

HOOD POLITICS



J. CERRONE X JERMAINE CREWS

Hood Politics II

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Chapter 1

“We need to get out of here, now!” Rocky panted as he looked around wildly, Dick and Brian’s lifeless bodies sprawled on the ground nearby.

“Hold up, partner,” Antoine objected as he retrieved his phone from his pocket, snapped photos of the corpses and recorded videos of the files and crime scene. “We need some insurance, Rock. Help me put these files in the wheel.”

“Insurance?” Rocky asked, concerned. “For what? We’re turning these files in, right?”

“To who?” Antoine scoffed.

“The Chief,” Rocky shrugged as he carried several boxed files from the back of Dick’s van and placed them in the trunk of the Dodge Charger. “He can fix this shit for us so we can get back to our lives. You can fix your marriage and I can get back to doing what I do! Most importantly, we can get back to work. This suspension shit is nutty! We can finally clear our names!”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Antoine huffed as he lugged the last two boxes over to the Dodge and placed them into the trunk. “You’re right, though. We gotta get out of here. I’mma show you something when we get to your crib.”

The two suspended detectives hastily entered their unmarked vehicle and sped away from the scene of the Olney shooting in front of Yolanda’s home. Rocky drove and weaved through the light traffic as he made his way

down Broad Street until he reached Cayuga Street, quickly entered the ramp and sped onto the expressway. The duo rode in silence as they made their way to Rocky's condominium in the Art Museum District of the city, parked in the garage and exited the vehicle.

"Pop the trunk for me, Rock," Antoine addressed his partner as he walked to the back of the Charger. "I need to get this file to show you."

Rocky complied, pressed the trunk release button on the remote control and stood watch as Antoine thumbed through the files until he located the one he was searching for.

"Okay. Come on," Antoine sternly instructed as he joined his partner and walked to the elevator.

Rocky and Antoine rode the elevator to the twelfth floor and exited, then took the stairs the rest of the way until they reached Rocky's condominium. Both men pulled their firearms as Rocky placed his key in the lock and opened the door. The men cautiously entered the apartment and turned on the light in the living room. They crept through the entire residence, guns drawn and pointed ahead of them, checking for intruders.

"All clear, partner!" Antoine called out.

"Clear over here too!" Rocky replied as he holstered his gun and joined his partner in the living room. "Now, what did you want to show me?"

"Look at whose name is in here," Antoine replied as he opened a manila folder and pointed at a handwritten name, highlighted in yellow.

"Thomas Strickland?" Rocky gasped. "That's the Chief! But why does it say '\$5k/month' next to his name?"

“Come on, dog,” Antoine chuckled. “You’re the one who’s always calling me naïve! You know what this is! This is a record of payoffs. This is high-level corruption shit, bro! The mayor’s name is on here, too...”

“Oh, shit!” Rocky sighed. “That’s crazy! Twelve stacks a month to the mayor? What the fuck is going on, Ant?”

“I don’t know, man,” Antoine confessed. “But I know we can’t trust them. We ain’t just going back to our normal lives just like that! We need to figure this shit out.”

“Real shit!” Rocky agreed. “We gotta figure out what we’re gonna do while we try to clear our names though.”

“We need to run, man,” Antoine solemnly suggested. “We’re suspended from duty. We just killed Dick and Brian, two detectives, and left their bodies in front of the home of the only witness to Kareem’s homicide. We know those pigs were dirty, but it’s going to be difficult to prove right now. Not to mention the fact that we also killed Ricky and Barry... if we’re ever connected to that! Plus, we have files that implicate the Chief of Police and the Mayor in corruption. The people involved in this are powerful – they know everything about us and our families. This is chess, not checkers, partner. We need to map this shit out very carefully!”

“Maybe we can see if my brothers can help us stay out the way for a while,” Rocky suggested, sighing out of frustration. “This is drawing, though. A nigga is a playboy. I’m supposed to *be* the law! I would have just stayed in the streets when I was a young-boy if I knew I was gonna wind up having to run *from* the law like some common street-nigga all these years later!”

“Yeah, I hear you, bro!” Antoine chuckled. “Imagine how I feel! I’m a family man with a born-again Christian wife and a young daughter! This shit ain’t for me! I want to be in the crib, getting drunk, watching TV right now!”

“I feel you, fam,” Rocky sighed. “It is what it is. We’ll get our lives back soon. In the meantime, let’s pack some clothes so we can get the fuck out of here!”

