Gwaltneys were buried. The pews began to empty as people made their way to the front of the church. They viewed the body and bestowed their sympathies to the bereaved parents.

Ophelia was headed that way, when she was pulled back into an unbreakable embrace. "Chick please." She whispered, squirming out of his hold in order to continue her trek towards the front.

Minerva's sad, teary brown gaze narrowed when she spotted Ophelia and Charles Augustine making their way forward. The sadness left and was replaced by something cold.

Ophelia held her hands clasped tightly and waited her turn. When the grieving mother looked up, Ophelia mistook the harsh look for one of pain, not hatred.

"Minerva, I don't know what I can say to tell you how sorry I am," she began, a gentle smile touching her full lips, "JJ was a lovely child and he'll be missed-"

"How dare you bring her here?" Minerva spat, staring past Ophelia's shoulder and into Chick's dark eyes.

"Excuse me?" Ophelia whispered.

Minerva's eyes were still on Chick. "I thought I made it clear. I don't want anything from you...or her."

"What is she talking about Chick?" Ophelia asked, her gaze turning hard and never leaving Minerva's face. Her attempt at being humble was quickly draining and her temper was coming to a slow simmer.

"Chick?" Ophelia called again. Her husband didn't have a chance to respond.

"I'm talkin' about you and your husband." Minerva supplied, moving off the pew to bring her face almost eye level with Ophelia's. "I told this nigga yesterday I didn't want any of your phony apologies or nothin' else! Now why don't y'all get the hell out!"

"Minnie." Jason whispered, rubbing the woman's back.

Minerva threw her husband a scathing look. "Get your damned hands off me." She softly commanded, dismissing the hurt which flashed in Jason's dark eyes. "My baby would still be alive if it weren't for you." She declared, without blinking an eye at the Augustines.

"What are you talkin' about?" Ophelia's voice grated and shook with hate.

Minerva wasn't intimidated by the taller woman. "I'm talkin' about that damned pond."

"What?" Ophelia sneered, stepping closer only to have Chick's arm slip around her waist. Minerva couldn't wait to elaborate. "If the Gwaltney's were in charge of that pond, as it should be, it would've been taken care of-properly. Instead it's nothin' but a deserted, shitty piece of trash!"

"That's enough Min!"

Minerva waved off Jason's warning. "You Augustines bickered and schemed to get it and look at it now! My baby never would've been out there alone if the place were watched by Gwaltneys!"

Despite her anger and the renewed hatred she felt for Minerva, Ophelia could not dismiss the hurt surging through her. Tears pooled in her voluminous brown eyes and she could never remember being so angry and terribly sad at once.

"We should go." Chick said, giving Ophelia's waist a gentle nudge.

Ophelia only nodded and turned to leave with her husband.

"Stuck up, educated bitch. Why don't you and Chick use some of them brains and learn how to take care of that piece of crap land?"

Minerva's parting shot drained Ophelia of her sadness and fired her anger to an explosive state. She wrenched her arm out of Chick's grasp and turned to face her nemesis. "Well since we're lettin' everything out, Minerva let's talk about how your baby wandered out to my piece of crap land in the first place."

"Fe Fe-"

"What the hell were y'all doin' while he was out there alone?" Ophelia queried.

Something flickered in Minerva's eyes and a smile came to Ophelia's face.

"Mmm hmm..." She breathed her lovely face a picture of satisfaction. "As if I needed to ask when everybody probably heard what y'all were doing."

"Ophelia please don't. Not here." Jason urged as he stepped a bit closer.

"No Jason. Your wife started this." Ophelia snapped, too far gone to exercise tact. "Let's hear it Minerva. Isn't it true that you and Jason were up in that house fuckin' the afternoon away while your boy was drowning?"

"Bitch." Minerva whispered, her lashes fluttering beneath the weight of heavy tears.

"That's enough Fe." Chick ordered, taking Ophelia's arm and practically dragging her to his side.

Ophelia didn't pull away, but she was far from silenced. "What? It's true, Chick! Ask any of their hundreds of servants. Not a one of 'em could tell you I'm not speakin' truth."

"You get out!" Minerva screamed and buried her face in Jason's chest.

Ophelia had no sympathy. "Hmph. At least she was screwing her husband. I remember when she used to take anything with a cock to bed."

The church was still filled with people. Once the argument began, many waited to view the outcome. Ophelia's last remark sent a solid gasp through the church. Stunned on-lookers turned and began to whisper amongst themselves. Many agreed that Ophelia Augustine had been speaking the truth.

Head held high, Ophelia turned to leave with her husband. Minerva wasn't about to let her go so easily and reached for the thick chignon Ophelia sported. Her fingers just grazed the silky ball, when Ophelia turned and laid a stinging slap to her cheek.

Minerva retaliated with a blow of her own. Before the exchange could explode into a brawl, Jason and Chick separated their wives. All conversation ceased as the crowd watched the two couples part ways.

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Minerva was still in a raving mood when she and Jason returned from the cemetery. She'd managed to keep her composure, but her husband could tell her nerves were like a twig about to snap. Jason could certainly relate. He had been on edge since the ordeal began.

Minerva left the car, slamming the door behind her. Jason had given everyone the day off, so the estate was bathed in silence. Minerva ran into the house and disappeared before Jason got out of the car.

"Not today." He growled, slamming the door with such force, the entire car shook. "Minerva!" He bellowed, bounding up the long, brick front porch steps.

Silence met his calls when he stepped past the front door. "Minerva!" He called again. A murderous glare gave his handsome features a more sinful appearance.

Minerva was in the kitchen. She held a glass in one shaking hand and poured water with the other. "I don't want to be bothered now." She told her husband when he found her.

Jason didn't bother with a verbal reply. He closed the distance between he and Minerva and slapped the glass from her hand.

Minerva gasped, but didn't have time to dwell on the shattered glass littering the polished wood floor. Jason placed her none too gently on the kitchen table and towered above her. Eyes wide, Minerva studied the look on Jason's face. She had never seen him so angry.

"Jason?" She whispered.

He didn't respond. He was much too focused on Minerva's dress. His big hands ripped the delicate material like paper. If possible, his dark eyes narrowed further as they roamed the pair of full breasts spilling from the lacy black bra. Jason didn't bother unfastening the wispy piece of lingerie. Instead, his fingers curled around the front and he ripped it off. Minerva cried out, her hands flexing as she watched her husband lean closer.

Jason kept Minerva pressed firmly against the table. His head bowed to her buxom and he inhaled the scent of perfume and sweat clinging to her skin. His lips parted and Minerva could feel his breath next to her nipples. They stiffened in response. When he took one of the rigid buds into his mouth, she squeezed her eyes shut and tried to block out the effect of his touch.

Jason's low growl sounded deep in his chest as his tongue stroked and suckled. He could feel Minerva soften beneath his hands and released her hips. His fingers slid over the tattered material of her dress and beneath the hem. In seconds, he was stroking her womanhood through the middle of her panties.

Suddenly, Minerva cried out and slapped Jason hard across his face. They both froze, watching each other with wide eyes. Minerva had never behaved that way and was just as shocked by the action as Jason. A moment later, she was racing from the kitchen and upstairs.

After closing and bolting the heavy bedroom door, she began to remove the ruined dress. The door flew open under the pressure of a mighty kick from Jason's boot. Minerva let out a terrified scream and clutched the dress to her chest. It was no protection against Jason's wrath. He was too angry to take heed to her fright.

Minerva stood watching him come closer. The dress slipped from her weak hands, just as his hands closed around her arms. He pulled her to the bed and pushed her down. Minerva didn't try to move away, she simply watched as Jason's clothing fell to the floor. When he stood naked before her, Minerva's breathing had noticeably increased. Still, she remained lifeless when he went to work on removing her half-slip and panties.

"Jason, please no...I can't." Minerva moaned, even though her inner thighs were moist with need.

Jason noticed. "Don't make me force you, Min." He whispered, tugging her earlobe between his perfect teeth. He felt her go pliant beneath his body and he settled himself between her silken legs...

"I really appreciate this, Vonda."

Ravonda Cornell chuckled and rolled her eyes. "Girl, after what you went through today, I certainly understand. Besides, my three are havin' the best time with CJ and Steph."

Ophelia smiled and closed her eyes resignedly. "I still appreciate it anyway. We'll be by to collect the kids before lunch tomorrow, okay?"

"No problem, Honey."

"Thanks Vonda, bye bye."

Ophelia set the phone aside and tapped her fingers against the maple message desk near the rear of the living room. When she turned, Chick was leaning against the doorjamb.

"The kids are gonna spend the night at Ravonda's." She called.

"You must've been reading my mind." Chick replied, a tiny smile touching the curve of his mouth.

Ophelia could only manage a tiny shrug. "Yes, I suppose you wouldn't want the kids around when you blast me for this afternoon, she silently predicted, trying to interpret Chick's easy expression.

When he pushed himself off the doorjamb, she unconsciously retreated. She cursed herself for being such a coward. To hide her nervousness, she headed out of the living room and up the wide staircase which branched off to opposite wings of the house.

"I'm sorry about today. I just couldn't take any more of that woman. I tried to let it go, but when she made that last comment, I-something just snapped." Ophelia rambled, when she realized her husband was following her up the carpeted stairwell.

Chick hadn't said a word. He walked into the bedroom behind Ophelia and began to remove his black suit.

"...I mean she had some nerve accusing us of killing her child. I admit I could've chosen my words differently, but she knew I was on the mark about what she and Jason were doing. I could see it in her eyes."

Ophelia had been turning down the bed amidst her lengthy explanation. After a while, she realized Chick hadn't responded since she began to speak. She turned to see if he was even in the room and found him standing right behind her. A startled gasp escaped her lips, giving Chick the opportunity he needed. His head dipped and he thrust his tongue deep inside her mouth.

Ophelia moaned and eagerly participated in the satisfying kiss. Her arms slid around Chick's neck when he lifted her off her feet and placed her on the bed. Using an expert's touch, Chick reached behind Ophelia and unzipped her dress. He broke the kiss to trail his mouth down her temple and past her earlobe, tugging the soft flesh between his even white teeth and suckling gently. Ophelia's tiny helpless groan fueled his desire and sent a shudder through his athletic frame.

"Chick please..." Ophelia sighed, nudging her hips against his.

A soft chuckle filled the room. Chick realized his wife's anxiousness. After all, they rarely had the house to themselves. He intended to see that they took advantage of every moment.

Ophelia threw her hands above her head when Chick slid the dress and her under things along her lithe, dark body. He grasped her thighs and buried his handsome face in the valley between. Ophelia's hips arched off the bed at the feel of his breath against her womanhood.

Chick pleased her unashamedly. His tongue delved deeply inside her and slowly rotated. Ophelia began to tremble. She pushed her fingers through his soft hair to hold him close. Chick increased the circular movements of his tongue as the shuddery gasps overhead spurred him onward. Mercilessly, he increased the pressure of the act. His hands tightened around Ophelia's thighs and her soft gasps became wanton cries.

"Does this mean you're not mad?" Ophelia whispered, when Chick finished plying her with his devastating treat.

"I will be if you don't shut up." He growled, thrusting his tongue past her full lips in the same manner that his manhood thrust into her body.

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Almost a month had passed since the funeral and the fiasco that followed. Jason Gwaltney hoped the passion he and Minerva enjoyed on the day of the funeral, would bring them closer. If anything, Minerva seemed to withdraw more deeply. She spent even more time in bed and was just rising many evenings when Jason returned from the fields.

Jason was used to being in control of any situation. Now, he was at his wits end. "Dammit." He groaned, eyeing the beaming sunlight with a dismal look. For the first time in a long time, he actually dreaded beginning another day. Still, he shook the heavy thoughts from his mind and moved to get out of bed. It was then that he realized he was alone in the massive four poster.

"Minerva?"

There was no answer and it appeared she had left the bed chamber. Jason whipped back the covers and reached for his robe. He was about to leave the room, when strange sounds caught his ears. They seemed to be originating from the private bathroom. His steps slowed as he listened for a few seconds. He was prepared to kick the door in, but tried the knob first. It gave and he found Minerva crouched before the toilet bowl.

"Minnie?" Jason called, horror filling his dark eyes as he watched her vomiting profusely. In an instant, he was on his knees next to her.

After several minutes, the vomiting turned into dry heaves. Minerva had been in the throes of nausea so long, she was completely limp. Jason pressed a kiss to her temple and carried her back to bed.

"What the hell is wrong with her, Doc?" Jason demanded of Dr. Farius Byers' partner Dr. Irving Nance.

Dr. Nance appeared uneasy as he fidgeted with the stethoscope around his neck. "Have her eating habits or anything else seemed out of the ordinary?"

"Are you serious?" Jason asked, a look of humorous disbelief appearing on his handsome face.

Dr. Nance closed his eyes and nodded. "Crazy question." He admitted, realizing how the question sounded in light of all that had happened.

Both men noticed Minerva tossing in bed and they stepped closer. Dr. Nance pressed one hand to Jason's shoulder.

"Would you mind if I had a moment alone with her?" He asked.

Jason studied the older man's weather-beaten vanilla-complexioned face and, after a moment, he nodded.

Minerva raised her head from the pillow when the door shut behind her husband. "What's wrong with me?" She whispered, her wide voluminous eyes appeared weak and sunken.

Dr. Nance stepped closer to the bed and patted Minerva's hand. "If I'm not mistaken, Miss Lady, you already know."

Minerva closed her eyes and turned her head towards the curtained window. "No..." she sighed.

"Minerva?"

"I'm pregnant?" She whispered, turning back to the doctor who nodded and smiled.

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Ophelia was certain Chick would come down on her about the things she'd said at the funeral. He never did. Of course it was the talk of the town. The Augustines and the Gwaltneys were always on someone's lips.

As a result, Ophelia kept her social appearances to a minimum. Her outings were limited to the grocery store, the kid's school and Chick's business.

Minerva Gwaltney was even less visible. Aside from Jason, the house employees and Dr. Nance, no one had seen her. News of the pregnancy had been bittersweet for the young couple. It filled them with twin emotions of grief for the child they lost and guilt that they'd been creating one child while losing another.

No one could be certain that the new baby had been conceived that day, but Minerva knew. She nor Jason could dismiss Ophelia Augustine's remarks on the day of JJ's funeral. They had been enjoying the pleasures of lovemaking while their child fought for his life.

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Chick stroked his beard as his eyes narrowed over the contract he viewed. The document labeled the terms of the agreement between Augustine Seams and a new retirement home which had been established for the black elderly.

Members of the management team began to trickle in for the staff meeting. Chick's mood over the last several weeks had been friendlier than he ever expected. Needless to say, his staff was delighted by his mood and eager to discuss the newest contract they'd acquired.

Lamar Robinson, one of Chick's vice-presidents, was usually among the last to arrive. Today, he hurried into the noisy meeting room and took his place next to Chick.

"Did you hear the news?" He whispered.

"No." Chick replied, with a grimace and without looking up from his paperwork. Lamar was always coming to him with some form of gossip which usually concerned the employees.

Lamar straightened his wide gray pin-striped tie and cleared his throat. "It's about your neighbors." He smugly supplied, smiling when Chick pinned him with a questioning look.

"Minerva Gwaltney's pregnant." Lamar went on to announce.

Chick nodded. He could understand why Lamar thought he should know. The pregnancy confirmed-more or less-what Ophelia said at the funeral.

"Your wife hit it right on the mark, Charles." Lamar raved, chuckling the entire time.

Chick ignored the rest of the man's speech. He knew this upheaval, like all the rest, would pass after a while. No one in town would frown upon his wife for speaking what she felt as true because no one held the Augustines or Gwaltneys responsible for anything they said or did.

That didn't hold true for Chick as his easy mood began to fade into something more heated. He managed to conduct the business meeting with the staff. Afterwards he headed home.

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Ophelia pulled the wide-brimmed straw hat from her head and smiled. For the last hour, she had been pruning the green bushes decorating the front of the house. She dusted her hands against the back of her jeans and prepared to head inside the house, when Chick's shiny, black Ford truck sped into horseshoe driveway. It was an unexpected treat to have him for lunch, especially when they could enjoy it alone.

Ophelia was about to tell her husband that, when his terrible frown came into view. Before she could back away, he caught her upper arm.

"Chick, what-"

"Shut up." He whispered, squeezing her arm so tight a tiny cry slipped past Ophelia's lips.

"Dammit Chick, what is wrong with you?!" She cried, when he pushed her into the house.

"I don't want to hear another damn word about anything else you have to say against the Gwaltneys!" He roared, slamming the front door so hard, the flower vases and picture frames shook.

"What?" Ophelia whispered, massaging her sore arm. The outburst had her shocked and confused, especially since she hadn't said anything to anyone in weeks.

Chick shrugged out of his navy blue suit coat and threw it to the burgundy high-back sofa. "I'm sick of this bickering and sniping back and forth. It's you and Minerva who's kept this thing goin' for so long!"

"Me and Minerva?" Ophelia snapped, becoming angry as well. "She was the one who started it with me at that funeral!"

"I don't care."

"Well, you should!" Ophelia retorted, her almond-shaped brown eyes blazing with fury. "After the way they've always treated you, you should care most of all."

Chick ran one hand over his soft hair. "I never had any problems with Jason."

"Hell, you didn't have to Chick. Minerva's more than enough to handle. Besides, I've never seen Jason come to your defense when his wife was talkin' shit."

By now, Ophelia and Chick had taken their 'discussion' to the kitchen. Chick selected a can of beer from the fridge, popped the top and took a long swig of the brew.

"Did you know she was pregnant?" He asked, after taking several sips of the drink. His back was turned to Ophelia and his voice was low. "Now everybody will know you were right about what you said." He continued, finally looking at his wife.

"But...she could've been pregnant before JJ."

"But you know they won't think that? Jason and Minerva are probably feelin' guilty as hell because they're thinking the same thing."

"Dammit Chick, that woman accused us of killing her child!" Ophelia reminded him, her eyes sparkling with renewed anger.

Chick finished his beer and threw the can into the sink. He stepped right up to Ophelia and held his index finger inches from her small nose. "Not another word Fe-Fe." He ordered, his voice sounding harsh and rough.

Ophelia swallowed past the lump in her throat, when Chick brushed against her on his way out of the kitchen. She knew that was the end of the discussion. Forever.

The heated feud cooled after decades of unrest. Years; however, only provided time for the hatred to simmer until, once again it was ready to explode.

## FOUR

### *Virginia- 1978*

"I didn't expect this to get so tedious, CJ." Stephanie Augustine moaned, tossing a pen to her white student desk.

Charles Augustine Jr. only shrugged. He was much more interested in his sister's growing album collection. "You were the one who wanted to trace the family tree for our Senior Project, remember?" He absently remarked, his deep-set dark eyes scanning the album covers.

Steph rolled her eyes and pulled her slender fingers through her straight, shoulder length tresses. "I'm beginning to think this was a bad idea."

"Well, it's too late to turn back now." CJ decided, turning to pin his usually responsible sister with a knowing glare.

"Wait a minute." Steph drawled. "Is this you tryin' to sound sensible?"

CJ went back to the red record player and set the Sly and The Family Stone album to play. "I just want all this mess finished, before the parties get started."

"I should've known." Stephanie sighed, knowing her older brother had an ulterior motive. "But, you're right." She conceded, reclining in her desk chair to study the Jacksons poster before her eyes. "This is no time to decide on a new project with graduation right around the corner."

CJ and Steph were born a year apart, but the smart young woman quickly caught up with her brother. Her parents couldn't have been more proud when she was chosen to skip a grade level. It was a good thing, too. Stephanie had inherited her mother's strong will and intelligence. She kept her laid back, fun-loving brother on his toes.

"If you can tear yourself away from all your engagements," Steph began, waiting for her brother to stop bobbing to the music and pay attention, "we need to set up a time to go to the Hall of Records for more research."

CJ grimaced and waved his hand. "Don't start with that jive, Steph. I know you and Sweet got plenty of parties to go to."

"Which is why we need to get on the ball with this." Steph reiterated.

Groaning, CJ took a seat on the chair next to the desk. "We already got a shit load of info," he said, rifling through the papers cluttering the desk, "I didn't think we'd find this much."

"Well, our family goes back a long way in this town." Stephanie reminded CJ as her lovely brown eyes scanned all the information they'd gathered. She knew CJ would never agree, but she'd found it extremely interesting-piecing together their family history. "I still can't wait until we're done." She admitted.

"Amen." CJ confirmed, standing from the chair. He went to peer past the white ruffled curtains shielding Steph's bedroom window. From there, he had an incredible view of the huge back lawn.

Many changes had taken place during the last ten years. Chick Augustine had a basketball court constructed when his son expressed an interest in the game. The Augustine pond was off limits, so a huge in-ground pool had been installed. Ophelia's impressive flower garden sat a couple of acres away from the recreational area, along with a stately vine-covered gazebo.

CJ's intense, dark gaze traveled farther into the distance, toward the overgrown pathway which led to the pond.

"CJ? CJ? CJ!"

"Huh? What?"

"Boy, what's got you so stoned?" Steph demanded, a frown marring her lovely caramel-toned face.

CJ shrugged off the question and turned away from the window. "When do you want to finish this research?"

Steph frowned towards the calendar on the back of her bedroom door. "Sometime early next week. I want to hurry up and get this done."

"How much more are you gonna do today?"

Steph's arched brows raised a notch and she shrugged. "Just a little more. Then, I'm taking a nap and then I'm gonna enjoy what's left of this weekend."

"I heard that!" CJ bellowed, already on his way to the door. "I'm goin' for a swim!" He called.

Stephanie slammed her hands to her desk. Papers flew everywhere in the wake of her brother's departure.

Ophelia Augustine's melodic laughter filled the lower level of the house. She was seated at the huge kitchen table that was always set for the next meal. Now a mother of four, the years had been wonderful to her and she was lovelier than ever. Her brown eyes sparkled more merrily and her waist length onyx hair seemed even more full and healthy.

"Girl, you are too crazy!" Ophelia cried, laughing hysterically with her first cousin, who lived in Columbus, Ohio.

"Honey, it's true!" Dyna Davidson retorted through her breathless laughter. "That girl has been worrying me senseless about going to visit her cousins in VA."

Ophelia laughed again. "Well, I can't wait to see Amina. I know she's got to be a beauty."

Dyna whistled. "Honey child, she is. She got that skin tone and hair just like you, Grandma and Stephanie."

"And you know that devilish girl done chopped hers to her shoulders." Ophelia lamented, referring to her daughter.

"Stop."

"Mmm hmm. Talkin' about it's easier to manage." Ophelia replied, faking her daughter's sometimes haughty tone of voice.

"I know she's still a fine sista." Dyna predicted.

Ophelia shook her head over her strong-willed daughter. "She is." She couldn't help but agree.

The cousins carried on their lively conversation, discussing everything from their children in their family. Ophelia became distracted a while later when her husband walked into the kitchen. Of course, the years had been just as kind to Chick Augustine. His rich chocolate-brown skin was still flawless, but he had removed the beard years earlier. His intense black eyes could still penetrate with startling effectiveness.

Chick blew a kiss to his wife, and then went to inspect the chicken pot pies baking for lunch. When Ophelia leaned over to swat his behind with her dishcloth, he closed the oven door and took an oatmeal cookie from atop the stove.

"Who's on the phone?" He asked, through a mouthful of cookies.

"Dyna."

"Hey, girl!" Chick called, before pressing a loud smack to his wife's cheek. "I'll see you later. I'm goin' to take Steph to do some research at the record hall."

Ophelia puckered her lips for another kiss, which Chick happily delivered. "I love you." She called.

"Oh brother." Dyna playfully complained. "Do y'all ever argue?"

"Ha! Baby don't be fooled." Ophelia shared. "Me and Chick have had some wild ones. Especially when the Gwaltneys were causing such an uproar."

"Is that mess finally over?"

Ophelia leaned back in her chair and toyed with the heavy braid dangling from her ponytail. "I would say it's over, but that's only because we don't cross paths."

"What about the kids? Don't they all go to the same school?"

"Mmm hmm, but they never say anything about them. They don't socialize."

"How many kids do they have?"

"Two who are school age-a girl and boy and I think there are another girl and boy, but they're only babies." Ophelia explained, pulling a crumb from her snug white T-shirt.

"Hmph, big families." Dyna noted.

"Yeah, but Chick forbids me to say anything negative about them."

"Is that difficult?"

"It is when my intuition keeps callin' to me."

"And what's it telling you?"

"That this whole thing is far from over."

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CJ raced out of his parent's immaculate home like the devil was at his heels. He passed the basketball court, barbeque pit and the pool. His final destination would prove to be far more enjoyable. He had discovered the treat several weeks earlier, while taking a break from the dreaded senior project.

For years, CJ's parents had demanded he never go near the pond. He had heeded their warnings...to an extent. The crystalline body of water beckoned him, but CJ took position behind the heavy mass of trees shielding the pond. He chose his usual spot and settled down for a show that was strictly taboo.

A striking young woman lay spread along the grassy bank of the pond. Her slender, molasses-toned frame was scantily clad in a white bikini. A mass of thick, black curls surrounded her angelic face like a dark cloud. Her eyes were closed, but their smoky-brown color and sensuous intensity were stamped onto CJ's brain.

Demetria Monique Gwaltney wiggled her toes in the cool, delightful water. Her long lashes flew open and she stared up at the partly cloudy sky. Since she could remember, the pond had been forbidden territory.

Now, at age fifteen, she had discovered the comforting power of the area. The fact that no one ventured out there, gave her a feeling of decadence and mystery. The pond was the one place where Demetria felt she could be herself. There was no one around to constantly remind her to watch her posture, smile more or talk louder.

A rustle from the cluster of trees behind her, pulled Demetria back to the present. She knew it wasn't the wind and smile came to her face. CJ Augustine, she thought. She wasn't frightened by the presence of her silent admirer, who was also the son of her family's enemies. She was excited.

Demetria realized she was being watched some time ago. One day, she hid on the opposite side of the pond-closest to her property. There, she could see handsome, CJ Augustine walk out to the bank as though he were looking for something or someone. Demetria made a noise in the bushes and emerged from her hiding spot. CJ made a fast escape, but Demetria had the best time taunting the young man. Secretly, she hoped he would make his presence known.

CJ watched Demetria intently. He berated himself for becoming so infatuated with a girl who would enter high school later that year as a Freshman. Unfortunately, he could not help himself when she was so incredible to look at. His heart pounded in the back of his throat, as anticipation set in. He wondered how long he'd have to wait that day before seeing more of her.

CJ wouldn't have long to wait. Demetria, who knew he was there, pulled her feet from the water and stood. Slow; tormentingly slow for CJ's benefit, she untied the flimsy strings holding the bikini top to her chest.

CJ gripped the tree trunk so tightly bits of bark loosened and fell to the ground. His dark lashes fluttered as a wave of male desire overcame his senses. When Demetria wriggled out of the matching bikini bottom, he uttered a soft grunt and leaned against the tree. His gaze traced every inch of her body as she turned to and fro inspecting her nude form. The inspection lasted about five minutes before she walked into the water and immersed himself in its coolness.

Leaves crunched beneath CJ's blue and white Converse when his strong legs weakened beneath him. He sat there, his eyes focused on the pond. He could not look away...

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"You want a soda or something before diving into all that work?" Chick asked, pulling the sleek gray LTD to a stop in front of the Cantone Market.

Stephanie shook her head and smiled for her father. "I'd never finish it in time and they don't allow drinks in the Hall of Records."

Chick raised his hands in a playful, defensive gesture. "Well they allow drinks at Augustine Seams, so I'm gonna go grab somethin'. Be right back."

"Okay, Daddy." Steph called, giggling when the man tugged on a lock of her hair. She uttered a tiny sigh, happy for the chance to change the radio from her father's preferred Blues tunes to a more up tempo station. She was tapping her fingers to the latest Ojays tune, when the market's screened front door opened. A tall, muscular young man walked out with the owner's son.

Stephanie's lovely brown eyes widened and she waved to her boyfriend from the car window. Samuel "Sweet" Kensie's double dimples appeared the instant his spotted Steph.

"Oh hell, I know you about to tell me to split." Nikos Cantone teased, his deep voice laden with an unmistakable northern accent.

Sweet's long drew close. "Why?"

When Nikos nodded towards Chick Augustine's car, a smile spread across Sweet's handsome, honey-toned face.

"Later, man." Nikos was saying, chuckling as he shook his head. "Hey, Steph!" He called, throwing up one hand.

Stephanie waved back. "Hey, Nikos!"

Sweet strolled over to the car. His gait was an over pronounced "pimp" which sent Stephanie into peals of laughter.

"What's so funny, girl?" He queried, pretending to be confused.

"You know why." She accused through her laughter.

Sweet joined in briefly, before leaning inside the car window and pressing a kiss to Steph's mouth. She trailed her fingers along the side of his smooth face and savored the sweet gesture. Sweet uttered a low sound and increased the intensity of the kiss. Stephanie gasped, giving him more room to explore. She moaned and eagerly participated. After a moment or two she remembered where they were and pulled back.

"My dad's right inside the store."

Sweet chuckled and trailed his wide fingers across Steph's pretty face. "He's talkin' to Mr. C." He assured her and prepared to lean in for another kiss.

"Stop." Stephanie playfully resisted, pressing her hand against one of Sweet's broad shoulders. "He won't be in there long. He's takin' me to the Hall of Records to get some work done."

Recognition dawned in Sweet's deep brown eyes. "Damn, y'all puttin' a lot of effort in that thing." He noted.

Steph shrugged. "Cause we want an A." She told him. "Plus, we've been finding so much information it hasn't been too hard piecing it together."

"Well, as long as it don't keep you too busy." Sweet decided, reaching inside the car to toy with the strap of Steph's bra, visible at the scoop collar of her snug green T-shirt. "We only got a few more weeks before we graduate."

"I know." Steph sighed, sadness dimming the sparkle in her eyes. "We still haven't talked about what we're gonna do afterwards." She reminded her boyfriend.

Sweet kissed a lock of her hair. "We'll think of somethin'." He promised.

Chick emerged from Canton's Market and spotted the young couple. He smiled, before clearing his throat and forcing a stern, 'fatherly' look to his face.

Sweet heard Chick approaching and stood straight. "Hey, Mr. Augustine." He greeted, moving around the car to shake hands with his girlfriend's father.

"What's happenin', man?" Chick replied, returning the hearty handshake.

"Not much, Sir. Just tryin' to keep Steph from workin' herself to death."

"I heard that." Chick agreed. "Y'all got plans for later?"

Sweet's shoulders rose in a lazy shrug beneath the black and gray football tee he sported. "I hope so." He whispered.

Chick clapped the boy's shoulder. "Hang in there, man." He advised, before heading to the driver's side of the car. "Isn't CJ supposed to be helpin' you with the project, Baby?" He asked when he settled in behind the wheel.

Steph waved to Sweet, before rolling her eyes. "He sure is Daddy!" She drawled, matter-of-factly.

Chick laughed. "Don't let him pull that jive on you, girl." He told her.

Stephanie burst into uncontrollable giggles at her father's use of the slang term. The car was filled with laughter as it sped down Main Street.

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Tavares Johnson Gwaltney had organized a gritty football game in his parent's backyard. The players were in their element as they raced back and forth across the lawn in their pursuit of the cherished pigskin.

Tav had devised his teams between high school buddies and his father's field workers. No one got any work done. Those who weren't participating in the game, were happy spectators

"That damned boy." Jason Gwaltney growled, spotting his son at the center of the recreation. He tossed the remainder of his coffee into the sink and headed outside.

The cooks jumped in unison, when the back door slammed shut behind the man.

"Tav!" Jason bellowed and play ceased instantly. "Get over here, Boy!" He ordered.

Onlookers were intrigued when Tav went to stand before his father. They were almost mirror images. Tav was just as tall as Jason, only not quite as massive. Of course, he was well on his way. He had his father's gorgeous, dark features and physical nature. Aside from all the brawn, he was an intelligent young man who would one day take control of his father's thriving business.

"Boy, what the hell is on your mind?" Jason whispered, clapping his hands to his son's shoulders.

Tav gazed innocently into the frowning face that appeared almost as youthful as his own. "Just lettin' off some steam, Poppa."

Jason shook his head. "How about lettin' it off after the men get off work, hmm?"

Tav nodded, having no desire to incite his father's considerable temper. He sent his friends home and told the workers they would resume the game some other time.

Jason waited on the hilltop overlooking the small valley where the game was held. "Pick a better time for play next time, alright?" He suggested when his son joined him.

Tav debated, before deciding to issue a reply. "Poppa, I figured these cats could use a break instead of workin' all the time."

Jason ran one hand over his bald head. He couldn't help but chuckle at his son's smooth talk. "I appreciate what you're sayin', man, but I need you to be more responsible. Especially when it comes to the people who work for us. You'll be running this place one day and if the men see you as a runnin' buddy before seein' you as the boss man, you won't have an ounce of control. Think about it." He urged, slapping one hand to the middle of Tav's chest before walking off.

Tav let his skepticism show once his father moved on. He waited until the man was absorbed in conversation with the field men, before racing off towards the front of the estate.

Of course, Tav knew better than to disagree with his overpowering father. Still, he had no aspirations to run the estate...at least not right away. At that point, the handsome high school senior was interested in two things: sex and sports.

Tav raced by his mother in his quest for the shiny black Impala parked in the front yard. Minerva Gwaltney, like her husband, had grown older in years, but not in appearance. She was as lovely as ever despite the fact that she had given birth to five children.

"Where're you off too?" Minerva called, watching Tav stop in his tracks and walk back to the porch.

"I got some things to do in town, Ma."

Minerva's brown eyes narrowed. She was far from being fooled. "Don't push your father too far, Baby. You're already skating on thin ice with his as it is."

Tav's grin brought his dimples to life. "Me and Poppa got an understanding." He assured his mother.

"Mmm hmm..." Minerva replied, as she bounced her third son Sanford, on her hip.

Tav sprinted up the brick steps and pressed a kiss to the top of his little brother's head. Then, he kissed his mother before jogging off to his car.

Minerva looked out across the field and saw Jason standing with his hands pushed into the pockets of his black overalls. He had been watching their son as well. "Enjoy your playtime, Boy." Minerva whispered.

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Tav left home quickly to avoid another lecture by his father. He knew his mother was right. Sooner or later Jason would demand he spend more time learning the family business. That would be especially true after graduation in a few weeks.

Tavares wasn't against being a part of it all. He admired his father's success and prayed, one day, he could be as dedicated and hardworking. Still, at the present, Tav was more interested in savoring the fringe benefits of being Jason Gwaltney's son: money, popularity, girls...He had plenty of time to be a businessman.

Tav drove to the playground, where a pickup basketball game was in progress. The court teemed with young men waiting to get into the game and girls waiting to be noticed by a cute boy. Most of the guys hoarding the court were upperclassmen-members of the basketball team.

When Tav arrived, they quickly opened a spot for him. The boy had a charisma no one could deny. His powerful build and fantastic looks made him first pick for any games and almost every girl vied for his attention.

"What it is, black?" Tav greeted Sweet when they met at the edge of the court.

"You ready for this ass whippin' on the court, man?" Sweet taunted as he and Tav shook hands.

"Give it all ya got, blood." Tav insisted, heading over to the packed, wooden bleachers.

"Can I hold your shirt, Tav?" One of the young women asked, when the navy blue garment was discarded.

Of course, Tav granted her the privilege. He tossed the shirt over his shoulder and flexed the muscles that rippled in his chest, arms, back and abdomen.

"You think she'd go out with me?" Nikos Cantone was asking.

Sweet shrugged as he watched Joselle Wallace across the court with Tav. "She's a fast one, man." He warned, tossing an empty water cup into a nearby wastebasket.

Nikos' pensive, dark stare narrowed as he continued to stare at the dark slender young woman. "It's a front." He decided. "She's in a lot of my classes. She seems real cool."

"I'll bet." Sweet replied in his most sarcastic tone. "Man why don't you go after one of them Italianas?" He teased.

Nikos looked over at his friend. "You got a problem with me goin' after the sistahs, brotha?" He playfully drawled.

"No." Sweet answered with a shrug. "But someone might."

Nikos' bronzed face softened with a knowing look. "I ain't had no complaints yet."

Sweet retied his black Converse and shook his head. "Yeah, right. Man, let's get this game started."

Hours later, the court was becoming more deserted as players and spectators ventured off for more enjoyment during the warm Saturday afternoon.

Nikos had seen Joselle leave several minutes earlier. She was headed in the direction of one of the walking paths. He had never approached her before, but decided now was as good a time as any.

"Yo! Nik, man! You comin'?!!" Sweet called.

The two, tall young men met at center court and shook hands.

"Nah man, I got some stuff to do, but I'll catch up wit'cha later."

Sweet pulled the pick from his hair and began to fix his afro. "You goin' back to the store?"

"Hell no!" Nikos replied, with a laugh. His double dimples appearing as an even white smile broke through. "It ain't every day Pops gives us both the same day off."

"I heard that!" Sweet bellowed, reaching out to shake hands with his co-worker. "See ya later, man."

Nikos watched his friend walk off. He turned in the direction he saw Joselle headed. Fanning the Knicks jersey from his torso, he set off to find her.

Obviously, Joselle and Nikos weren't the only two interested in taking a stroll in the park. Nikos had been walking a while, when he happened upon a couple sharing an intimate rendezvous.

They were braced against a tree. Distinct moans and breathless cries filled the air surrounding them. The boy was huge and hunched over the girl, whose hand shook against the tree trunk. Her lover took her savagely from behind, but she didn't seem to mind.

Tavares Gwaltney urged his partner with crass statements; calling her demeaning names as he satisfied himself. His large hands cupped the girl's breasts as his hips thrust forward in rapid succession.

Nikos watched, but not out of voyeurism. He had to know the girl's identity.

"Mmm..." Tav groaned his thrusts slowing as he reached satisfaction. When he pulled away, Joselle Wallace's limp, nude body was revealed.

Tav pulled on his loose gray jogging pants and reached for his T-shirt. "Later." He called leaving the girl slumped against the tree.

Nikos retreated behind some heavy brush and remained there until Joselle had gathered her things from the ground and left. Afterwards, he pulled both hands through his thick, wavy black hair and tried to burn her image from his mind.

## FIVE

Cardman G. Wainright High school was a massive four-story structure located along the outskirts of town. The school's student body consisted of the town's entire "minority" teenage population. The ten minutes between classes gave students a chance to socialize in the halls or on the huge school yard. The well-manicured green lawn teemed with talkative students, cars and motorcycles.

Samuel "Sweet" Kensie's deep-set dark gaze narrowed with skepticism. "You sure it was her, man?"

Nikos leaned against the wide, stone banister leading into the school. He had been telling Sweet about the 'lover's tryst' he'd walked in on. "I'm positive it was her." He declared, folding his arms across the orange T-shirt he sported.

"He was fuckin' her right there on the tree?" Sweet asked, disbelief clouding his words. He whistled when Nikos nodded.

"And I'd just seen that muthafucka with some other girl a couple of days ago." Nikos recalled.

Sweet shook his head at his friend's naïveté. "My man, Tav Gwaltney ain't no 'one chick dude'." He informed the boy.

"I'm beginning to see that." Nikos sighed, his stomach churning as he remembered him coldly Tav left Joselle after they 'made love'. "I'm surprised he ain't made no moves on your girl." Nikos teased, his perfect, even smile appearing.

"Steph?!" Sweet bellowed, his robust laughter spilling forward. "Man, believe me, that chick has zero tolerance for the Romeo or his family."

"I heard that!" Nikos replied, smacking palms with Sweet. "And speaking of family, here comes your future brother-in-law."