The men rushed to their rooms and hastily stuffed several changes of clothing into their duffle bags. In addition, Rocky emptied the contents of his safe – fifteen-thousand dollars in cash – and placed it inside his bag along with his clothes. Rocky took the money so the men would have funds to cover their expenses without needing to use their credit or debit cards and without feeling the need to touch the money included in the secret files they recovered from Dick and Brian.

The duo reconvened in the living room a few minutes later, nodded at each other and proceeded to the front door. Once they reached the garage and approached the unmarked Charger, both men hesitated and looked at each other.

“We should take one of my cars and switch the plates with one of my brother’s jawns,” Rocky suggested.

“Good idea,” Antoine agreed. “Let’s transfer the boxes with the files to your wheel.”

“Alright, bet,” Rocky agreed as he tossed the keys to the Dodge to his partner. “I’m pull up.”

Less than a minute later, Antoine heard the quiet growl of Rocky's pearl-white BMW 7-Series sedan as he drove alongside his partner and parked near the row of solitary vehicles.

"Real low-key, partner!" Antoine chuckled when Rocky exited his luxury sedan.

"Whatever, Ant!" the man laughed. "You already know low-key ain't really my style. I don't own any vehicles made for hiding! Now, let's hurry up and load these boxes so we can get out of here!"

"Say less!" Antoine agreed.

"Damn!" Rocky huffed as he dropped one of the boxes, spilling several files onto the floor.

"What's that?" Antoine asked as he leaned over to help his friend quickly clean up the mess. "Bonds from Bank of America and Wells Fargo... made out to the City of Philadelphia and the police department? Records of police brutality settlements too! What the hell are these doing in here? We gotta look into this, partner!"

"Yeah, we do," Rocky replied. "But we can do that later. First, I want to go back and make sure Yolanda is okay without drawing on ourselves. You know her place is probably crawling with cops by now!"

"Yeah, we can do that. We'll just go around back and stake it out until they take their statement from her, clean up the bodies and leave," Antoine suggested.

"Say no more," Rocky agreed as they entered his vehicle and he shifted his car into gear. "We out."

Chapter 2

Bathsheba Hayes, the Director of Internal Affairs, finished her meal at the political mixer and pushed her plate aside. The attractive older woman daintily wiped her mouth with a cloth napkin and neatly placed it on the table as she retrieved her purse and rose from her chair before pushing it under the table.

“Alright, y’all,” Bathsheba addressed the other attendees seated at her table. “It’s been a pleasure, but it’s time for me to get back to the grind!”

The physically-fit, middle-aged woman gracefully strolled out of the building, her purse strapped over her shoulder as she pulled her phone from her pocketbook and dialed her voicemail to listen to her messages. As she strolled down Broad Street in the cool night air, Bathsheba’s neutral facial expression quickly transformed into horror as she listened to the two voice messages Nikki left her roughly an hour beforehand.

“Hey, boss-lady. It’s Nikki. I did some digging when I got home. Shabazz was right. McGowan is dirty! I’m following him and his crew now. I just got off 95 at the Bartram Avenue exit. I don’t know what they’re up to, but something isn’t right. They’re definitely up to no good. I’ll keep you posted.”

“Oh, shit!” Bathsheba gasped in shock as she followed the prompts to save the voicemail, entered her vehicle and listened to the next message from her subordinate.

“Sheba... Boss-lady, you’re not gonna believe what I just saw! Your buddy, Dick, and his crew just met up with the Chief of Police at this storage

unit on 70th and Norwitch. The Chief handed Dick a large envelope full of cash and left. Dick gave each of the two guys with him a stack of cash, then they loaded some crates into the back of their van. I have pictures and video of everything. I'm going to engage them before they leave. Please call me back as soon as you get this message.”

“Oh, my Lord!” Bathsheba shrieked. Un-fucking-believable!”

She shifted her vehicle into gear, exited the Center City parking garage, and navigated her way to Southwest Philadelphia to meet up with Nikki. Bathsheba dialed her coworker’s phone number half a dozen times while en route but was unsuccessful in her repeated attempts to reach Nikki.

“Shit, Nikki!” Bathsheba cursed aloud to herself as she raced through the city to the storage unit. “God, girl... I hope you’re okay!”