"What's happenin', y'all?" CJ greeted, slapping palms with Nikos and Sweet.

"What's goin' on, man? You comin' to play ball with us after school?" Sweet asked bending to tie his sneakers.

CJ grimaced and shook his head. "Gotta pass today, brotha. My Ma's got me goin' to pick up my cousin from the train station. She's staying with us for the summer."

"Daaaamn, they already out of school?" Nikos marveled.

CJ waved one hand in the air and shoved the other into his jean pocket. "She's one of them smarty pants, takin' advanced classes and stuff like that."

"She sounds just like Steph." Sweet mentioned.

"Mmm hmm." CJ agreed. "Anyway, they already got out for summer up in Ohio."

"Is she going to graduation?" Nikos asked.

A rueful smirk crossed CJ's wide mouth. "Man, I hope *I'll* be going to graduation. That senior project is so damned complex." He lamented.

"Problems?" Sweet asked.

CJ shook his head. "Not really. We got a lot of information. It's just a lot to piece together and I don't know if we'll get it all done in time."

"Man, do you know how hard your sister's been workin'?" Sweet asked, giving his friend a reassuring clap on the back. "She'll make sure y'all don't miss the deadline."

"Hmph. Well, as much time as I've been givin' Steph, she probably won't even let me put my name on the damn thing." CJ mused, joining in with Nikos and Sweet when they laughed. A while later he said his goodbyes and left for the train station.

Sweet decided he had to get going as well and told Nikos they'd meet at the ball court. Nikos was headed for his truck, when he bumped into Joselle Wallace. The girl had always been sweet to him and that day was no exception.

"Hey Nikos." She greeted, with a radiant smile brightening her round, pretty face.

Nikos was tongue-tied. He had no idea what to say after what he'd seen. His image of Joselle as a sweet innocent girl was still there, but that image was now mingled with something else.

"Are you okay, Nikos?" Joselle asked her words soft and unhurried as she noticed the closed look on his handsome, olive-toned face.

Nikos forced a slight shrug. "Just um...just got a lot goin' on...you know?"

"Mmm..." Joselle replied her brown gaze faltering as the lull in conversation lengthened.

"Jo! Hey Josie! Eh Girl!"

Joselle and Nikos were strolling across the parking lot in silence, when Joselle heard her name. Tavares Gwaltney stood across the wide, gravel parking lot. He was leaning against his black Impala surrounded by a group of his friends.

"Eh Joselle, tell Mister Italiano, his crew is down at the spaghetti shop!"

Several other students in the parking lot heard the crude remark. Of course, everyone loved Nikos, so the only laughter came from Tav and his gang.

"What a bastard." Joselle whispered, her voice shaking with hate. "I'm sorry." She added.

Nikos waved it off. "That mess don't faze me." He sighed.

Joselle reacted as though the insult were directed at her. "Stupid, stupid..." She chanted.

Nikos didn't ask what the problem was. He already knew. A moment later Joselle was asking him to excuse her and disappeared across the parking lot.

\*\*\*

"Steph. Girl get those books off the table!" Ophelia cried, when she flew into the kitchen. Stephanie frowned and watched her mother checking the simmering pots. "I can't believe you're goin' to all this trouble for a family member-a teenager at that."

"It's not just a family member, little girl." Ophelia retorted, mocking Steph's haughty tone. "Amina is my favorite cousin's only child and Dyna asked me to take care of her. She's never been away from home before."

"So what's she like?" Steph asked, as she began to clear away her books.

Ophelia stirred the pot of black-eye peas simmering in onions and ham hocks. "Amina is a very smart young woman. Extremely smart-book wise. She's also very quiet-a graceful, poised sort of child. Dyna says some people may think she's stuck on herself, but it's just her way. She's a lovely girl and quite sociable once you get to know her. So be nice." Ophelia warned, tweaking her daughter's nose when she walked by.

Silence settled over the kitchen as Steph cleared the table under her mother's watchful eye.

"Are you getting enough help from your partner?" Ophelia asked referring to CJ as Steph shuffled papers.

The girl flipped a lock of her hair from her face. "Not as much as I'd like to, Ma." She admitted. "CJ acts like he's in some kind of daze half the time. Especially when we're trying to work on the weekends."

Ophelia leaned against the counter and pushed her hands into the pockets of her form-fitting bell-bottoms. "What do you mean dazed?" She queried.

Steph shrugged. "I can't say for sure and I really don't know how else to describe it. He just acts like he's in another world sometimes."

"Well do you think the project will be finished in time?"

Steph's weary expression quickly turned confident. "I'll be finished with it. There is no way I'm spending any more time than necessary at Cardman G. Wainright High."

Ophelia's laughter filled the room.

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CJ parked his mother's sleek red Cadillac near one of the overhead speakers at the station. The sounds of Ike and Tina Turner resounded from the state-of-the-art 8-track tape deck. He closed his eyes and leaned against the black leather headrest.

His thoughts took him away from the crowd of travelers to the previous weekend.

He could live forever off the sight of Demetria Gwaltney. Realistically, he had to admit it would be impossible to accept sight without touch. The time would come when he would either make his presence known or stop going to the forbidden pond.

"Number 6063 from Columbus, Ohio on Track Seven. Again, number 6063 from Columbus..."

"Damn!" CJ hissed, jumping out of the car to race inside the terminal. He headed right to the ticket window and asked for directions to the track.

"CJ?"

It took a moment before CJ tuned into the soft voice calling his name. When he turned and looked down, an incredibly lovely cinnamon-skinned girl looked back at him.

"Amina?" He whispered.

Amina Celeste Davidson's long lashes fluttered over her eyes in relief. "I was hoping it was you." She sighed.

"How'd you get off the train so fast?" CJ was asking, as he moved away from the ticket window.

Amina's hazel almond-shaped eyes actually seemed to sparkle when she laughed. "They've been announcing the train for a while now. I've been in here almost ten minutes."

CJ cleared his throat, realizing his daydreaming had completely taken over and he'd forgotten where he was. "Well, let's get your stuff and get outta here." He suggested.

Amina let out a yelp when CJ turned on the car. "I see why you couldn't hear the announcement!" She called over the music blaring from the speakers.

CJ grinned and adjusted the volume. "Sorry. Do you listen to Parliament?"

"I do." Amina replied, sliding a lock of her waist-length wavy hair behind her ear. "Mostly, I listen to the O'Jays, Mavis Staples, Rose Royce, The Fifth Dimension and the Jacksons."

"Just like Steph." CJ said, shaking his head in amusement. "So what grade are you goin' to next year?" He asked.

Amina giggled. "No grade. I just graduated this year."

"Get the hell outta here!" CJ ordered, flashing his cousin a quick look of disbelief. "Damn you are just like my sister. Y'all should get along big time."

The light in Amina's eyes faded a bit. "I hope so. It'll be so nice. I don't really have any girlfriend's up in Ohio."

CJ came to a stop at the red light and turned to face her. "That's hard to believe."

Amina fiddled with the hem of her ruffled neck, blue blouse and shrugged. "I could never get them to accept me."

"Not even your smart friends?"

"There weren't many my age." Amina explained her expression sad. "Besides, people tend to frown on you for being 'smart' and then...I had other things against me too."

"Like what?" CJ probed, pushing the accelerator when the light changed.

Amina leaned back against the headrest and closed her eyes. "Most of the girls I went to school with thought I was after their boyfriend's when it was really the other way around."

CJ nodded, but did not respond. He could hear the hurt in Amina's soft voice even though she tried to mask it with laughter. He understood her plight. Despite the fact she was his cousin, there was no denying her beauty. Amina had the look of his mother and sister, but there was an added gentleness-something sweetly graceful. Instantly, he felt a need to protect her.

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Although it was mid-week, the basketball court was packed. Middle and High school students finished homework, while others socialized or watched the game. Sweet and Nikos were on the same team that day. The two friends were dynamic partners, much to the dislike of Tavares Gwaltney.

Tav and his crew made up the opposing team and didn't like being bested by anyone. Especially a team, which included someone they deemed 'beneath' them.

"Time!" Tav called, after a few plays added 8 more points to the opposing teams staggering lead.

"We gotta stop these muthas." He practically growled, when his team met in a huddle. "Marcus, let me guard that greasy headed Nikos."

"I knew it wouldn't be long." Nikos mused, when the huddle broke.

Sweet frowned. "What you talkin' bout, Man?"

Nikos's grin sparked his deep dimples. "I'll bet Tav's gonna guard me."

"Just concentrate on whippin' these fools, man." Sweet suggested, fanning his sweat-drenched white tank top.

Unfortunately, the 'game' wasn't on Tavares Gwaltney's mind. The game that had always existed between he and Nikos Cantone reached a fevered pitch that day. The supposed "guarding", lead to a shoving battle which resulted in punches being thrown. Nikos could handle himself, but against Tav's rage, his skills wore thin. Tav seemed close to killing Nikos, when the fight was stopped.

"What the hell is wrong with you, fool?!" Sweet raged, pulling Nikos limp body off the pavement.

"It's just a fight Sweet, man. Be cool." Tav replied, a broad grin crossing his face.

"Fuck cool, man. You almost killed him!" Sweet roared, as his teammates carried Nikos from the court.

Tav felt no remorse. "Maybe he should play ball someplace where he'll feel safer!"

Sweet waved his hand and turned away. "Fuck you, Man!" He called.

Tav only laughed. "Y'all do Italians even play ball?!" He inquired of his teammates who all laughed at the remark.

Sweet caught up with his friends who were escorting Nikos to his blue Toyota truck. "We gotta get you home, man!" He decided, pulling Nikos' keys from the back pocket of the boy's jean shorts. They settle Nikos into the passenger side while Sweet got behind the wheel.

"Damn Gwaltneys!" Sweet raged, slamming his fist against the steering while his friend moaned in pain.

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"Oh, you look just like Dyna!" Ophelia raved, pulling Amina close for another hug.

Everyone was in high spirits, having another member of the family beneath the roof. Amina was especially delighted by the warm reception she'd received from the Augustine clan.

"I hope you're hungry!" Ophelia warned, when she went to the oven and removed the broccoli and cheese cornbread.

"I am!" Chick and CJ called, as they stormed into the kitchen.

"CJ put these mittens on and take the cornbread out to the dining room." Ophelia instructed, and then pressed a quick kiss to her husband's cheek. "Baby, I already fed Derric and Cameo. They should be asleep. Would you go check?"

"No problem." Chick replied, giving his wife a light salute before he disappeared upstairs to see to the youngest Augustines.

"Steph, get the drinks, alright?"

"I'm on it, Ma." Stephanie called, already pouring fresh lemonade into tall glasses.

Amina stood in awe. "Aunt Ophelia, you've got it together." She complimented.

"Amina, pleeease don't let her think she's bad." Steph playfully scolded.

Ophelia removed the apron from her floor length floral print sundress and smacked Steph's bottom. "Let the girl speak, child. Yes baby, I'll admit it takes a lot to keep these people on schedule."

Steph mocked her mother's flamboyant gestures when the woman went on about how difficult it was raising such a large family. Ophelia turned to give her daughter another smack on her derriere, just as Chick returned to the kitchen.

"You expecting your beau tonight, Babygirl?" He asked.

Steph nudged her father's shoulder at his use of the old-fashioned term. "He said he'd stop by after he left the court."

"The court?" Amina queried, taking a seat at the kitchen table.

Steph nodded and took a seat in the chair at her cousin's left. "Mmm hmm. The basketball court. Everybody hangs out there."

"What's it like?" Amina questioned, her light eyes sparkling as Steph explained about the park and basketball games that grabbed all the kid's interest.

A knock sounded on the backdoor, amidst Stephanie's speech. Chick went to answer and smiled when he saw his daughter's boyfriend on the porch.

"What's goin' on, man?" Chick greeted stepping aside to allow the young man entrance.

"Hey Mr. Augustine." Sweet replied, weariness evident in his deep voice as he stepped in from the evening shadows.

"Sweet!" Steph cried, being the first to spot the blood red streaks on the boy's white tank top.

Sweet closed his eyes and grimaced, having realized he hadn't changed his shirt. "I'm fine. I'm alright." He assured his girlfriend and her family when they gathered around him.

"Man, what happened?!" CJ asked when he returned to the kitchen and saw his friend's bloodstained clothes.

Steph pulled Sweet over to the kitchen table as he spoke. "That nig-sorry Mr. and Mrs. Augustine. Tav Gwaltney happened. Got all up in Nikos face during the game. Started shovin' him, one thing led to another, then they were brawlin'. I thought that fool was gonna kill Nik."

"Rank bastard." Stephanie sneered.

"Dumb ass." CJ whispered.

"Hey! Hey!" Chick reprimanded when he heard his son and daughter's remarks.

"Sorry Pop, but that fool ain't nothin' but a-

"A nuisance." Stephanie finished for her brother.

"Who is he?" Amina asked, her light voice resounding in the now silent kitchen.

Ophelia practically bubbled to give her second cousin the real deal on the Gwaltney's. One look at the warning look in Chick's dark eyes changed her mind.

"Tav and his family are our next door neighbors, Baby." She replied, the tone of finality telling everyone else that the conversation had reached its end.

Several acres away at the Gwaltney estate, Demetria was applying liniment to Tav's busted knuckles. "Daddy do you think he needs a doctor?" She asked, frowning at the horrid cuts on her big brother's hands.

"I don't need a thing." Tav replied, before his father could say a thing.

"You need a whippin' in my wood shed!" Jason bellowed, slapping the back of Tav's head. "What the hell were you thinkin' about fightin' like some damned hoodlum over what?! I should take you outside and show you what a real fight is!"

Tav looked up at Jason, who appeared ready to bust from the confines of his dusty gray work shirt. Tav shuddered and prayed the huge man would not carry out his threats.

"I got somethin' better in mind, though." Jason muttered, helping himself to a drumstick from the platter of fried chicken. "Because of this blasted fight, you have forfeited your summer of fun, boy. Your black ass will be learning the business instead of traipsin' over town all time of the day and night."

Demetria finished her doctoring and left the table. She could feel Tav's hand shaking against hers as their father passed his sentence. Clearing her throat, she pushed the Band-Aids and gauze into the pockets of her green sundress and left the kitchen.

Tav knew it would be foolish to argue, but the idea of losing an entire summer, made him want to scream. "Day and night? What can I learn about the market at night?"

"I'll think of somethin'." Jason promised.

Tav pushed his chair away with enough force to knock it to the floor. "Poppa you can't do this to me, man! This is my last summer before college."

Less than a second seemed to pass, before Jason laid a powerful backhand to his son's face. "Enjoy these weeks until your graduation, boy. After that, your ass belongs to me."

Tav was motionless and speechless as he clutched his flaming cheek. Defeated, he watched his father stroll from the room.

\*\*\*

Dinner at the Augustine home was an enjoyable affair, despite its rocky start. CJ and Steph were delighted by Amina's company. They were even more pleased by her presence, when Ophelia allowed them to forgo helping her with the dishes in order to entertain their cousin.

"I wish you had changed your shirt." Steph whispered to Sweet, as they all watched "The Flip Wilson Show."

He shrugged. "After I took Nik home, I didn't feel like goin' home and havin' my dad give me the third degree about what happened."

"How was Nikos when you left him?" Steph asked.

"In pain, but he's tough. Bruises'll probably be the only way to tell he was in a fight." Sweet decided.

"That fool's gonna tangle with the wrong person one day." CJ predicted, his handsome face hard with anger.

"Why don't you all get along?" Amina asked, after she'd listened in for a few moments.

"It's a long story." Sweet warned.

"She still needs to know." Steph decided. "His entire family has been a pain in our side for years, right CJ?"

CJ nodded, though he couldn't bring himself to demean everyone in the Gwaltney family.

"But Tav has got to be the worst of 'em," Stephanie was saying, "he's crude, arrogant, stuck on himself, foul-mouthed, nasty, no respect for women..."

"He probably has respect for his Mama." Sweet teased.

"And she'd be the only one." Steph retorted.

Amina smoothed her hands across her burgundy sweater. "Y'all make him sound so scary."

"You just stay away from him." CJ cautioned.

Steph rolled her eyes. "Please, once he sees Amina y'all know he's gonna try to run them same pickup lines on her."

The conversation continued, becoming more heated by the minute. When Chick passed the den doorway, the discussion was silenced.

## SIX

**D**uring the next couple of weeks, things were relatively silent. The fight between Nikos and Tav was almost forgotten. Forgotten, that is, by everyone except Nikos, Tav and Jason Gwaltney. The bruises faded, but Nikos Cantone was left with an even deeper hatred of Tavares.

Of course, Tav had greater concerns. His father had remained true to his word, making Tav attend meetings and offer input on marketing ideas for the store. Tav hated it, or so he thought. His ideas for Gwaltney Produce were quite insightful with the potential to net substantial profits. Slowly, but certainly, he was gaining the respect of his father's top people.

Amina Davidson had also been pulling attention. She had already turned the heads of several of CJ's male friends. Everyone wanted to know more about her. Amina; however, was content shopping with Ophelia and helping Stephanie with her senior project. Only to herself could Amina admit there was one person she wanted to meet. His identity, she dared not reveal.

Soft streams of sunlight fought past the lavender curtains in Amina's bedroom. It didn't take long to awaken, especially with the loud voices on the other side of the wall.

"What the?...!" She whispered, slowly pushing the covers away. Pulling a pink chenille robe over her green thin-strapped nightgown, she left the room and went to investigate.

"It's Saturday mornin' and your butt ain't out of bed yet!"

"That's because it's Saturday mornin'."

Steph rolled her eyes as her small hands clenched into fists. "This is it! I ain't overlookin' your laziness no more!"

"Damn Steph, I ain't get to bed 'til-"

"I don't care when you got to bed!" Steph roared, her arched brows meeting to form a fierce frown. "CJ, I can't believe you haven't finished the research you promised to have for me by this morning."

CJ groaned and pulled the ends of the pillow up to cover his ears. "I'll get it done." He grumbled.

"When CJ?" Steph persisted, stepping closer to her brother's bed. "The project is due Friday and I wanted to get it finished this weekend."

CJ sucked his teeth and rolled onto his side. "Aw Steph, we gonna pass whether we turn that mess in or not. Our grades are good enough."

CJ's lax response only enraged Stephanie further. Nostrils flaring, she jumped on the bed and reached for a pillow. Her anger and frustration spewed forth as she pounded her brother's face, back and chest with heavy blows. CJ laughed, until the blows grew harsher and he realized his sister was really angry.

"Steph!" He cried, becoming breathless as the pillow landed across his face in rapid succession. "Steph, alright! Alright, damn!"

"Alright what?" Steph demanded, holding the pillow poised for another hit.

CJ took a moment to catch his breath. "I'll finish my part of the research today and piece it all together. We can work all day and night if we have to."

Steph eased back and smiled. "That's more than acceptable." She coolly replied, smoothing her glossy hair back into place. "But you'll be working alone, since I'm goin' out with Amina." She announced, sending CJ an expectant look-daring him to complain. When he nodded, she moved off the bed with the dignity of a queen and strolled from the room.

Amina watched the scene from the doorway. When Steph passed, they slapped palms. "That's cold!" CJ called from bed.

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As usual, the Gwaltney household was already up for the day. The family was enjoying a hearty breakfast of grits with sausage links with gravy, biscuits with jam, scrambled eggs with cheese, milk and coffee. Today would be an important day for business as Jason was meeting with a new market from the next county. He hoped to have his produce stocked there.

"I can't believe you're finally looking to sell your wares outside the county, Baby."

Jason managed a soft smile for his wife, before he shook his head. "I still don't know, Minnie. You know I ain't too high on doin' business with whitey."

Minerva nodded, forking a mound of the seasoned grits into her mouth. "Well, that's a small price to pay to bring more money in, right?"

"That's the best reason." Jason agreed. "That, and the fact that it was my boy's idea for me to broaden my horizons."

"So, how does it feel to be a decision maker, Baby?" Minerva asked her son.

Tav's expression was a mixture of anxiety and weariness. "We're having lunch with them today, Ma. So I'll let you know after they sign the papers."

Minerva and Jason exchanged glances, before bursting into laughter.

"At least he's confident!" Minerva raved.

"That's my boy!" Jason bellowed through his roaring laughter.

Minerva noticed that Demetria had not said much, despite the lively conversation. "What do you have planned for today, Honey?" She asked, tapping her fingers on the navy blue tablecloth to get her daughter's attention.

"Not much." Demetria replied, looking up from her plate for the first time since breakfast began.

Minerva propped her fist beneath her chin and smiled into the face which resembled her own. "I don't like you spending so much time alone, Sweetie." She whispered.

Jason pushed his chair from the table and took a quick swig of his coffee. "We should get going." He said to Tav. The two well-dressed men left the table after kissing Minerva and Demetria.

When the dining room was silent, Minerva inched her chair closer to her daughter's. "So, do you have anything exciting planned for the weekend?" She probed again.

"Like I said, Ma, 'not much'." Demetria reiterated, folding her arms across the front of her purple silk robe.

Though there was nothing strange about a young woman enjoying long walks and finding quiet places to read, it set Minerva on edge. She had always thought Demetria would be more like her-take charge, lively, outgoing. Unfortunately, all mother and daughter shared were looks. There, the similarity ended. Minerva forced herself to be gentle with Demetria because she sensed how fragile the girl was.

"Baby, are there any girls you'd like to invite out here?" Minerva suggested, hoping to spark interest with the idea. "You know, summer's coming up," she continued, "and maybe you'd like to have a slumber party or something like that."

Demetria's huge brown eyes drifted downward. She showed no excitement.

Minerva caught her lower lip between her teeth to ward off the frustration bubbling inside her. "You wouldn't have to worry about Tav butting in on the party, you know? Your Daddy's wearing him out every day." She teased.

Demetria managed a smile, hoping to soothe the unease she heard in her mother's voice. Still, it was clear that she was disinterested. "Could I be excused?" She softly requested.

Minerva realized she'd been holding her breath and finally nodded. Demetria left the table like a flash, leaving her mother looking after her in confusion and concern.

Demetria raced upstairs and ripped her nightclothes from her back. She changed into the revealing red, string bikini she had chosen for the pond that day. She covered the skimpy outfit with a pair of yellow shorts and a matching top. She made her way out of the house, taking care not to run into her mother along the way.

Demetria left through the back door, as though she were running for her life. The girl did not stop until she was far away from the workers. Her sprints slowed to a stroll and soon she had reached the pond. Burying her face in her hands, she took a deep breath, inhaling the clean air which seemed exclusive to the pond.

Lectures from Minerva always produced the same results. Demetria realized long ago that her mother would never understand her. Minerva Gwaltney wanted a daughter to follow in her footsteps. Demetria knew she would never be able to meet those expectations. She had no desire to. She was a different type of person. A person who found excitement in ways her mother would never understand.

The tree leaves rustled against the wind and Demetria's heart raced. CJ Augustine would arrive anytime, but she had plenty of time before he got there. Setting down to the bank, she leaned against a rock and opened a thick book.

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Later that afternoon, Ophelia stood frowning over one of the dozens of cookbooks that filled her kitchen. CJ had requested a special meal that night for Nikos Cantone, who he had invited for dinner. Nikos's father was satisfied that his son had healed enough to venture out socially and had no problem with his visiting the Augustines.

Chick walked into the kitchen and found his wife leaning against the counter. "What you doin, Girl?" He whispered against her neck.

Ophelia nuzzled against her husband and smiled. "CJ's inviting Nikos for dinner and wants something special." She explained.

"And where's everybody else?" He asked, crossing his arms over the black cotton top he sported with blue jeans and sneakers.

"Derric and Cameo are playing out back," Ophelia replied, her fingers tapping against an interesting recipe she'd located, "and Steph finally laid down the law with her brother about getting on their project."

Chick laughed over his son's plight. "Poor man." He mused.

"Hmph, he's still in better shape than Tav Gwaltney, or so I hear."

"Really?" Chick replied his interest peaked.

Ophelia closed her eyes. "Sorry." She groaned, remembering their agreement of not discussing the Gwaltneys.

Chick was intrigued. "It's alright. What'd you mean?"

"Well, word is Jason put his foot down after that fight. He's got Tav learning the business to keep him out of trouble."

Chick stroked the smooth line of his jaw. "That's not a half bad idea. I've been wondering when I should talk to CJ about spending more time down at the office."

"Well, you better catch him quick before his calendar fills up with party dates." Ophelia warned, pulling a chair to the counter to help her reach the top cupboards. She was checking for an ingredient, when the room slanted crazily and she felt faint.

Chick had been appreciating his wife's curves, when he saw her grip the back of the chair. The weak expression on her face caused him to frown.

"What is it?" He whispered, pulling her from the chair and into his arms.

Ophelia hesitated for a moment, before answering. "I'm fine now. I think I just lost my balance for a minute." She explained, though her heart raced frantically.

Chick held her even closer, his mouth brushing the smattering of hair at her temple.

Ophelia eased out of the comforting embrace. "I'm fine." She assured him, patting his arm before turning back to the cookbook.

Chick didn't press the issue, but he was far from reassured. Luckily, the tension was interrupted when Steph waltzed into the kitchen.

"Ma, do we have anymore soda?" She called, already headed for the refrigerator.

"Just look Honey. I'm sure there's some in there." Ophelia called, waving her hand without bothering to turn around.

"Y'all okay?" Steph asked, noticing the expressions on her parent's faces.

Chick nodded and moved away from the counter. "We're cool. Who's the soda for?"

"For me, Amina and CJ." Steph replied, already refocused on what she'd come to collect from the kitchen.

"You three have any preferences for lunch?" Ophelia asked.

Steph tossed her head, her heavy ponytail swinging merrily. "CJ might, but I'm taking Amina into town. We're gonna do some shopping and have lunch out somewhere."

"More shopping?" Chick cried, in pretend disgust. He walked over to his daughter and kissed her forehead. "Be careful and have fun." He whispered, pressing a few bills into her hand.

Steph's lovely brown eyes sparkled even more. "Oh we will!" She promised, her fingers closing around the wad of cash. "Thanks Daddy! Bye Ma!" She called, racing from the kitchen.

Chick turned back to Ophelia, the confusion returning to his dark, deep-set gaze. He closed the distance between them and patted her waist. "I'll see you later, hmm?" He whispered, pressing a soft peck to the shell of her ear.

Ophelia leaned into the kiss and nodded. When she was alone in the kitchen, she slumped against the counter and held her head in her hands. "Oh hey!" She called, before the girls could get too far. "Be back in time for dinner. Nikos is coming over."

"We'll be here. I'll be sure to tell Sweet if I see him." Steph promised.

"Nikos?" Amina asked on their way upstairs.

"He got into a fight with that bastard Tav Gwaltney, remember?"

"Mmm..." Amina replied, with a nod before she disappeared into the bedroom.

\*\*\*

Demetria was growing restless, despite her love for the pond. She'd received none of her usual warnings to let her know CJ was in her midst. At one point, she had gone so far as to venture behind the brush to see if he was there. He wasn't and the realization was so disturbing, she almost cried. She couldn't help but wonder if he'd lost interest. After all, he was a graduating senior and she was just starting high school.

Voices on the other side of the pond reached her ears then. Demetria checked to make sure she was presentable, and then pulled the book back onto her lap.

Two Gwaltney employees: Julius and Kathy Bismarck emerged from behind the green brush surrounding the pond. Their conversation ceased when they spotted Demetria.

"Are you okay, Sweetie?" Kathy asked, her strong voice softened by concern.

Demetria looked into the woman's plump, dark face and smiled. "I'm fine, Miss Kathy."

Kathy and Julius exchanged glances, and then focused their attention out over the pond. Even the cool loveliness could not stop their minds from wandering back to that terrible day so long ago.

Julius cleared his throat to catch his wife's attention. "We're gonna be sayin' goodbye, Miss Deme. You be careful out here, alright?"

Demetria clutched the book to her chest and smiled up at the thin, light-complexioned man. "Yes sir." She told her father's foreman.

Kathy waited until she and her husband were out of earshot. "I thought Ms. Gwaltney told the kids to stay away from there?"

Jason only shrugged.

When the Bismarcks were gone, Demetria tossed her book aside and pouted. She toyed with a bouncy curl and began to think. Gradually, the pout faded and was replaced by a cunning smile. The next time CJ was there, and she knew there would be a next time she would give him every reason to stay...and keep coming back.

\*\*\*

Jason and Tavares Gwaltney met at The Kirby Steakhouse for their afternoon meeting. As usual, Tav had dazzled their potential business associates. As a result, they were most interested in his proposal. Jason only had to sit back, look proud and enjoy his meal.

"All this talk of contract negotiations and profits is makin' me want to go to the bathroom." Roy Samms groaned, pushing his chair from the table.

"I'll take a Bourbon straight, Honey." Cordell Holmes of Holmes Fish and Produce, told the smiling waitress. "Roy, wait up!" He called to his Vice-President.

"I could stand a trip to the head, myself." Jason decided, but let the other two men go on ahead.

Tav could feel his father's eyes boring into him and prayed he wasn't in for another tongue-lashing. When he worked up the nerve to look up, he found the man grinning.

"I want to congratulate you, son." Jason told him, clapping one hand to the sleeve of Tav's navy, blue suit coat. "You're doin' a fine job." He added.

Tav let out a relieved sigh. "Thanks Poppa. I'm actually enjoying myself, but I do realize it's work. I want you to feel confident putting the business in my hands."

Jason gave his son a playful slap. He had no doubt Tav would make a fine successor. Of course, he decided to keep that to himself.

When Jason left for the restroom, Tav remained at the table enjoying his Scotch. Though he was no stranger to alcohol; sharing a drink with his father and their associates had him feeling quite grownup. Today was just the beginning, he thought. He had big plans for Gwaltney Produce. Before he was done, the name would be recognized nationwide.

The waitress returned with fresh drinks for the table of businessmen. She fluffed her shoulder length honey-brown tresses and made her smile more radiant for the handsome young man at the table.

"Will you be needing...or wanting anything else over here, Mr. Gwaltney?" She asked, adding a bit more sugar to her words.

The girl's blatant suggestive tone, not to mention her mannerisms, brought Tav's gorgeous dimpled smile to view. Before he could take the brown-skinned beauty up on her obvious offer, two more lovely young women walked into the dining room. One, held Tav in speechless fascination.

"That was some sale." Amina whispered, as she took a seat at the table. Her almond-shaped gaze grew wider at the sight of all her purchases.

Steph situated her bags beneath one of the vacant chairs at the table. "I know the place was a tad on the expensive side, but all the extra cash Daddy gave up, really came in handy." She said, brushing lint from the bellbottom denim jumpsuit she sported.

"For real." Amina agreed.

"Besides, all that hard work we've been puttin' in on that project the last two weeks... we deserve it." Steph declared.

"Amen." Amina agreed, just as the waiter returned to take their drink orders.

The girls accepted menus and scanned the wide selection, trying to decide on their orders.

"Amina?" Steph whispered, after a few moments of silence.

Amina was frowning over her menu. "Hmm?"

"I just wanted to apologize."

Amina set her menu aside and looked up. "Apologize?"

Steph toyed with one of the thick curls from her high ponytail. "Me and CJ have been spending so much time on that damn project, while you've been doin' nothing but shopping with Ma for the most part. I really appreciate all the help you gave me with the work, but I know you've been bored to death."

Amina giggled and shook her head. "Steph, please. I have been havin' the best time helping you with the project and shopping with Ophelia."

Steph's bright smile reappeared. "I'm glad you weren't pissed."

Amina folded her arms across the snug-fitting gray top she wore with white bellbottoms. Her naturally arched brows raised a few notches. "Believe me, Girl. After wearing all those Sunday school dresses to school every day, I'm havin' too much fun buying the snazzy stuff."

"Looks like we'll finally get a chance to sport our new threads on Friday." Steph announced, after the waiter walked away with their orders.

Amina fiddled with a few wavy tendrils which dangled outside the thick braid around her head. "What's Friday?"

"The parties, Girl!" Steph replied, beginning to dance in her chair. "And then there's summer. With a lot of people leaving for college, this is gonna be one for the books." She predicted.

Amina closed her eyes and smiled. "I can't wait."

"You?!" Steph bellowed, appearing more than ready.

"What's happenin', Steph?"

Both girls looked up, when the deep voice reached their ears. Stephanie's happy expression disappeared instantly.

"What the fuck do you want?"

Amina almost choked on her tea when she heard her cousin snap. Her eyes were wide as they rose to the person who had spoken so politely. Her heart thundered against her chest when she saw the incredible looking young man at the table. He was very tall, massively built-perhaps a football player, Amina thought. His head of wavy black hair was worn in a low cut afro, the eyes were dark and deep-set, the nose long and slightly wide and the fantastic mouth was curved into a smile.

Tav tried to mask his aggravation. "I just came by to speak, Steph." He slowly explained. Steph was not pleased. "Speak about what?"

Tav pushed one hand into his trouser pocket. "I'm here helping my Pop close a business deal." He said, leaning against the table.

Unimpressed, Stephanie sent him a scathing glare. "How nice for you. Now would you leave? We're about to eat and I can't digest my food with you around."

"Steph!" Amina leaned across the table and whispered.

Tav's probing dark eyes slid to the sweet, caramel-toned beauty across from Stephanie. "It's okay." He told her, extending his hand. "I'm Tavares Gwaltney."

Before Amina could accept his hand, Steph stood and slapped it out of the way. "You stay away from her." She practically snarled.

Tav's jaw tightened as he allowed his anger to show. "You know, Steph, everybody ain't as anti-social and stank actin' as the Augustines."

"News for you jackass, she *is* an Augustine." Steph spat, loving it when Tav winced. "Now get away from this table." She ordered, pointing behind him. "Go on!"

Tav rolled his eyes away from Steph and back to Amina. "His dimples faintly appeared when he smiled at the soft look she sent him.

## SEVEN

"I told CJ and them Tav would be tryin' to run his jive on Amina when he saw her."

Steph was still in an uproar when she and Amina returned home. She was telling her mother what happened at lunch. Since Chick was gone, Ophelia didn't mind being vocal about her own feelings toward the Gwaltney clan.

"Baby, are you okay?" Ophelia asked Amina, who had been very quiet. "Tav didn't upset you, did he?"

"Oh no, I'm fine." Amina assured her cousins, but said nothing more.

Ophelia and Steph hardly noticed. They had plenty to say where the Gwaltneys were concerned.

While mother and daughter ranted, Amina thought back to her 'meeting' with Tavares Gwaltney. She would dare breathe it to her family, but she thought he was incredible. He was even more handsome than she expected, with the flawless, molasses-toned skin. Tav didn't seem

anything like the monster her family portrayed him as. Naïveté would not let her think first impressions were often false.

"Hey, what's with all the loud talkin'?" CJ called, when he walked into the kitchen.

"I had a run-in with Tav when we were out at lunch." Steph explained.

"A run-in?" CJ questioned, his heavy brows drawing closer.

Steph raised both hands, sensing her brother's anger. "It was nothin'. I handled it. He was just tryin' to get in Amina's face with his pickup lines."

"Mmm." CJ replied, his frown fading. "Ma, what's up with dinner?" He asked.

Ophelia sent him a smug smile and focused on smoothing non-existent wrinkles from her yellow sundress. "Baby everything is under control. It'll all be ready in time." She promised.

CJ nodded his satisfaction, and then wiggled a finger toward his sister. "Can I talk to you a minute?" He asked.

"I tell you, that boy always brings it out in me." Steph rambled as she followed CJ out of the kitchen. "I mean, he had a bunch of nerve comin' over to our table like that. I swear-"

"Steph, would you hush?!" CJ snapped, his handsome face twisting into a sinister frown. "I got somethin' I need to show you."

Steph figured her brother was in one of his strange moods. She followed quietly, as he led the way to her bedroom. Her eyes lit up like beacons when she walked through the doorway. Gratitude and relief shone on her face and she threw her arms around CJ's neck while jumping up and down.

The report was typed and stacked on top of the research log. Next to it, on the bed, was a layout of their family tree.

"I didn't finish inserting all the names." CJ explained, watching Steph scan the work. He leaned against one of the pink bedroom walls and pushed his hands into the side pockets of his black and white gym shorts.

"CJ this is good." Stephanie marveled at the neatness of the layout.

"You really need to read the thing Steph and then tell me what you think."

"Why do you sound so down about it? Looks like we're in the home stretch now." Steph decided, turning to pin her brother with a frown.

"Just tell me what you think Steph, damn." CJ muttered, as he headed to the bedroom window.

"Ohhhhh...I know what's wrong with you." Steph sighed, tapping one brown polished nail to her chin. "You couldn't run out to where ever you go every Saturday afternoon and you're over here pouting."

"And you don't even know what the hell you talkin' about Steph." CJ snapped, before storming out of the room.

Stephanie forgot her confusion, when the phone rang. "I got it!" She called, snatching up the receiver. "Augustine residence."

"Hey girl, you ready to get down?"

"More than you know, since we're a half hour from finishing our project." Steph replied, laughter filtering through the announcement when she heard Sweet clapping on the other end of the phone.

"Congratulations! So when do you want me to pick you up?"

Steph turned and began to scan the project. "Well, we're all having dinner with Nikos tonight at the house, so I guess after that...Amina'll probably ride with us."

"Cool. Well, I'll try to make it for dinner. Otherwise, I'll see you later tonight."

"Talk to you later, Baby." Steph whispered, blowing a kiss through the receiver.

\*\*\*

Dusk was approaching and Demetria had not returned home. Minerva was either standing on the back porch or peeking out the window every ten minutes for any signs of her daughter.

Jason, on the other hand, had arrived home in high spirits. The wide grin of a proud father practically encompassed the entire lower portion of his attractive dark face.

"Minerva! Minnie?!" Jason called, when he stormed in through the front door.

A second or two passed before Minerva emerged from the corridor leading to the kitchen. "What is it?" She whispered, her hushed words carrying a hint of anxiety.

"You should've seen our boy takin' care of business today!" Jason relayed, his big hands spreading wide as he paced the sitting room. "All I had to do was sit back and let him handle it all. He closed the deal, we got the papers signed and the ball is rollin'."

Minerva couldn't help but smile at her husband's excitement. "That sounds good, Baby. Where is he?"

Jason began tugging at his necktie. "Should be here any minute. He was following me in his car. What's wrong with you?" He asked, beginning to frown at the unease on his wife's lovely face.

"Nothing...it's probably nothing." Minerva replied, fighting to keep her tone unaffected.

Before Jason could question his wife, Tav bounded into the house. If possible, his grin was even broader than his father's. He was basking in the glow of his stellar performance and had decided to use it to his benefit.

"Poppa can I go to Calvin Hammerson's party tonight?" He asked, praying the request sounded humble and unassuming. "Everybody's gonna be there you know? With graduation and all."

Jason waved his hand, urging silence. "Go on and have a good time. You earned it." He told his son, partly because it was true, mostly because he wanted to know what had Minerva so unsettled.

Tav raced out of the cozy, room before his father could change his mind. Jason walked over to Minerva, who stood staring out the window.

"What's goin' on, Min?" He whispered, slipping his long, strong arms around her face.

Minerva savored the embrace and leaned back into Jason's unyielding body. "Deme's been actin' so strange...she left this morning right after you and Tav. I haven't seen her since."

"Well, that don't mean something's wrong, Baby." Jason comforted, kissing Minerva's cheek.

"I just don't like the way she keeps to herself. I tried to get her to think about having some girls over, she acted like I'd just told her to go jump out of a window."

Jason chuckled. "Baby, you know how our girl is, how quiet she always is."

Minerva turned away from the window and began to stroll out the room. Jason followed.

"Deme's going to high school this year. I want her to have a good experience. I don't want people to see her as some... outcast."