Less than fifteen minutes later, the Internal Affairs Director arrived to the intersection of 70th and Norwitch in far Southwest Philadelphia. She was horrified to see patrol vehicles parked on each corner, yellow “caution” tape sectioning off portions of the area, shell-casing markers on the pavement and several uniformed officers standing around, seemingly holding casual conversation.

“Bathsheba Hayes. Director, Internal Affairs,” the alpha female flashed her badge as she approached three male officers who stood near the entrance of the storage unit, talking and sipping coffee. “What’s going on here? Where’s Sergeant Goodwin?”

“Oh... the bus took her to Presbyterian a while ago, ma’am,” one of the uniformed police officers reluctantly spoke up.

“Presbyterian Hospital?” Bathsheba shrieked. “She was shot? What happened?”

“We’re not sure,” a second officer volunteered. “Evidently she was wounded, called in for assistance but slipped into a coma due to blood loss by the time the bus arrived.”

“Oh, my god!” Bathsheba exclaimed, tears forming in her eyes. “This is bullshit! I can’t believe this! Who was the first on the scene?”

“I was, ma’am,” a rookie officer stepped forward and spoke up. “Officer Jalen Juarez. Twelfth District. I got here and she was already unconscious, bleeding profusely from her abdomen. The EMTs arrived shortly after me. They seemed to be able to get her in stable condition before they took her to the hospital, though.”

“Thank you, officer,” Bathsheba concisely replied before abruptly turning and walking to her vehicle.

The strong woman found it difficult to hold her emotions in check. She rushed inside her vehicle and sat in the darkness as she burst into tears. Bathsheba’s heart was filled with self-condemnation and guilt as she realized Nikki’s current predicament was due to her own poor judgement.

After several minutes, the Internal Affairs Director regained her composure, started her car and pulled away from the curb, embarking on the relatively short journey to Presbyterian Hospital in West Philadelphia.

“Oh, Nikki!” Bathsheba gasped when she walked into the younger woman’s hospital room and observed her body’s traumatized condition – bloody and unconscious with tubes protruding from her orifices. “I’m so sorry, girl!”

Bathsheba slowly approached Nikki's bedside and gently rubbed the unconscious woman's arm. The older woman's body heaved as she gently sobbed, looking down at her coworker in critical but stable condition. The middle-aged woman cried for several minutes before gathering herself once again. She turned and exited Nikki's room in search of a member of the hospital's staff.

"Excuse me," Bathsheba called out and flashed her badge after spotting a nurse walking through the hallway. "I'm Bathsheba Hayes, Director of Internal Affairs, Philly PD. Nicole Goodwin in room 243 is my employee. She doesn't have any family in the state, so I'll be her emergency contact."

"Okay, thank you for letting me know," the short, burgundy-haired woman replied with a warm smile. "I'm Sally, the charge nurse. Why don't you come fill out some paperwork with me at the nurse's station?"

"Okay," Bathsheba agreed as she returned her wallet and badge to her inner jacket pocket and followed the attractive Asian woman to the nurse's station. "What do you need me to do?"

"Just some emergency contact information, HIPAA forms and Durable Power of Attorney paperwork, just in case," Sally matter-of-factly informed Bathsheba.

"Oh," Bathsheba stoically replied.

Durable Power of Attorney paperwork meant there was a chance Nikki may never wake up from her coma. This harsh reminder of the gravity of Nikki's situation caused Bathsheba to grow emotional again. The woman stifled her tears as she completed the forms. Once she was finished, she placed the pen and pad on the counter and slid it in Sally's direction.

“Here you go. I’m finished.”

“Thanks. Are you going back in the room now?” the charge nurse asked.

“Yeah... but, do you know where her phone is?” Bathsheba asked. “It’s her work phone and I need it.”

“Oh, um... sure!” the younger woman hesitated as she searched the nurse’s station for a moment, then retrieved the keys from around her neck and unlocked the safe with the patients’ personal belongings. “Goodwin... Goodwin... here you go!”

“Thanks, honey!” Bathsheba smiled. “I’ll see you later!”

Bathsheba hastily strolled down the hallway to Nikki’s room, closed and locked the door and sat in the chair next to the young woman’s bed. She unlocked the phone using the generic Internal Affairs pin and was horrified at the pictures and videos of Dick and Brian meeting with Police Chief, Thomas Strickland, clearly conducting shady activities in a remote location shortly before Nikki was shot by a still unidentified assailant.

“Shit! This is bad!” Bathsheba gasped aloud. “I’m so sorry I got you involved in this, Nikki! I don’t even know what to do!”