"Minnie, stop this now." Jason ordered his baritone voice soft and deep. "Don't worry yourself about that."

"I can't help it." Minerva sighed, as she and Jason walked into the kitchen.

Kathy Bismarck was across the room at the huge stove. She was checking on a batch of corn muffins, when she overheard the Gwaltneys discussing their daughter.

"Jason, I just want the girl to be more outgoing, more talkative. She keeps to herself so much...I can't think of one friend she has."

"Well, maybe that's a good thing Minnie." Jason decided, leaning back in his chair at the head of the small rectangular table. "Deme don't need none of them fast girls corruptin' her."

Minerva wore a snug fitting orange knit sweater and still, she shivered. "It's more than that Jason." She snapped. "She runs off every Saturday. If she has no friends, where's she going, what's so doing?"

Kathy rose to her full height and closed the oven door. She hadn't meant to eavesdrop, but couldn't stop herself. After what the parents had been through in the past, she couldn't bear to see them upset over another one of their children. Smoothing both hands over her brown uniform dress, she was about to head over to them.

At that moment, Demetria walked in through the back door. Kathy closed her eyes and uttered a soft prayer as Jason and Minerva rushed over to their child.

"Where have you been all day?" Minerva questioned, brushing her hands over Demetria's face and clothing as though she were making inspection.

"I'm fine, Mama." Demetria sighed, grimacing a bit at the fuss her mother was making. "I just lost track of time." She explained to her father who stood looking concerned.

"Where were you, Babygirl?" Jason asked.

Demetria sought Kathy Bismarck's dark gaze briefly, before looking back at her father. "Just walking...I found a quiet place to read."

Jason appeared satisfied. "That's a good girl." He whispered, pressing a kiss to Demetria's temple.

"May I be excused to my room?" Demetria softly requested. She avoided looking at her mother, unnerved by the look in the woman's eyes.

"That's fine, Baby." Jason allowed, watching Demetria run from the kitchen. "You know Min, I just don't know...Maybe the child just likes being alone."

Minerva's gaze remained suspicious.

\*\*\*

"I'll get it!" Amina called, jogging past the front sitting room when the doorbell rang later that evening. She tossed her wavy locks over her shoulders and quickly inspected the capped-sleeved gray cotton dress, before opening the door.

Nikos Cantone's pitch black stare narrowed the second the door opened. The small, confused frown which had formed between his sleek brows disappeared as he found his voice.

"I'm Nikos...Cantone. CJ's friend?" He slowly announced, becoming more intrigued by the young woman who had pulled the door open.

Amina's smile widened as she began to nod. "Right, come on in. I'm Amina Davidson. CJ's cousin." She explained, stepping aside to allow the tall young man past the doorway.

Nikos closed his eyes as realization dawned. "Oh yeah, CJ said you were coming to visit. How do you like VA so far?" He asked, watching Amina close and lock the door.

"I love it." She promptly responded. "I've only been here a few weeks and I'm already havin' the best time."

Nikos waited until Amina took a seat on the burgundy loveseat in the sitting room. He joined her there. "Well, CJ and Steph are cool and they always know how to have a cool time."

Amina nodded her agreement, her hazel stare narrowing from curiosity. "You know, you don't sound like CJ and Steph at all." She noted.

Nikos leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his black jeans. "I don't get it."

"What I mean is, you don't sound like you're from Virginia."

"Well, originally I'm from New York."

Amina's eyes widened. "New York?"

"Mmm hmm." Nikos confirmed, with a nod. "I moved here when I was eleven."

Amina settled back against the sofa and braced her elbow along the back. "Tell me what it's like." She urged and settled in to listen to Nikos talk.

\*\*\*

"So what do you think?" CJ was asking Steph as he pushed her bedroom door shut and leaned against it.

Steph paced the square Oriental rug in the center of her room. "I think we should take your suggestion from this morning."

CJ massaged his temple. "Remind me, Steph."

"We'll pass anyway, right?" Steph challenged, reaching for a red leather belt to loop around her stylish, black polyester jumpsuit. "Whether we turn anything in or not."

"What do we tell Ma and Pop?"

"Nothing." Steph replied, with a shrug. "As long as we graduate, that's all that matters."

CJ folded his arms across the multi-colored shirt he wore outside a pair of hunter green slacks. His uneasy expression matched the sound of his voice. "So, what about the project?"

Steph fluffed out her hot-curled hair and turned away from the window. "We'll just put it up somewhere. We'll never finish it now." She decided, eyeing the project on the bed with a foreboding glare.

"I've only seen pictures of it, but I've always wanted to live there. I never thought I'd meet someone who came from there."

Nikos chuckled over Amina's excitement about New York. He had never met anyone so interested in his stories about his hometown. "I suppose it's okay if you've never been there, but I prefer VA to New York any day."

"That's hard to believe." Amina sighed, propping her fist beneath her chin. "I mean, I've had a lot of fun here, but after living in a small area of Columbus, Ohio all my life, New York sounds like a dream."

Nikos rolled his eyes toward the chandelier in the ceiling. "A dream, huh?"

"Why'd you and your dad leave?"

Nikos hesitated and the easy, open expression on his handsome face disappeared for the first time that evening. "My mom's family made it hard to stay."

Amina's probing gaze narrowed. "How?" She asked.

"Ever heard of the mafia?"

"The mafia?" Amina whispered, leaning closer as though she were being told a big secret. "I learned about it in school... seen movies about it."

"Well, it's very real, lemme tell ya. Anyway, my dad didn't want anything to do with it and they made it hard for him to stay after my mom died."

"What about his family? Couldn't he go to them?"

Nikos pushed one hand through his glossy black waves and shook his head. "That was the last thing he wanted to do, especially when they're connected too. Stuff like that could start a war."

"My God." Amina breathed, her mouth falling open.

Nikos shrugged beneath his gray, nylon shirt. "Anyway, my dad didn't want me growing up in that life. So we left. Only a few people know where we are now."

"That's incredible."

"My pop just did what he thought he had to and I'm proud of him. He left New York with only a little money and now he's got a successful store."

Amina shook her head. "Haven't you ever wondered? You know...what it might've been like?"

Nikos brows rose, but he offered no response. He could never admit to anyone, especially his father, that he had always been curious and more than a little interested.

\*\*\*

"Why Sweet! We didn't think we'd see you tonight." Ophelia cried, pulling her daughter's boyfriend off the front porch.

Sweet's dark eyes sparkled as he walked inside. "Sorry, Mrs. A. I told Steph I'd probably be late. Is all the dinner gone?" He asked.

Ophelia threw her head back and laughed. "I'm afraid so, Baby." She informed Sweet, patting her hand against his back. "And don't look so down. I know your Mama cooked big

today. But, if you saved room, I have two big pieces of sweet potato pie wrapped up on the stove for you."

Chick, Nikos and Amina laughed, when Sweet took off like a rocket in the direction of the kitchen. Their big smiles faded a bit when CJ and Steph walked down stairs.

"Are you two okay?" Ophelia asked, closing the distance between herself and her children. "You've both been so quiet all evening."

Brother and sister nodded.

"We're cool, Ma." CJ replied, squeezing his mother's hand.

Ophelia nodded, though her brown gaze was far from easy. "Well, try not to be out all night. Steph, Sweet's in the kitchen." She announced, stepping past them to check on Derric and Cameo upstairs.

Sweet was on his way out the kitchen, when he saw his girlfriend headed inside. "What's wrong?" He asked, noticing the strained look on her face.

Steph could only rest her head against her boyfriend's shoulder. When Sweet felt her trembling in his arms, he pulled her further into the kitchen. He placed the pie on the table, before leaning back against it.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" He asked, squeezing Steph's hands in his.

"Besides getting an F on my final?" Steph snapped, tears slipping from the corners of her eyes.

"An F? I thought you told me y'all were done with it?"

Steph wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "There's no way we'll finish it now. We'll just have to take the F."

"I don't get it, Steph."

Steph smiled into her boyfriend's handsome chocolate-toned face. "I don't really feel like talkin' about it now anyway."

"Hey y'all, come on!" Nikos called from the living room.

Sweet kissed Steph's cheek. Then, arm in arm, they left the kitchen.

\*\*\*

Calvin Hammerson's pre-grad party had the makings of being the biggest and best party of the year. The elm tree lined backyard was already packed with dancing bodies when CJ, Steph, Sweet, Amina and Nikos arrived.

CJ didn't remain dateless for long. One of his many admirers pulled him onto the dance floor. Sweet and Steph followed suit, leaving Amina and Nikos bobbing their heads to the music of Earth, Wind and Fire pulsing through the air.

Nikos turned to Amina and spread his hands. "You mind dancin' with the only white guy at the party?" He teased.

Amina laughed and shook her head. "Come on." She sighed, taking his hand and pulling him to the crowded dance floor.

Tav Gwaltney was in his element, this being his first party in weeks. He was surrounded by his buddies and, of course, several young ladies. Still, remaining true to form, Tav was always on the lookout for someone even more intriguing to occupy his time. His penetrating, deep dark gaze narrowed when he spotted a lovely, familiar face across the yard. When her dance partner came into view, he smirked and his fists clenched. He knew he wasn't out of the woods with his father, and this was no time to rouse the water, but he had to go over...

"Are you up to this?" Amina was asking Nikos as they gyrated to the music. She noticed him wincing each time they bounced to the up tempo beats.

Nikos tried to put up a brave front, but he couldn't mask the pain against his still tender ribs.

"Come on." Amina decided, taking it upon herself to end the dance. "Let's sit down and you can tell me more about New York."

Nikos dimples flashed when he heard the request. "I swear I never met anybody so interested in that place."

Amina shrugged and took a seat across from Nikos at one of the picnic tables along the far edge of the yard. "I just have this crazy dream about owning my own business there one day."

"That's not crazy." Nikos assured her.

Amina waved one hand in the air. "I'll agree with that when I'm sittin' in my top floor office overlooking the city." She replied, joining in when he laughed. The easy going mood, halted abruptly when Nikos looked up and saw Tav at the table.

Tav was about to reintroduce himself to Amina and accept the handshake he was deprived of earlier that day. Before he could make a move, CJ and Sweet were there.

"What's goin' on, Tav?" CJ queried, though his hardened expression proved the question wasn't meant to be social.

Tav raised both hands. "I didn't come over to cause trouble." He swore.

Sweet took a step closer. "Well, then you won't mind leavin' will you, my man?"

Tav nodded and pushed one hand into his dark blue designer jeans. He sent Amina a soft look, before stepping away from the table.

CJ, Sweet and Nikos began to discuss Tav and his actions. Amina's radiant gaze followed the topic of conversation making his way to the other side of the yard.

\*\*\*

"CJ Augustine can I ask you something?"

CJ smiled down at the seventh young woman he'd had the pleasure of dancing with that evening. "What's on your mind?"

Shelly Evans arched her slender form closer to the tall, handsome young man who held her. "Why don't you have a girlfriend?" She whispered, her slanting black gaze trailing his mouth suggestively. "I mean, you're one of the cutest boys in school. If not *the* cutest."

CJ knew his cheeks would've been red, had his complexion been lighter. "Thanks." He managed.

"It's true." Shelly replied, smiling when CJ's dark eyes slid down to her glossy, red lips. "You've broken a lot of hearts at Cardman with this single brotha routine, you know?"

CJ was intrigued by the conversation which proved to be very enlightening. He had no idea so many young women found him so appealing. Unfortunately, the more Shelly talked about him being single and seemingly disinterested, the more he thought of Demetria Gwaltney.

Amina went to freshen drinks for her and Nikos. They had been seated for most of the party, but she didn't mind. The conversation was incredible. At the refreshment table, Amina noticed a boy about her height, approaching her. She focused on fixing her drinks and waited for him to say something. When he only stood and stared, she turned to face him. For a moment, they boy appeared thunderstruck.

"Um...Chad. My name is Chad Reynolds." He finally revealed. "What's yours?" He slowly, almost timidly, inquired.

"Amina." She replied, smiling at the uneasy young man.

Chad nodded. "Sorry to bother you Amina, but I'm um here for my friend Tav. He wants to talk to you, but your family..."

Amina nodded, understanding completely.

"Anyway, he wants to call you."

"Well...I'm staying with my family...the Augustines."

Chad's smile faintly resembled a grimace. "He'll call you tomorrow."

Amina's lashes fluttered like hummingbird wings as she watched Chad walk away. She closed her eyes and willed her heart to beat slow.

## EIGHT

A ringing telephone greeted the Augustines when they arrived home from church that Sunday. While everyone else kicked off their shoes and began to get comfortable, Amina's wide eyes were glued to the phone. Her first thought was of the boy from the party who told her to expect Tav Gwaltney's call. Before anyone could make a move to answer, she rushed to the message desk near the back of the sitting room.

"Augustine residence." She whispered.

"Amina?"

"Hi." She replied, her voice just a bit shaky as she greeted Tavares Gwaltney.

"I know you can't talk, but would you meet me somewhere later? Around five?"

Amina cast a quick glance over her shoulder. "Where?" She whispered into the receiver.

"At the edge of your family's property there's a pond on one side and a garden on the other side. Meet me in the garden... Amina? Will you be there?" Tav asked, his deep voice carrying just a hint of anxiety.

"Yes." She told him in a hushed tone and quickly set the receiver back to its hook.

"Who was that, Amina?" Steph asked from the doorway of the room.

"Just Nikos calling to see if I had fun at the party." She replied, following her cousin from the sitting room.

"Fe? You wanna go out instead of cooking?"

Ophelia turned away from the cupboards and sent her husband a strange look. "On Sunday, Chick?" She asked, pushing one hand into the pocket of her stylish, brown polyester zip front frock.

Chick pushed himself from the kitchen doorjamb and stepped inside. "You look drained, you sound weak even though you're trying to sound lively for my sake."

"Chick."

"Admit it."

Ophelia rolled her eyes and leaned against the counter. "Alright, I have been feeling just a little drained lately."

"Mmm hmm." Chick replied, already figuring as much. "I want you to see the doctor." He demanded, slipping his arms about her waist.

Ophelia looked up and pressed her hands against his solid chest. "Chick, before I do that-

"Fe, don't argue with me now." He said, his onyx gaze flashing with impatience. "You been looking peaked for too long and I don't like it. Please don't argue with me, not about this."

"Shh..." Ophelia requested, smoothing her lips across Chick's strong jaw. "I'm not arguing with you, but I have a theory about what's wrong with me."

Chick leaned back. "Spill it." He ordered.

Ophelia squeezed her husband's muscular forearms before curling her hands around his neck. "I think you're gonna be a daddy again." She whispered, her luminous brown gaze holding a trace of unease.

Ophelia needn't have worried. Chick let out a yelp and hauled his wife's slender frame high against his chest.

"Baby don't say anything until we're sure, alright?" Ophelia gasped, amidst dozens of kisses being pressed to her face.

\*\*\*

Sunday afternoons were usually the slowest time of the week for the Cantone Market. The store sometimes experienced a small rush just after church, but that was mostly it for the day. With Gwaltney Produce growing bigger every month, the usual business was even more difficult to come by.

Nikos had run upstairs for a bathroom break. On his way out of the apartment, the phone rang.

"Cantone's." He greeted.

"Nikos, boy!" A boisterous, deep voice replied.

Immediately, Nikos began to laugh at the sound of the highly missed thick Brooklyn brogue. "Constantine Bellini, is that you?" He teased.

"Eh, that's Uncle Connie to you, boy!"

"What's happenin' Uncle?"

"Well, if I'm not mistaken, and I never am, you're about to become a graduate."

Nikos shook his head. "You never miss a date, Uncle C."

"And don't you forget it." Connie warned.

Nikos took a seat on the black leather living room sofa and settled in to talk with his favorite uncle. Constantine was his mother's older brother and the man always had hopes of his nephew assuming control over the family's interests.

"So what are your plans after graduation?" Connie asked.

Nikos stared at the Converse logo on the front of his T-shirt. "I really don't know, Uncle."

"No thoughts of comin' back home?" Connie pried.

"I'm not sure yet." Nikos replied, though he'd thought of little else especially since his conversation with Amina.

"You know there's a spot for you here, if you want it."

Nikos leaned back against the sofa and smiled. He wondered when his uncle would get to the point of the call. Constantine had no children of his own which made him more determined to have his sister's child running his affairs.

Carlos Cantone entered the small, cozy, above-store apartment and heard his son's laughter. The calm, relaxed expression on his dark face disappeared the instant he heard his brother-in-law's name. He strolled into the living room and waited for his son to finish the call.

Nikos choked on his laughter, startled to see his father in the room. "Um...Uncle C, can I um call you back later?" He whispered.

"Old man just walked in, huh?"

"Uh-huh."

"Forget about it. I'll talk to you soon, alright?"

"Thanks, Uncle." Nikos replied, easing the black receiver back to its hook. "Sorry Pop."

Carlos waved both hands in the air as he took a seat on the opposite end of the sofa. "Listen Nikos, I can't forbid you to be interested in your mother's family. You'll be graduating soon and I have a feeling you want to go back to New York."

"Papa-"

"Nikos. I understand." Carlos told his son, reaching over to grasp the boy's shoulder. "I only want you to be careful. To think before you make any decisions."

Nikos sighed and slouched back against the sofa. "It ain't such a big deal, Pop."

"Yes it is, Son." Carlos argued, his round midnight gaze filling with concern. "My boy, once you're in there's no going back."

Nikos kept his face free from expression. As usual, he thought his father was making too much of the situation.

\*\*\*

CJ had fought the desire to visit the pond for as long as he could. He convinced himself Demetria wouldn't be there-he didn't know if she even went to the pond on Sundays. At any rate, he had much to think about and the solitude of the place would do him good. He set out, bumping into Stephanie on his way down the back stairway.

"You alright?" He asked, slowing his steps as he approached his sister. He didn't like the weary look on her face.

At first, Steph could only manage a nod. Then she shrugged, her shoulder nudging the glossy flip of her black hair. "I just can't wait until graduation."

CJ stepped closer. "That's why you're walking around here moping?"

Steph smoothed her hands over the cotton sleeves of her orange and purple striped blouse. "I think it's time to leave Virginia."

"Over this?" CJ asked, finally understanding what had his sister so upset.

"Over everything, CJ." Steph replied, leaning against the polished mahogany banister. "I'm ready to see different things and get away from all the anger and hate around this place." She vented.

"I can understand that."

CJ's solemn reply brought a smile to Stephanie's face and laid a playful slap to his cheek. "You don't even understand. You love it here and will probably end up running Daddy's business. All you need to do is choose between all these chicks chasing after you."

CJ laughed, his dimples appearing. "Shut the hell up, Steph." He ordered, pulling her into a tight hug.

Demetria ventured to the pond right after church, as she usually did. After CJ Augustine's uncharacteristic absence the day before, she prayed he would be there on Sunday. Easing down

to the grassy bank, her huge dark eyes mirrored the sparkling water. She promised herself that, after that day, CJ wouldn't think of not showing up again.

The soft look on her dark face faded a bit, when she recalled the scene with her parents. It appeared she had returned home just in time, she thought remembering seeing Kathy Bismarck in the kitchen. Today, she couldn't risk anyone snooping in on her private place. She wanted no onlookers for what she had in mind.

The familiar sound of leaves crunching underfoot sent Demetria's heart pounding. CJ, she thought, preparing to set her plan into action. A cunning smile teased her full mouth as she thought of her mother. If Minerva only knew that her daughter had in fact taken on several of her more ...outgoing characteristics.

Heart racing, Demetria set her book aside. She remained focused on the pages while easing out of the fuchsia shorts set she wore with no underwear.

CJ's long lashes closed briefly as he watched Demetria. He had seen the young woman nude many times, but today was different. After the short set had been discarded, Demetria spread a red beach towel on the ground and relaxed on top of it. Reaching for the book once more, she held it close to her face and pretended to read while her fingers trailed the length of her body.

CJ looked on, becoming both shocked and aroused as he watched Demetria's fingers disappear between her thighs. The girl pleased herself shamelessly, her slender form writhing as ecstasy claimed her. When she tossed the book aside and moaned into the breeze, CJ's knees weakened beneath him. He dared not blink, fearing he would miss something.

Demetria was not disappointed, when CJ remained hidden behind the brush. She could feel his dark stare past the greenery, focused on her bare body as she enjoyed the intimate treat. It won't be much longer now, she promised herself, bringing a halt to the explicit act. Coolly and very slowly, she pulled on her clothes, collected her things and sauntered away. She dared not look back, lest her admirer see the huge smile brightening her face.

\*\*\*

Amina was reading in the living room, when the front doorbell rang. "It'll get it!" She called, leaving the airy, elegant room and heading to the double, cherry wood doors.

"Nikos!" She greeted, happy to see her newest friend.

Nikos didn't appear quite so elated. "Hey Amina, CJ around?"

"Mmm...not right now. He should be back soon, though." She informed him, tugging on the sleeve of his black shirt as she urged him inside.

Nikos hesitated. "I can come back, Amina." He decided.

"Well, let's talk for a while first." She suggested, sensing it was what the boy needed. "I was just reading in the living room."

"I gotta tell ya, Amina. I never met anybody who read just for the fun of it." Nikos teased, a wicked grin coming to his face. "Lemme guess, it's a book about New York?"

Amina slapped his shoulder. "Nooo...but I have thought about getting a few from the library."

Nikos slapped his palm to his forehead. "I should've known."

"Boy, I ain't studyin' you." She mumbled, rolling her eyes to the ceiling. "You're gonna regret all these jokes when I open my company there." She predicted, giggling when Nikos exchanged his teasing expression for a more humble one.

"Speaking of New York," he said, joining Amina on the long hunter green sofa, "I had a talk with my favorite uncle who lives there."

Amina turned sideways on the sofa and sent Nikos a knowing look. "I'll bet that was nice?"

"Yes and no."

"Say what?"

"Damn, Amina." Nikos snapped, moving off the sofa to stare out the long windows. "My uncle wants me to move back to New York. I can't do that without tellin' my Pop and I know how he feels about it."

"And how do *you* feel about it?" Amina asked, curling her sandaled feet beneath her stylish denim bellbottoms.

Nikos turned away from the windows and leaned against the wall. "I want to be part of my Uncle Connie's business, but I feel low about it."

Amina fiddled with the French braid dangling from her high ponytail. "So your Uncle Connie's business is...sort of shady?"

Nikos laugh was not a humorous one. "It's so shady, it's pitch black."

"But you still want to be part of it?"

"The power excites me." Nikos admitted, his handsome olive-toned face taking on an unusual gleam. "The power in my uncle's world does something for me that runnin' a small town store could never do."

Amina's hazel stare faltered as she traced the embroidered patterns in the sofa cushions. "Do you really know what kind of world you'd be getting into? I mean, Nikos could you live with...hurting people?"

"I guess I won't know 'til I have to do it."

"Nikos!" Amina gasped, at the nonchalant response.

He walked back to the sofa, palms outstretched. "I know it sounds foul, but Amina...I been foolin' myself a long time that I was just like my Pop. Content with the small town live and being an ordinary Joe fadin' into the crowd. Even though I got my ass beat, that fight with Tav made me see violence is in my blood."

Amina reached for Nikos hand and gave it a hard squeeze. "I don't care what you say. I don't see that type of violence in you." She whispered fiercely, her grip on his hand tightening.

They sat that way for the longest time.

Minerva was in the kitchen critiquing dinner, when she spotted Tav on his way out.

"Baby, dinner's about ready. Where are you off to?" She called.

Tav stuck his head inside the kitchen. "I'm goin' for a walk, Ma. I'll be back in plenty of time." He promised, before blowing his mother a kiss and leaving the house.

A few minutes after Tav's departure, Jason arrived in the kitchen. He waited until the cooks were preoccupied across the kitchen, before cornering his wife.

"What's for dinner?" he growled into Minerva's neck. His big hands squeezed her bottom through her silk floral lounging dress.

Minerva was pressing lemons for lemonade. "Now that one's acting crazy." She grumbled. "Tav's going for a walk." She announced.

Jason chuckled. "So?"

"Since he learned to drive, that boy never goes anywhere on foot."

"You worry too much, woman." Jason decided, pressing a kiss to his wife's cheek and helping himself to one of the golden biscuits cooling on the counter. "Anyway, I don't care what the boy does as long as he keeps dazzling my business associates."

"Uggh!..." Minerva groaned and threw her hands up in defeat.

Tav prayed Amina would be waiting for him at the edge of the property. He had no idea why he was so fascinated by the girl, but figured it was because she was, in his words, 'fresh meat'. Still, there seemed to be more. He could sense it and he didn't even know her.

The meeting of the Augustine Gwaltney property resembled another world-A place untouched by the anger between the two clans. It sat far on the other side of the pond and was similar to a wild flower garden in its appearance.

For the first time, Amina began to have doubts about meeting Tavares Gwaltney. She remembered all that she'd heard about him. Though he seemed nice and approachable, no one she knew had anything favorable to say. What if he was the mean, disrespectful bully that everyone claimed? Her heart beat more from uncertainty than excitement. Her nerve was draining like water from a sink and all she could think about was leaving. As if on cue, Tav stepped through the brush.

Amina smoothed her hands against her jeans and waited. The smile on Tav's handsome, molasses-toned face was soft but it triggered his dimples just the same.

"Tavares Gwaltney." He quietly announced so he would not frighten her.

"Amina Davidson."

"Amina." He repeated, as though he were reciting a poem.

Tav took a step closer, but retained a healthy distance between himself and the poised beauty in his presence. "How are you related to the Augustines?" He asked, pushing both hands into the front pockets of his snug fitting jeans.

"Ophelia Augustine is my mother's first cousin."

Tav nodded, gnawing his bottom lip before speaking again. "I guess Ms. Augustine didn't waste any time telling you how bad we Gwaltneys are."

Amina couldn't prevent her smile from showing. "I know some of the history. My cousins hate you a lot." She couldn't help but add.

Tav didn't appear angered. "I haven't given 'em much reason not to hate me." He admitted. "I would've thought twice about that if I'd known I was gonna meet you."

Amina threw her head back and laughed, missing the captivated look in Tav's dark eyes.

"Where are you from?" He asked.

"Ohio. Columbus." Amina replied, taking a few steps closer as she spoke.

"Are you in high school yet?" Tav asked, not believing she was even old enough.

"I already graduated high school."

"Stop jivin'."

"I'm not." Amina assured him, with a quick toss of her head. "I skipped a lot of grades and was able to graduate early."

Tav's heavy brows rose. "I'm impressed." He admitted. "You thinkin' about college?"

"Yeah, I can't wait to get in and get out." Amina told him, finding a seat on one of the large, smooth rocks. "I want to have my own business one day."

Tav nodded. "Sounds good. I'm planning on takin' over my Pop's business one day too."

"I'm thinking about starting a cosmetics company for the sistahs." Amina replied, smiling when Tav chuckled. "What?" She asked.

"I just can't believe someone who looks like you, would need makeup." He replied, as though that fact was more than obvious.

Despite her rich cinnamon-toned complexion, Amina was sure she was blushing.

\*\*\*

Amina and Tav made plans to get together from that first day on. They enjoyed long walks along the deserted outskirts of their family's properties. Tav arranged many private lunches at their special place and they became very close. Still, despite Tav's obvious interest, Amina was uncertain. She was a natural beauty, but couldn't help feeling a bit out of her league-considering the types of girls she had seen with Tav. The fact that he was such a gentleman and never even tried to hold her hand, only made her feel more inadequate.

Amina was on her way to meet Tav one afternoon, when she saw Nikos' blue truck pulling into the driveway.

"Hey!" She cried, running over to envelope the boy in a tight hug.

Nikos laughed, savoring the hug. "It's been a while, Girl!"

"A few days."

"Ha! Weeks!" Nikos argued. "How you doin'?" He asked, staring down into her lovely face.

Amina shrugged. "I'm fine."

Nikos' sleek onyx brows drew close. "That the truth?"

"Yeah." She replied, though her gaze faltered. "Why wouldn't you believe me?"

"Cause I don't. Fess up."

"Nikos, do you think I'm pretty?"

Nikos would've laughed, had it not been for the concern he saw in Amina's hazel eyes. He realized she was serious. "Why the hell would you ask that?"

Amina propped her hands on her hips and stared down at her mauve-polished toes peeking out from her sandals. "Would you just answer me, please?" She whispered.

Nikos couldn't believe anyone so incredible would need to be told they were incredible, but he obliged. Cupping Amina's chin in his palm, he smiled down at her. "Believe me when I say, you're more than pretty. Now what made you ask me that?"

Amina replied with a shrug.

"I won't let up 'til you tell me...Amina..."

"You can't tell anyone, alright?" She urged, stepping close to grab the edge of his Dodgers T-shirt.

A car horn sounded just then. It was Chick and Ophelia who pulled into the opposite end of the gravel driveway.

"Are you happy about this?" Ophelia asked, after she and her husband waved to Amina and Nikos.

Chick shut off the engine and turned to face his wife. "I already told you how I felt." He said, stunned by the question. "I'm more than happy, aren't you?"

Ophelia sighed and looked in the backseat, at the adorable boy and girl who played there. "After Derric and Cameo, I wasn't tryin' to get in the family way again."

Chick cleared his throat, his penetrating midnight stare even more narrowed. "So, what are you sayin'?" He asked, fearing his wife may want to terminate the pregnancy.

Ophelia read his thoughts. "I'd never do that to our child, Chick. This is just gonna take some adjusting, that's all." She assured him, smoothing her hand against his smooth, dark brown cheek.

Chick took her hand and pressed a kiss to her palm.

"I need you to keep this between us, Nikos." Amina demanded, after they'd found privacy beneath one of the elm trees in the front yard.

"Alright, already I promise." Nikos said, though he felt it was a mistake to do so.

Amina cast a quick glance across the yard to make sure her family was out of earshot.

"I've been seeing Tav Gwaltney."

"Tav Gwaltney?!"

"Shhh!"

"Tav Gwaltney? Amina are you crazy?" Nikos whispered, his dark eyes sparkling with anger...and hurt.

Amina clasped her hands to her chest. "Don't be like this." She pleaded.

"Be like what, Amina?" Nikos snapped, his hands waving in the air. "Did you forget about how much your family hates Tav or what that muthafucka did to me just because he didn't like the way I looked?"

Amina knew her friend was hurting and her heart went out to him. "Nikos please, don't think I don't care about that. It's just that...I've seen a different side to Tav and-"

"It's a lie, Amina. A big front." Nikos declared, shoving one hand through his wavy, black hair. "Amina, I seen too many nice girls be fooled by that mutha."

Amina wouldn't hear it. She shook her head violently, the ponytail slapping her cheeks. "He's not like that. Not with me. He hardly even touches me."

"Is this why you were asking me if you're pretty or not?"

Amina looked away, pushing one hand into the wide back pocket of her green bellbottom jeans.

Nikos had his answer. He became even more enraged, his concern for Amina fueling his anger. "I can't talk about this..." he muttered.

"Nikos please..." Amina called, her eyes filling with tears as she watched him walk away. "Nikos? You won't say anything, will you?"

Finally, Nikos turned. He stepped back to Amina, his index finger poised in the air. "That fool is only tryin' to get in your pants and once he does he's gonna think he can treat you like gold or like shit-depending on his mood."

"Nikos-"

"You're gonna regret the day you started seein' him." Nikos foreshadowed, the haunted look on his face making him seem far older than his eighteen years.

"Will you tell anyone?" Amina whispered.

Nikos' pitch black stare raked the length of her petite form. Finally, he shook his head. "I won't say anything." He promised, then turned and headed back to his truck.

Amina watched him with uneasy eyes.

"Steph and CJ must be out." Ophelia noted, when she and Chick walked in the house and heard the phone ringing. Chick carried Derric and Cameo to their playpen in the far corner of the kitchen while she answered the call.

"Mrs. Augustine?"

"Yes?"

"Hi Ophelia, this is Margret Dubois."

"Hey Margret." Ophelia replied, smiling when she recognized the voice of CJ and Steph's history teacher.

"I'm so sorry to be calling on the weekend, but I uh...I have some concerns."

"Concerns about CJ and Steph?" Ophelia asked, catching Chick's eyes across the room. "Such as?"

Margret seemed reluctant to respond. "Ophelia, Stephanie and Charles came to me Friday and informed me that they would not be turning in their final project.

"What?" Ophelia replied, her face a picture of surprise.

"I told them they would receive an F and they seemed fine with it. Their only concern was that this not prevent them from graduating. I assured them it wouldn't, but this is not like them at all. I knew they put a lot of time into the work and I can't understand why they wouldn't follow through."

"That is strange." Ophelia agreed, tapping her nails to her chin as she listened. "Margret, I appreciate you calling. Chick and I will talk to the kids as soon as they get home."

"What was that about?" Chick asked when Ophelia ended the call.

Ophelia shook her head. "CJ and Steph told their history teacher they weren't turning in their final project. They told her they'd take the F as long as they graduated."

"Hmph. That is strange." Chick agreed, stroking his jaw as a thoughtful expression came to his face.

"You didn't seem as upset as I thought you'd be." Ophelia noted, removing the sweater she wore over the sleeveless pin-striped straight dress. "But that's okay." She decided, folding the sweater. "I'm angry enough for both of us and I can't wait for those two to get back here."

"Fe." Chick called softly, almost absently. "Lemme handle this, alright?"

Ophelia recognized the hard glint in her husband's eyes and nodded. "I'll let you know the minute they walk through the door."

\*\*\*

CJ had no plans of changing his weekend ritual, after Demetria's revealing 'show' two weeks earlier. Now, the watching had become almost unbearable and quite difficult on certain parts of his anatomy. Demetria's exploits had become increasingly explicit and CJ found his hands actually aching to touch her.

He realized, of course, that was impossible. Especially when he knew...

The thought went unfinished as the tall grass parted and Demetria appeared. She chose her regular spot and began to undress. CJ saw that she wore a revealing yellow bikini underneath the orange jumpsuit which slid to the ground. He wondered if she'd only be using the pond's privacy that day for swimming or reading.

Swimming and reading were not what Demetria Gwaltney had in mind. In fact, she did something completely out of the ordinary. Blanket in hand, she turned and faced the thick trees and brush where CJ hid.

CJ stood rooted to the spot and could only watch as she moved closer to his hiding place. Everything seemed to move at a snail's pace, but soon they were face to face.

CJ began to clear his throat, desperate to find the voice that had deserted him. Demetria was even lovelier up close. That only added to his nervousness.

Demetria smiled at the handsome, uncertain young man standing before her. When he opened his mouth to speak, she stepped closer and pressed her finger to his lips. Then, she turned and spread the large dark blue blanket upon the ground and stepped to the center. Her huge, deep brown eyes sparkled with practiced innocence when she reached for CJ's hand and placed it across her bikini top.

CJ glanced around to make sure they weren't being watched. His long lashes fluttered once at the sensation surging through his body. His hands slowly contracted over Demetria's

breast and he grunted. When she arched against his palm, CJ lost all control and pulled her against him. His hands cupped her lovely dark face as his mouth slanted across hers.

Demetria trembled fiercely as the kiss deepened. She was, at once, an eager participant-returning the kiss with lusty enthusiasm. Her slender arms slipped around CJ's neck and she began to rub herself against the arousal pressing against the zipper of his jeans.

Suddenly, Demetria stepped away and eased out of her skimpy attire. CJ had seen many girls nude, but none affected him as she had.

Demetria tossed her thick, bouncy black locks across her shoulders and stood more erect. CJ slipped his arms about her waist and lowered his handsome face to the crook of her neck. He inhaled the soft fragrance of her perfume and whispered her name as though he were chanting it.

Demetria tugged on the hem of CJ's T-shirt before pulling it over his chest and back. The remainder of his clothes disappeared shortly afterwards.

Naked, they rolled on top of the soft blanket. CJ treated himself to all the pleasures he'd only daydreamed about. He had no idea how experienced Demetria was, but to his delight she was a very willing partner.

They made love until the afternoon sun began to set.

## NINE

Stephanie's mood had not improved when she returned home that afternoon. She'd hoped being out with Sweet would lift her spirits, but it hadn't. Her boyfriend was determined to find out what had her so upset.

"Steph?" Ophelia called, when she stepped out of Chick's study. She saw her daughter trudging towards the back stairway. "Steph?" She called again.

"Ma'am?" Steph mumbled.

"Your father wants to have a talk with you and CJ."

Ophelia's tone of voice caused Stephanie to turn and pin her mother with a curious look. "Somethin' wrong, Ma?" She asked.

"He'll talk to you when CJ gets home." Was all Ophelia would reveal.

Steph placed her denim tote to the kitchen counter. "What's wrong, Ma?" She asked, her heart beating a little faster.

"Do you know where CJ is?" Ophelia asked instead.

Steph shook her head. "I haven't seen him." She slowly replied, her expression a mixture of suspicion and unease.

Ophelia only shrugged and headed for the door. "I'll call you when he gets here." She said, leaving Stephanie standing in the kitchen.

CJ and Demetria lounged behind the thick brush, basking in the afterglow of lovemaking. CJ forced himself to block the mild wave of disappointment over the fact that Demetria was not a virgin. Of course, the disappointment was short-lived as the girl's expertise satisfied him more than once. The two, young lovers lay beneath the shady elm trees, enjoying the feel of each other's bodies.

Demetria sighed and flipped onto her stomach. Bracing herself on her elbows, she smiled down into CJ's face. "So, what happens now?" She asked.

CJ couldn't stop the despair from filling his onyx stare. "We can't be together like this again."

Demetria's brown eyes mirrored the look in CJ's gaze. Before she could say anything, he reached for her hand and pressed it to his chest.

"You know this can't happen again." He said, forcing his words to sound convincing.

"I don't understand." Demetria whispered, her gaze faltering.

"Baby, I just committed a felony by sleeping with you. That's a risk I can't take again, no matter how good it was." He explained, forcing himself not to think of the other reason why an involvement with Demetria Gwaltney was impossible.

Demetria wanted to cry, but she realized CJ was right. It could never work between them. What they'd shared had been beautiful and she would treasure it always. Finally, she found her smile and leaned closer to CJ again.

"If this is going to be the only time," she whispered, nudging his jaw with her nose, "do we have time for more?"

CJ's lips curved into a knowing grin and he pulled Demetria's slender form atop his athletic frame and obliged her request.

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Amina arrived at the secluded garden spot a few moments before Tav. Her heated discussion with Nikos robbed her of energy and she'd opted to take a nap before setting out again. She prayed Tav hadn't already shown up and left. She needn't have worried.

Less than a minute passed when Tav came rushing out to the clearing. His expression seemed harried and he was out of breath.

"Sorry Amina. Sorry I'm late." He gasped, bracing one hand against a tree trunk as he enjoyed deep gulps of air.

"I just got here myself." She replied, managing a small smile.

Tav raked one hand across his head. "My Pop is on the warpath today. I just managed to sneak off while he was talkin' to some of the field hands."

"So I guess we don't have any time together, huh?" Amina was asking. She stood with her arms folded across her snug-fitting green, yellow and white striped T-shirt.

"I'm sorry." Tav whispered, walking closer. "But, I wanna take you out to dinner tonight." He said, settling his big hands to her waist.

"Out to dinner?" Amina repeated, her hazel eyes narrowing. She and Tav had been seeing each other privately for weeks. "Tav...I don't know..."

"What?"

"Are you ready for everybody to know about us? 'Cause I don't think I am."

"Well, I'm tired of sneakin' around." Tav argued, a frown beginning to form on his dark face. "I want everybody to know you're mine."

Amina's uneasiness lifted like mist. Tav's possessive statement sent her heart thudding with excitement. A moment later, she was nodding.

"So how do we meet?" She asked, knowing there was no way she could simply walk out of the Augustine home without questions.