Bathsheba unlocked her own phone and scrolled through her contacts list, contemplating who she could trust on the force. After several minutes of deep thought, Bathsheba decided on a high-ranking policeman in West Philadelphia whom she had known for decades.

Ring... Ring... Ring...

“Hello? Bathsheba Hayes?” a middle-aged man answered the phone with sleep in his voice. “You finally decided to take me up on my booty-call offer twenty years later, huh?”

“Hell no!” Bathsheba scoffed. “This is serious, Roger! Stop playing. I can’t tell you the details, but one of my young agents was just shot. She’s at Presbyterian Hospital in critical but stable condition. Room 243. I need twenty-four-hour police coverage of her room starting immediately.”

“Oh, shit, Sheba!” Roger sighed. “That’s no good! What the fuck is going on?”

“Didn’t you just hear me say, ‘I can’t tell you the details?’” Bathsheba sighed. “Are you going to help me or do I need to call somebody who will?”

“I got you, Sheba,” Roger replied. “I’ll send somebody over there now.”

“Okay, thanks, Roger. I’ll wait here until the coverage arrives.” Bathsheba replied before disconnecting the call.

The woman retrieved Rocky and Antoine’s business cards from her wallet. Bathsheba hesitated as she contemplated which man she should reach out to in attempts to extend an olive branch. After thinking about the matter for a while, Bathsheba decided to call Rocky. She felt he would be the primary decision-maker since he had the more dominant personality of the two detectives.

Ring... Ring... Ring... Ring... Ring...

“You’ve reached Rakim Shabazz of the Philadelphia Police Department Northwest Homicide Division. Leave a message.”

“Hi, Rocky,” Bathsheba softly began. “This is Bathsheba Hayes, from Internal Affairs. I’m Nikki’s boss. We met at Warm Daddy’s a little while back. Anyway... this message is for you and Antoine, I’m so sorry I didn’t trust and believe in y’all. Nikki has been shot and I’m not sure by who, but I think it was a dirty cop. She’s in critical but stable condition in Presbyterian Hospital now. I have video of those crooked-ass, white cops, Dick and Brian, exchanging a package with the Chief! The shit is really damning. We have to meet up and figure this out so we can clear your names and rid this city of corruption. Please call me back ASAP!”

Bathsheba marked the message as urgent before disconnecting the call. She sat back in the chair next to Nikki and repeatedly watched the videos documenting the Chief of Police’s corruption while she waited for Nikki’s protective guard to arrive. Bathsheba was so entranced watching them she didn’t realize how much time passed until a West Philadelphia uniformed police officer entered the room.

“You ordered protection for the room, ma’am?” the officer asked as he glanced down at the footage playing on Nikki’s phone, startling Bathsheba.

“Oh,” Bathsheba jumped as she abruptly paused the video and locked the phone; stashing it inside her purse as she rose from her seat. “Yes. Thank you.”

“Well, I’m here,” the tall, stocky man grinned. “I’ll be here for the next twelve hours until my relief comes. Roger briefed me about the situation.”

“Okay...” Bathsheba hesitated as she walked past the man. “Thanks. Have a good night.”

“You too, ma’am,” the officer nodded as he glanced at Nikki laying peacefully in her hospital bed. “No need to worry. She’s in good hands.”

Chapter 3

“Hello?” Chief of Police, Thomas Strickland, yawned as he woke from his slumber and answered the phone.

“Chief,” Officer Anthony Spinelli whispered into his cell phone. “Can you hear me?”

“Yeah, Tony,” Thomas replied as he yawned again and sat up in bed, speaking quietly to refrain from waking his wife. “What’s up?”

“A uniform was shot on duty,” Spinelli informed the Chief. “She’s from Internal Affairs. Nicole Goodwin. Her boss, Bathsheba Hayes, confiscated her phone and ordered twenty-four-hour security for her room. I’m on duty at Presbyterian Hospital now. Room 243. Thought I should let you know.”

“Shit!” Chief Strickland cursed as he sat fully erect in his bed. “Thanks for letting me know.”

-Click-

The older, Black man felt his heart pump ever faster and his blood pressure rise as his anxiety built to a fever pitch. His mind raced as he thought of what could have led to the Internal Affairs agent being shot on duty, and if the unexpected shooting had anything to do with his meeting with Dick.