Tav leaned against one of the elm trees, unmindful of the slices of bark clinging to his cream trousers and gray shirt. "Don't worry about that. I plan on driving to the Augustines and knocking on the door."

Amina was horrified. "You can't! Are you serious?" She cried, searching the boy's handsome face for some sign of humor.

Tav wasn't smiling. "This mess between our families has gone on too long and it don't even have a thing to do with us."

Amina's lashes fluttered and she appeared drained. "Tav..." She groaned.

He reached for her hand and squeezed it tight. "I'll see you at seven." He promised.

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"Hey Pop." CJ called, surprised to find his father sitting on the porch when he returned home around six that evening.

"I want to see you and Steph upstairs." Chick told his son, already pushing himself from the large black rocker.

CJ had planned to take a shower, then adjourn to his room and think about his afternoon with Demetria. One look at his father's face told him those plans would have to wait.

Marvin Gaye's soulful mellow crooning filled Stephanie's room as she relaxed on her bed with a thick Agatha Christie novel. She heard a quick knock on the door, before it opened and CJ walked in with their father.

"Sit down." Chick instructed CJ, pointing to the foot of the twin bed Steph occupied.

The teenagers watched their father turn down the music and take a seat on the opposite bed. They watched him intently as he relaxed on the dainty ruffled fuchsia spread.

"Your mother got a call from Ms. Dubois today." He informed the children.

CJ and Steph exchanged quick glances, but offered no response.

"What are you two thinking about? Letting all that hard work go to waste?"

Finally, Stephanie replied. "It's a long story, Daddy."

Chick shrugged. "I have all night."

"Me and Steph decided it was all for the best not to turn the thing in."

"Why?" Chick insisted, frowning into the face which was a younger version of his own.

"Do y'all prefer F's to A's these days?" He asked, when his prior question went unanswered.

"Aren't we graduating?" Both kids asked in unison.

"What if Ms. Dubois said you weren't?" Chick challenged, his deep voice softly probing. "Would it make you turn in the work?"

CJ and Steph answered the question without saying a word.

"Did ya'll come across something in your research that upset you?"

"Upset us?!" The siblings cried, looking as though they were horrified.

Chick only shrugged, his onyx gaze sliding from one child to the other.

Suddenly Steph pushed the book from her lap and turned to face her father more directly. "Daddy, could you let it go?" She pleaded, her fingers stretched wide. "We started coming up with too many loose ends on the thing and there was no way we'd have it done before the deadline." She declared, her expressive brown eyes widening with desperation.

"Shh...Baby, it's alright." Chick soothed, raising both hands to calm his daughter. When she leaned back against the headboard and bowed her head, he chuckled. "Lord, you are just like my great aunt sometimes." He sighed, closing his eyes as he envisioned the outspoken, humorous, excitable woman. "Miss Lulabay Augustine Godfrey. Did you come across her name in your research?" Chick asked, nodding when the kids smiled.

Chick grinned and folded his hands across the front of his green, short-sleeved sport shirt. "I remember the day I announced to the family that I was marrying Ophelia. It was very important to Auntie Bay Bay that I was truly happy and in love with your mother. She went on to say that she knew what it was like to want a love you could not have and settle for what you did not want."

"Smart woman." CJ couldn't help but remark, as his own situation came to mind.

"Very smart." Chick confirmed. "And very hurt." He added.

"How?" Steph asked.

Again, Chick closed his eyes and rested his head back against the wall. "Your great great aunt was a strong-willed lady. She always said what was on her mind and you could love it or hate it. She really didn't care. I think it was personality more so than her beauty-which was stunning-that really interested most men."

"But she still got hurt?" Stephanie inquired hanging onto her father's every word.

Chick nodded, without opening his eyes. "She got hurt, when she fell in love with the wrong dude."

"Josiah Gwaltney." CJ provided, easily recalling the name from research.

After a while, Chick looked across the room. "Exactly. You see...in those days, the Augustines and Gwaltney's biggest upset was over the land. When Auntie and Josiah got together...Did you two get past my aunt and her...man?"

Steph looked at her brother, and then shook her head at Chick. "We stopped there...too afraid of what we'd find, I guess."

"Well, lemme finish puttin' the pieces together." Chick decided, reaching over to the bookcase and switching off the record player. "Aunt Lula Bay and Josiah realized it couldn't work. Besides the dislike between the families, Josiah was way older than she was. That didn't stop them from enjoying a brief, but productive relationship. My aunt got pregnant and wanted to keep her son James, but knew it would be impossible. She was a child herself. Josiah took the boy, gave him his name and the Gwaltneys raised him. No one knew about the mother. It was to protect my aunt from anyone knowing she'd had a child out of wedlock."

"Then how were we able to find out about your Aunt and Josiah at all?" CJ asked.

Chick shrugged. "The Augustines and Gwaltneys have been powerful families in this town a long time. I honestly can't tell you how this all came to be recorded. I didn't even think you two would get so far in your research."

Steph leaned forward. "There's more, isn't there Daddy?"

Chick sighed. "Ressie Augustine-my mother-grew up and fell in love. She didn't know the man she adored was her cousin."

"She fell in love with her Aunt's son?" CJ remarked, his dark eyes widening.

Chick managed a slow grin. "That's right. Like my Aunt, she got pregnant and had me. The family wanted to disown her, but Auntie Lula Bay refused to let them do it. I never knew my father, but those two women raised me better than if I'd had ten daddies."

"Did your dad know about you?" Steph asked, seeing the hurt beginning to cloud her father's face.

"He knew." Chick responded, his voice close to breaking.

CJ raised his hands. "Well, what'd he do?"

"Married another woman. Laurantta Samuels. I think my mother died a little every day after she heard the news."

"Did they have any kids?" Steph asked.

"Several." Chick confirmed, pinning the kids with an unwavering dark stare. "You two wouldn't know any of their sons, but one. I have a cousin who is also my brother and he lives not ten minutes away."

"Jason Gwaltney." CJ stated, a heavy lump forming at the base of his throat.

Chick only nodded, watching his son and daughter absorb the incredible details of their family's history. The room was silent for several minutes. CJ and Steph were too in awe to speak the questions filling their heads.

"Do the Gwaltneys know about this, Pop?" CJ finally asked.

"Jason does. I don't know about his brothers. I know he's kept it from his wife and kids."

"What about Ma?" Steph asked.

Chick shook his head. "She has no idea."

"Does this mean you understand why we didn't turn in the project?"

"I do." Chick told his son. "And I hope you two understand why we need to keep this quiet?" He cautioned, watching his son and daughter nod in agreement.

Stephanie was leaning forward to ask another question, when a heavy knock sounded on her bedroom door. The frantic, constant rapping was followed by Ophelia's voice.

"Chick! I need you downstairs, now!"

Chick practically leapt from the bed at the sound of his wife's voice. He raced from the room with Stephanie and CJ at his heels.

Downstairs, Amina stood near the front of the living room. Her hazel eyes sparkled with unshed tears as she wrung her hands in nervous fashion. Tavares Gwaltney stood outside on the front porch. He appeared just as uneasy as he peered into the house through the screened door.

"What the hell?..." Chick breathed, his dark eyes narrowing in disbelief as he stepped closer to the door.

Amina raised her hands as stepped in front of her cousin-in-law. "We have a date. Tav's taking me out to dinner." She explained, grimacing when everyone gasped her name.

Ophelia shook her head in disbelief. "Amina...Honey you don't even know this boy."

"I've been seeing him for weeks." Amina softly informed her cousin.

Chick's grin was far from humorous. "Amina, Baby I don't care if you been seein' him for months, we can't let you do this."

"But Chick-" Amina began, her voice catching on his name as sadness overwhelmed her. The tears rolled down her cheeks and her bottom lip trembled uncontrollably.

Tav looked on and wanted to kick himself for causing such a mess. When Amina began to cry loudly, he stepped closer to the screened door.

"Mr. Augustine, it's just dinner-"

"Boy if you don't get the hell off my property." Chick snapped, raising his index finger in Tav's direction. "I don't want you sniffin' around her another minute. You can cancel whatever you had in mind for this girl."

"It wasn't like that, Sir."

"Just get outta here, Tav!" CJ ordered.

"Stop it! Stop it, all of you!" Amina cried, and then raced from the living room with her hands covering her puffy face.

"What the hell are you up to?" Chick whispered his glare clearly suspicious.

"Nothin' I swear it Mr. Augustine." Tav declared, pressing one hand against his stylish olive-green shirt.

"Well, swear it to somebody else, I don't wanna hear it. I don't want to see you back around here again and if I hear 'bout you bothering that girl, it's gonna be your ass." Chick promised, seeing Tav wince at the threat. He did realize he may have been coming down hard on the young man. Unfortunately, the story he'd just told his children, sparked a lot of the hurt and anger he thought he'd buried.

Tav said nothing further and turned to head down the porch steps. The front door closed with a vicious slam and he flinched from the sound that vibrated through his ears. He couldn't wait to reach the privacy of his car, where he planned to bellow his frustrations.

"Tav?" Amina called, just as he was about to settle into the black Impala.

Tav forgot about his anger and rushed over to pull Amina close. "I'm sorry." He whispered, pressing kisses to the baby fine hair along her temple.

Amina shook her head. "It's not your fault. I should've just met you someplace. I knew they'd act like this."

"I'll remember that next time."

"But I want to go out with you tonight." Amina whispered, pulling away to look at him.

Tav could see the tears in her eyes with the help of the moonlight. "Chick'll have my behind if I put you in this car."

"Just go on to the restaurant. I'll meet you there."

Tav frowned, knowing he'd misheard. "Meet me? How?"

Amina shook her head, her expression becoming more hopeful. "Don't worry about it. Just be there."

Tav studied the pretty face in the line of his gaze. He wanted to kiss her terribly, but decided it would have to wait until later.

Amina watched him settle behind the wheel of the car and waved as the Impala tore out of the driveway and up the road.

"Amina, Girl what were you thinkin' agreeing to go on a date with that fool?"

"Forget the date, what have you been doin' with him all these weeks?!"

Amina paused on the bottom step and glared at CJ and Stephanie. "Y'all don't know him. So caught up in hating his family, you always think the worst!"

"That's because he is the worst, Amina."

"Steph-"

"She's right." CJ interrupted his handsome face dark with disgust. "Tav Gwaltney is an evil son of a bitch. He's been that way since we known him. If you don't see it now, you will."

Amina refused to listen. She shook her head, the rich brown waves brushing her shoulders as she did so. "Tav always treats me good. We've talked so much and he's told me a lot. He's a good guy and y'all-"

"You know Amina I really ain't tryin' to hear this bullshit." CJ snapped, leaving his sister and cousin at the stairway.

After a moment, Steph followed her brother. Amina raced upstairs to her bedroom.

"Cantone's?"

"Nikos?"

"Hey Amina."

"I hope you're not still mad?"

Nikos chuckled and reclined against the mahogany headboard. "Forget about it. What's happenin'?"

"I need a favor."

"What's goin' on, Amina?" Nikos probed, finally hearing the anxiety in her voice.

Amina smoothed a shaky hand across the red mini-skirt she wore with knee socks and white platforms. Her other hand clutched the receiver so tightly, her palm had turned beet red. "I need to get out of this house. Can you come get me?"

"Amina, what's the problem?"

"Nikos, please!" Amina snapped, almost to the brink of tears again. "Just come get me and I'll explain when you get here."

Nikos was already off the sofa, searching his pockets for keys. "Calm down, alright? I'll be there in a minute."

CJ smiled when he slipped between the bed linens. After his shower, he was finally able to indulge in focusing on the scandalous memories from earlier that day. Scandalous, he thought. That was the perfect description for the day's events. He'd known well before the enlightening discussion with his father, that his actions with Demetria Gwaltney were strictly taboo-in more ways than one. Still, he had already started to have second thoughts about his decision not to see her again. After the ugly scene with Amina and Tav, he realized that the decision was for the best.

"Amina?"

"It's only Nikos, cousin Ophelia." Amina sighed, her hand poised on the brass front door knob.

Ophelia closed the distance between herself and Amina. "Sweetie, we only want you safe. We've known the Gwaltneys a lot longer than you have and all I've ever heard about Tav has been terrible."

"Yes ma'am." Amina conceded, her lashes fluttering out frustration, when Ophelia pressed a kiss to her temple. "We'll be back soon." She called, before leaving the house.

Nikos leaned across the long front seat of his truck and opened the passenger door. He waved to Ophelia as Amina settled onto the beige leather seat.

"Let's get out of here." She grumbled.

"Damn, what the hell happened in there?" Nikos asked, putting the truck into gear.

"A misunderstanding." Amina sighed, leaning back against the headrest.

Nikos shook his head. "I never thought I'd see the day. Everybody in that house gets along like The Brady Bunch."

Amina rolled her eyes. "Hmph. Not when it comes to Tav Gwaltney." She said, staring out into the darkness.

"What's he got to do with it?"

Finally, Amina turned on the seat and pinned her friend with a needy gaze. "I want you to take me to Franklin's Grill. Tav came to pick me up for dinner and they wouldn't even let him past the door."

Nikos slammed on brakes so hard, both he and Amina had to brace their hands against the dashboard. "Please don't tell me you got me out here takin' you to see Tav?"

"Nikos please-"

"Hell no, Amina! Hell no!"

"If you don't take me, I'll just walk." She threatened, her mouth curving down into a pout.

Nikos slammed his hand against the steering wheel and cursed fiercely. "You too smart to be falling for this, Amina."

"Why does everybody figure he's the worst?"

"Because he is and I ain't gonna let you do this."

Amina reached across the seat and squeezed Nikos fist on the steering wheel. "Please." She whispered. Her voice shook as the tears resurfaced.

Nikos turned to stare out the window. The muscle in his jaw twitched erratically as he debated.

"Nikos please." Amina whispered once again.

"Fuck." Nikos groaned, pressing hard on the accelerator and continuing ahead.

The ride to Franklin's Grill didn't last long, but Nikos tried his best to persuade his friend to change her mind. Amina would not be swayed. For every reason Nikos gave not to become involved with Tavares Gwaltney, Amina came back with at least two reasons why she wanted to keep seeing him.

"Thank Nikos." She whispered, when the truck stopped in the front of the restaurant's entrance. "Tav'll bring me home." She said, pressing a quick kiss to his cheek before leaving the truck.

Nikos's fist remained clenched, as he watched her race inside the restaurant. Before driving away, he silently admitted what he'd known for some time. He was falling in love with Amina Davidson.

Tav stood the moment he saw Amina enter the dining room. He expelled a sigh of relief as she made her way towards him.

"You okay?" He asked, concern touching his dark face.

Amina nodded. "I'm fine." She assured him, smiling when he moved to help her into her seat.

"How'd you get here?"

"Nikos brought me."

"Nikos? Cantone?"

"Mmm hmm..."

Tav's steps were slow as he returned to his seat. "I didn't know you knew him like that."

"Oh yeah." Amina lightly replied, her hazel gaze scanning the simple, laminated menu.

Tav wasn't so reassured. "You trust him?" He queried.

Amina finally looked up. "Very much. Nikos has been the best. We don't always agree, but he never acts like he's looking down on me, because I don't see things his way."

Tav didn't have to ask what 'things' Amina was referring to. He figured she'd told Nikos who she was meeting and Tav didn't relish the idea of Nikos Cantone knowing the details of the relationship. Tav would've asked how much she'd confided to the boy, but Amina was already talking too much about her 'friend' for his taste. When the waiter arrived to take their orders, he uttered a silent prayer of thanks.

"So, what are you doing after summer ends?" Tav asked, once their meal of fried chicken sandwiches, fries, coleslaw and sodas had arrived.

Amina set the ketchup aside and shrugged. "Well, I know I don't want to go back to Ohio. Not right away, anyway. I think I'll travel, see the country. I gotta convince my mom to loan me the money, though."

Tav laughed. "Where do you want to go first?" He asked.

"New York." Amina answered without hesitation.

Tav nodded, biting into the mammoth-sized sandwich. "Big place." He noted, amidst his chewing.

"That's what Nikos says. He used to live there, so he knows everything about the place. We talk about it all the time."

Tav groaned, as the conversation returned to Nikos Cantone.

"I had fun." Amina whispered, when Tav shut off the lights and engine just down the road from the Augustine house.

Tav shared the sentiment. Despite the rocky start at conversation, the date turned out just as he'd planned.

"I wish I could take you to the door." He whispered, entwining his fingers with hers. A few moments passed in silence, and then Tav leaned across the seat with intentions of placing a simple kiss to Amina's cheek.

She turned, just as his lips brushed her face. Their lips connected in a flurry of sensation. Amina gasped, giving him the opportunity to thrust his tongue deeply into the dark sweetness of her mouth. Tav could tell she had never been kissed before and felt a rush of possessiveness overcome him. He cupped her supple cheek in his palm and groaned into her mouth. Amina's innocence only excited him further and he was at the brink of laying her flat on the front seat, when he stopped himself. Amina was too fine for a quick toss in his car. Surprising himself, he released her and retreated back to the driver's side.

"I'll see you tomorrow." He promised. And the day after that, he added.

Amina smoothed her hands across the long-sleeved white, cotton shirt she wore. "Good night, Tav." She replied, slipping out of the car and into the night.

A few more weeks passed with Tav and Amina managing to keep their relationship secret. Nikos, against his strong disapproval, continued to act as the go-between. Transporting Amina to Tav, was killing him. Still, he couldn't deny how happy and alive she seemed. Unfortunately, the nagging voice kept telling him it wouldn't be long before Amina saw Tav Gwaltney's true colors. He could only pray she'd recover from the devastation.

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Graduation day arrived at last. The Augustine home was alive with conversation, laughter and family. Many relatives flew into town for the festivities. The front yard was filled with cars and children ran throughout the grand backyard; laughing and playing.

A huge breakfast had been planned before commencement and smells of pancakes, muffins, eggs, ham, sausage and steaks intermingled through the house and outside.

Dyna Davidson, Amina's mother had flown in for the exercises as well. Of course, she was more than interested in her daughter's activities during the last few months. Nikos and his father had been invited to the breakfast and Dyna couldn't help but question her cousin about the young man who seemed so taken by Amina.

"He's a sweet young man," Ophelia was saying as she removed the last batch of apple muffins from the oven, "very respectful and smart. He and Amina are just friends, though."

"Thank goodness." Dyna sighed, smoothing one hand beneath her red lounging dress as she took a seat at the table.

Ophelia sent her cousin a wicked look. "What does that mean?"

"The last thing I need or want is to see my only child hooked up with some white man."

Ophelia wasn't surprised by Dyna's candor. She set the muffins aside to cool and leaned against the counter to watch the woman closely. "I hear what you're saying, but Nikos is a very nice young man and much better than the one, the *black* one Amina had her sights set on a few weeks ago."

Dyna waved her hand, beckoning Ophelia to continue. "Details." She ordered, smiling when her cousin took a seat at the table and happily obliged.

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The Cardman G. Wainwright graduation proved to be the event of the year. Like the Augustines, the Gwaltneys had just as much family attending to see Tavares accept his diploma.

Of course, everyone filling the bleachers and seats in the spacious gymnasium, cheered on the new graduates who marched toward the stage in a sea of hunter green and burgundy robes.

"Amina!"

"Nikos!" She cried, running toward her friend with her arms outstretched. She couldn't have been happier for her cousins or all the friends she'd made during her stay in Virginia. Still, as happy as the occasion was, it was also a highly emotional time.

"So this is it, huh? I guess you'll be setting your sights north, soon?"

Nikos shrugged at Amina's assumption. "Actually, I been thinkin' about staying in Virginia."

Amina folded her arms over the front of the gray and white striped dress with flaring sleeves. "You're not serious?"

"What?"

"I mean, you just seemed so excited about going back to New York, is all."

Nikos tapped a commencement program against his palm. "I don't know if it's the right move for me."

Amina's gaze narrowed. "Nikos Cantone are you scared to leave your Daddy?" She teased, joining in when he laughed. "Seriously Nikos, you should go. I know you really want this. Plus, I'll need somebody to go visit when I go up there."

Nikos was still chuckling, when he pulled Amina close and held her tight.

"And he's already been accepted at Hampton!" Jason Gwaltney bellowed as he and his clan surrounded Tav across the crowded gym lobby.

"How you gonna make it without him, Jase?" Cory Gwaltney, one of the cousins, was asking.

"I'll manage." Jason replied, pushing both hands into the deep pockets of his dark trousers. "He'll be working for the business during summer and ready to take over by the time he graduates." He went on to say, the image of a proud father as he clapped his son on the back.

Tav stood next to his father, beaming just as brightly. He had waited a long time to see the man so pleased with him and he wanted to savor the feeling.

Sadly, Tav's serenity was short-lived, when he spotted Amina with Nikos Cantone. His fists clenched reflexively, the rage beginning to simmer deep inside. Luckily, having so much of his family around offering him their best wishes, helped him keep a lid on the rage...and suspicion. Talk of the big dinner to be held later that day in his honor, eventually captured his interest.

Amina never noticed she was being watched. The day had been so hectic and event-filled, she hadn't even thought of Tav. She and Nikos were soon interrupted by Steph, Sweet and a few others. Everyone was in high spirits as they discussed plans for later that day. They all planned to meet back at the Augustines for the big cookout to be held in honor of the graduates.

CJ was making his way through the crowd, when he saw Demetria Gwaltney watching him from a few feet away. She was an entrancing dark angel in a flowing, white empire-waist dress with capped sleeves. Even in the demure, ankle-length creation, he found her as alluring and tempting as that day at the pond. She captivated CJ so he wanted to go to her regardless of what would be said.

"CJ! CJ Augustine!"

CJ turned and found himself enveloped in a tight hug. The young woman had clamped herself around him like a limpet as she bestowed her best wishes upon him. CJ reciprocated the

well-wishes to his fellow graduate, but his thoughts were wholly focused on Demetria. When he looked around, she was gone.

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The huge crowd was filing out of the gym much later and Tav knew he was moments away from losing his temper. He had tried to ignore Amina with Nikos, but whenever he looked around, they were either hugging, laughing or smiling at one another.

The happy expression illuminating Amina's face only grew brighter when she heard Tav call her name and saw him heading towards her in the parking lot. Thankful to have a moment alone with him, she waved and rushed over to meet her secret boyfriend. Unfortunately, Tav's mood was far from jovial. His handsome face was twisted into something sinister. The hem of his graduation robe whipped around his long legs as his strides quickened.

"What the hell is goin' on with you and that greasy head muthafucka?" He demanded, wrenching Amina's arm into an overpowering grip.

Amina's smile faded as she looked up into the angry face so close to her own. Anxiety filled her hazel eyes as she searched the parking lot for any sign of her family.

"Did you hear what I said?" Tav persisted, giving her arm a warning tug.

"Ta-Tav, my family...we don't need to have them see-"

"I don't give a fuck!"

Amina tried to smother her fear, but it constantly revived itself. Especially, when Tav stepped before her. His wide body completely blocked her view.

"What the hell you doin' with Cantone?"

"Nikos is my friend. I told you-"

"I know what you told me."

"Then why are you being like this?"

"Why the hell he gotta be all over you like that? Why he gotta be touchin' you and shit?"

"He's a friend, Tav. You do know what that is?!" Amina snapped, growing angry despite the pain shooting up her arm. "Or do you only think a girl is only meant to be screwed?"

In response, Tav squeezed Amina's arm more tightly. His strong fingers bit into the soft flesh as he waited for her reaction. When Amina winced and cried out in pain, he let her go and stomped off into the crowd.

Amina tried to massage the ache from her bones, but only seemed to inflict more pain in doing so. All the negative remarks she'd heard about Tav flooded her mind like a tidal wave. She closed her eyes and prayed she wasn't about to see the monster she had been warned of.

## TEN

Minerva stabbed her fork into the mound of fluffy yellow scrambled eggs. Her dark eyes were focused out the window in the master bedroom, where she and Jason decided to enjoy breakfast that morning.

"Well, what do you think is wrong with her?" She asked.

Jason spoke through a mouthful of eggs, steak and buttered toast. "Baby, please. Nothin' goin' on with that girl."

Minerva shook her head. "Sometimes you can be so blind when it comes to those kids." She accused, turning to glare at her husband.

"What's got you so riled? The girl always keeps to herself, she's always quiet." Jason pointed out, wiping his mouth with the gray cloth napkin tucked into the collar of his striped shirt.

Minerva shook her head, the curls in her high ponytail dancing wildly. "Something's different." She pointed out.

"Minnie-"

"Soon as we got home after graduation, she ran upstairs and locked herself in her room. She didn't even come down for Tav's dinner."

Jason leaned across the cozy round table and reached for the silver coffeepot. "You want me to talk to her, Minnie?"

Minerva slapped Jason's hand and poured the coffee instead. "Don't even waste your time. The child will only bat her eyes at you and say 'nothing Daddy' and you'll leave it at that." She predicted, setting the shiny pot aside. "I'll talk to her after breakfast."

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Amina walked into the kitchen just as the phone rang. She was so on edge from the day before she actually jumped at the sound.

Ophelia was removing a tray of cinnamon toast from the oven and looked over her shoulder. "Baby, would you answer that for me, please?"

Amina took a quick, deep breath before lifting the receiver off the white wall phone. "Augustines." She greeted.

"Amina?"

"Why are you calling me here?!" She whispered panic filling her eyes when she looked to see if Ophelia was near.

"I have to apologize for yesterday." Tav told her, his deep voice sounding strong yet anxious. "Amina?" He called, when she offered no response.

"Go on."

"Baby I'm sorry and I want to tell you that in person."

"I don't think so."

"Amina please. I was way out of line and I can't expect you to believe that, unless I can say it in person...Please?"

Amina's every instinct screamed that she decline Tav's urgent request and write him off as a bad dating choice. Unfortunately, Tav's persistence and the fact that Ophelia was right across the room pushed her to make a quick decision.

"Alright. When and where?"

"Our spot in the garden. Come now."

Amina replaced the receiver, and then rested her forehead against it.

"Honey, have a seat. I'm about to set out breakfast." Ophelia called.

Amina smoothed her hands across her bare arms and shook her head. "I don't really feel like anything right now."

Ophelia propped one hand on her hip and frown. "You feelin' okay?"

Dyna walked into the kitchen and heard the question. Immediately, her narrow light brown eyes focused in on her daughter. "You alright, Baby?" She asked, walking over to press the back of her hand against Amina's forehead.

Amina nodded, absently wiping her wet palms against the back of her green shorts. "I think I'm gonna take a walk before I eat anything."

Dyna and Ophelia exchanged glances when Amina practically ran out the back door. They were both more than a little suspicious.

"What's happening', Pop?" CJ greeted, when he caught up with the man headed downstairs.

"Goin' to get some of this breakfast 'fore it's all gone." Chick teased.

"I heard that." CJ replied, also on his way to the kitchen.

"I did want to ask you something, though." Chick called, brushing his son's shoulder.

CJ stopped on the stairway and turned. "Shoot Pop."

Chick propped both hands on his hips, slipping his fingers through the belt loops of his gray tweed trousers. He seemed to be debating on how to approach the subject. "You'll be starting college in the fall and I know this summer's gonna be pretty hectic with all the social events."

"Yeah..." CJ agreed, folding his arms across his Giants T-shirt and watching the man closely.

"I know you'll want to have fun and all that," Chick continued, "but I'd like you to consider spending some time at the business. It's no secret I want you to take over one day."

CJ nodded and tried to hide his smile. He had never seen his father so uneasy and felt proud that the man thought enough of him to want him aboard. "That sounds good, Pop. I been wanting to ask if I could work at the company during the summer, anyway."

"You were?" Chick queried, CJ's interest almost rendering him speechless. "Are you sure you want to work like that this summer? You'll be missin' out on a lot of parties, you know?"

"I appreciate the warnin', Dad. But, I don't really care 'bout that." CJ said, his voice dropping an octave as thoughts of Demetria filtered his mind.

Chick was more than a little impressed by his son's mature attitude. He dared not say anything and embarrass the boy, though. Instead, he patted CJ's shoulder and they continued on downstairs.

Minerva braced herself and knocked lightly on Demetria's door. Lately, she didn't know how to approach her own daughter, but vowed that would not stop her from trying. Over the weeks, she had seen Demetria withdraw into an even tighter shell. Minerva was more than a little afraid of what she would discover. After her knock went unanswered, Minerva tried the doorknob. A smile came to her lips when she found that Demetria hadn't locked it.

"Deme?" She called, finding the room empty.

At first, silence answered her greeting. Then, the sound of coughing and something else rose in the air.

"Deme?" Minerva called again, stepping further into the room. Clutching the hem of her purple floral print lounging dress in one hand, she followed the tortured sounds to the private bathroom. There, she found Demetria hugging the commode amidst an attack of coughing and vomiting.

"Jesus!" Minerva cried, running into the room. She fell to her knees next to Demetria and threaded her fingers through the girl's thick, sweat-drenched hair.

"Let it all out, Baby." She instructed, holding Deme's hair away from her face until the vomiting ceased to dry heaves.

"Thank you, Mama." Demetria whispered her voice barely audible.

"Can you stand?" Minerva asked, feeling Demetria brace against her as she tried. It was useless and the girl settled back to her knees, shaking her head slowly.

Minerva pressed a kiss to her daughter's cheek. "Come on." She softly urged, helping Demetria out of the bathroom and back into bed. She watched the child's eyes close the instant her head touched the pillow.

"Sweetie, how long have you been this way?"

"Something I ate." Demetria excused, turning her head into the pillow.

"But you haven't eaten anything. Not today or the day before."

Demetria used the sleeve of her white cotton nightgown to wipe the sweat from her forehead. "That's probably it then, Ma. I didn't eat, that's probably why I'm sick."

Minerva was far from convinced, but could see her daughter wasn't up for discussion. Instead, she cleaned the bathroom and helped Demetria change gowns.

"I'll be back to check on you." Minerva promised, pressing a soft kiss to her daughter's cheek.

Downstairs bustled with activity as usual. Minerva looked around for about ten minutes, until she located Sally Royal the head housekeeper.

"Something you need, Child?" Sally asked her kind brown eyes wide with concern.

Minerva patted the older woman's hand and smiled. "Just a question, Miss Sally. It's about the laundry duties over the last month."

"Yes?" Sally replied, her easy expression growing a bit more serious.

"Who was in charge of laundry then?"

"Has the staff been doing a poor job?" Sally asked, the tone of her voice meaning she was ready to reprimand them.

Minerva began to wave her hands quickly. "It's nothing like that. I only want to know who's been taking care of Demetria's clothes. I want to make sure that child is on time getting dirty things to the staff. She's been very moody lately and you have to stay on these girls, you know?"

"Amen." Sally concurred, tapping her index finger against her chin as she thought. "Let's see...last month...that would have been Kathy Bismarck handling laundry."

"Thanks Miss Sally." Minerva whispered, squeezing the woman's hand once, before she hurried off.

Minerva checked her watch. She knew Kathy usually took a few minutes to speak with her husband Julius around that time. She found the woman waving off her husband as he headed back to the stables.

Kathy smoothed one hand across her sleek chignon and turned. "Miss Minerva!" She gasped, her eyes widening when she saw her boss standing there. "Miss Minerva, I'm sorry. Julius was just-"

"Oh Honey, please." Minerva cut in with a wave of her hand. "You don't need to explain a thing." She assured, pulling the woman aside. "I have something to ask you." She whispered.

"Yes ma'am?"

"Has Demetria been getting her laundry to you on time?"

Kathy took a small step back. "Her laundry?"

"I only want to make sure she's doing what she's supposed to."

"Oh ma'am she is." Kathy quickly replied, her hands clasped across her chest. Slowly though her gaze clouded with the slightest uncertainty.

Minerva saw it. "Something you want to tell me?"

Kathy chewed her bottom lip almost a minute before she answered. "I did wonder about something...Demetria was only giving me her clothes."

"Mmm hmm."

Kathy could see Minerva wasn't grasping her meaning and stepped closer. "Demetria only gave me clothes. I never washed any of her under things. Especially the ones she wears during her menstruation. I usually bleach them, but I haven't done so for going on two months now. I didn't ask her about it, because I thought maybe...she was getting embarrassed over me handling something so personal."

Minerva closed her eyes, fearing that her suspicions were credible.

"Miss? You alright?" Kathy whispered.

Minerva could barely manage a nod as she turned and blindly headed back towards the house.

*This is a bad idea girl. A bad idea!* Amina began to chant the phrase the closer she came to the secluded garden. It would be best to end things, she knew that. She had been telling herself that very thing since she raced out of the house. Tav's attitude at graduation made her afraid of him for the first time since they'd met. Still, she ignored it. She ignored it, because Tav said he wanted to apologize.

"Oh girl, is it worth it? Is he worth it?" She sighed, wishing there were someone she could completely confide in.

When Amina reached the clearing, all doubts left her mind. She found Tav already waiting. He paced slowly back and forth. His handsome dark face was a picture of concentration. Amina watched him for a while and convinced herself the boy was definitely worth it.

"Tav?" She whispered.

Tav stopped pacing and was by Amina's side in an instant. He cupped her lovely cinnamon-toned face in his huge palms and favored her mouth and neck with soft kisses. "I'm sorry...I'm so sorry. I had no right to treat you that way. I swear I'm sorry."

Amina's heart thudded uncontrollably, her lashes fluttering as kisses showered across her eyes and brow. "Why did you act that way?" She moaned.

Tav pressed his forehead against hers and squeezed his eyes shut. "I go wild when I see you talkin' to other guys," he admitted, "especially Nikos."

Amina squeezed his hands. "But we're just friends. That's all it's ever been. You can't keep doing this." She urged, though in the far corners of her mind, she found it exciting that he was jealous. Emotion ruling her actions, she stood on her toes and kissed him.

Tav was affected at once. His arms slid around Amina's tiny waist and he held her high against his muscular form. His tongue thrust past her lips and he kissed her with explicit thoroughness.

Amina gasped and moaned beneath the possessive kiss. She was so overwhelmed by Tav's expert touch she barely noticed that he had settled her to the soft, sun-bleached grass. She shivered from the sensuous feelings firing through her body, smoothing her fingers across the collar of his navy blue shirt.

Tav added more pressure to the kiss as his hand toyed with the hem of the green and blue striped top Amina wore. When his hand slipped beneath the garment to stroke the lacy edge of her bra, she knew it was time to call a halt to the scene.

"Tav...wait..."

"Mmm mmm."

"Yes Tav." Amina softly insisted, trying to ease his hand away from her breasts.

Tav's fingers were already caressing the gentle swell of one breast. His arousal was more than evident as he began to simulate vague thrusting motions with his hips.

"No Tav." Amina resisted, this time using the most firm tone she could muster.

Tav raised his head and looked down into her wide eyes. The innocence and sensuality combined in the stunning hazel gaze urged him to wait. Instinct told him she was a virgin and he knew it would be well worth the wait to indulge in the untested sweetness.

"I'm sorry." Amina whispered, her voice cracking on the last word as she watched him move away.

Tav helped her stand, and then cupped her chin between his fingers. "Don't apologize to me. It's okay." He soothed, brushing his mouth against her temple.

That day, Amina fell a little more in love with Tavares Gwaltney.

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Stephanie selected another slice of the gooey cheese pizza she shared with Sweet.

"I don't get it, Steph." Sweet admitted, between mouthfuls of pizza. "We're going to college. You know how much freedom that means?"

"But we're going to different schools." Steph reminded her boyfriend, her pretty face a picture of sadness. "How's that gonna affect us?" She asked.

"Why are you worried about this?" Sweet asked, pinning his girlfriend with a confused glare.

"You want Hampton. Obviously, you're not interested in leaving Virginia."

"Well, what do you have in mind?" Sweet asked, folding his arms across the blue and red striped shirt he wore.

Steph's brown gaze faltered. "I want Howard."

"In D.C.?!"

"You know another?"

"Damn." Sweet sighed, his long brows tugged close into a frown. "I didn't think you wanted to go so far."

"It's not that far." Steph replied, her laughter coming forth.

Finally, Sweet shrugged and reached for another slice of pizza. "I guess a change wouldn't be so bad."

Steph's eyes widened. "What are you tryin' to say?" She asked, fiddling with the bamboo earrings dangling from her lobes.

Sweet uttered a short laugh, but didn't bother to look up. "If you think I'm letting you out of my sight Stephanie Augustine, you crazy."

Suddenly, happier than she'd been in weeks, Steph giggled and slid around to Sweet's side of the booth. She threw her arms around his neck and began to shower his neck and face with kisses.

Sweet could only laugh. "Lord girl, is it that big a thing for you to get out of VA?"

Stephanie eased away and sent to boy and exasperated look. "You have no idea how ready I am to get out of this place."

"What the hell for? I mean, hell Steph you got that big house, cool parents, what-"

"I know where you're comin' from." She admitted, moving back to her side of the booth. "But, do you ever have a feeling that no matter how good things are goin', something's about to go down? Something bad? And you want to be as far away from it as possible?"

"Jesus, Steph." Sweet sighed, more than a little concerned by her solemn words and expression.

Stephanie reached across the table and held her boyfriend's hand in a tight grasp.

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"I appreciate this, Seymour. I know how hard it is to make house calls on such short notice."

Dr. Seymour Robinson smiled as he followed Minerva Gwaltney upstairs. "Don't give it a thought. I'm always happy to help out an old friend. What exactly is wrong with Demetria?" He asked, scratching his balding head.

"You mean, besides the mood swings and the vomiting?" Minerva queried.

Seymour switched his medical bag to the other hand and shrugged. "How's she been eating? Has she been getting enough sleep?"

"There hasn't been anything out of the normal on that end. She usually eats quite good and she spends so much time in her room that I'm sure she's getting more than enough rest."

"Have her cycles been regular?"

The simple question made Minerva halt her ascent up the stairs. "I honestly don't know." She admitted, bowing her head.

Seymour touched her arm. "Minerva?" He called, fixing her with a pointed look.

"Oh Seymour, I really don't know." Minerva cried, slapping her hands to her thighs. "I began to suspect when I found her vomiting. I even checked with my maid who told me

Demetria hasn't been putting her under things-her menstrual things especially-in with everything else to be washed."

Seymour could see affected Minerva was becoming. He decided against asking any more questions. Instead, he patted Minerva's hand and they continued upstairs.

Demetria could barely lift her head from the pillow, when her mother walked into the bedroom with Dr. Robinson. The dizziness and foul bile rose in the back of her throat the instant she moved.

"Hello Demetria!" Seymour greeted, setting his hat and bag to the white and gold nightstand next to the brass canopy bed. "I hear you're feeling a little under the weather. Can't have a pretty girl like you cooped up in her room all day, can we?"

"Do you need anything, Seymour?" Minerva called, still standing just inside the room.

Seymour smiled his kind brown eyes warm and reassuring. "We're fine, Minerva. Just give me and this young lady a few minutes alone."

"She didn't have to bother you with this." Demetria told the doctor when the door closed behind Minerva.

"Your mama's concerned Demetria and she wasn't bothering me. I'm a doctor, you know?"

Demetria couldn't manage a smile over the doctor's teasing remark.

"It'll pass soon. I just have to give it a while." She told him.

Surprised by her words, Seymour chuckled. "And how can you be so sure?"

Demetria closed her eyes. "It always passes after a while."

"Have you seen another doctor?" Seymour asked, intrigued by her confidence.

"No."

"Then, how do you-"

"I read, Doctor Robinson." She replied, her voice sounding firm for the first time that day.

Seymour unbuttoned his white, cotton suit coat and folded his arms over his chest. "And what has your reading told you?"

"That this is common...and temporary."

"This?"

"Morning sickness."

"Demetria-"

"Doctor Robinson, I'm pregnant."