Thomas needed to figure out how to manage this situation before it got even more out of control than it already was. The man slowly rose from his

queen-sized bed and exited his room. He crept through the hallway, entered his bathroom, closed the door and sat on the closed toilet lid.

Ring... Ring... Ring... Ring...

“Thomas,” Mayor DiCicco solemnly answered the phone. “I’m assuming this is important since you’re calling me at such an ungodly hour.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Mayor, but it is,” Chief Strickland confessed in a panic as he breathed heavily into the receiver of his burner phone. “It’s IAB... one of their agents was shot tonight. It was Nikki Goodwin. She’s in Presbyterian Hospital now. Sheba Hayes took her phone and ordered round-the-clock security on her room!”

“Jesus Christ, Thomas!” Mayor DiCicco exclaimed. “I thought you had this under control! What’s on the phone? Who shot her?”

“I-I-I’m not sure, sir,” Thomas stuttered. “I had a meeting with Dick and Brian down Southwest earlier and I just heard--”

“I know you didn’t call me in the middle of the night to waste my time! What did you hear, Thomas?” Mayor DiCicco impatiently demanded. “Tell me what you know!”

“Dick and Brian are dead!” Chief Strickland sighed. “I heard it over the radio before I called you. Rocky and Antoine are the main suspects!”

“Get the hell out of here, Thomas!” Mayor DiCicco gasped in disbelief. “You were supposed to have this under control! This is unbelievable, not to mention, unacceptable! I need to make a call. I’ll handle it. Expect a visit from Harrisburg.”

-Click-

“Sir, I’m so, very sorry to bother you at this time of night,” Mayor DiCicco greeted Attorney General, Roger Cohen, with the utmost respect when the man answered the phone that night.

“No problem, Alvin,” Roger replied as he attempted to fully awaken. “I know you wouldn’t call me at this time if it wasn’t an emergency. What’s going on?”

“We have a situation here in the city...”

Mayor DiCicco explained the dire circumstances to the Attorney General and requested immediate assistance with damage control of the situation. The men spoke for a few minutes as Roger listened to the Mayor’s explanation, but the Attorney General already knew what needed to be done.

“I’m sending Karen. She’s the best person for the job,” A.G. Cohen matter-of-factly informed the mayor. “She’ll be there in the morning.”

“Karen, bring me a beer!” the sixteen-year-old’s father commanded her.

The sassy teenager huffed as she walked to the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, retrieved another beer for her already intoxicated, alcoholic father and returned to the living room.

“Here, Dad,” Karen handed the ice-cold, perspiring drink to the man without looking in his direction.

“Thanks, beautiful!” the man slurred his words as he grabbed the drink and simultaneously gripped his teenaged daughter’s wrist with his free hand. “My baby girl is so pretty!”

“Come on, Dad!” Karen whined as she unsuccessfully attempted to wrestle her arm away from her father’s vice-like grip.

“Come on and watch TV with me, Karen!” the man sloppily grunted as he forcefully pulled his daughter onto his lap and began to stroke her bare legs, exposed due to the short-shorts he bought her and forced her to wear.

“Where’s Mom?” Karen asked. “Why don’t you watch TV with her?”

“That old bitch passed out hours ago!” Karen’s father chuckled as saliva slid down his bottom lip. “You know your mother drinks more than I do! Relax and watch a show with Daddy!”

“Not tonight, Dad!” Karen whined. “Please! I don’t feel like it!”

“Stop being a little bitch, Karen!” the teenager’s father snapped as he slapped her across her face.

“What the hell, Dad?” Karen whimpered as she grabbed her reddened, swollen cheek and rubbed it in attempts to dull the pain.

“I’m sorry, baby,” Karen’s father apologized disingenuously as he gently rubbed his daughter’s cheek with one hand and softly kissed her.

The way the alcoholic kissed Karen was not the way one would expect a man to kiss his own daughter, and the teen shuddered as her father pressed his wet, chapped lips against her cheek. After kissing Karen as if she were his lover, her father caressed her leg. As he did so, he allowed his hand to creep up her thigh, closer to the inner seam of the crotch of her shorts. Karen attempted to abruptly jump up from her father’s lap, but the man grabbed her forearm once more and pulled her back down onto his lap, causing her to feel his erect manhood poking into her backside.

“Dad! Please! Not tonight!” Karen pleaded.

“I told you to stop acting like a bitch!” Karen’s father growled as he carefully placed his bottle of beer on the coffee table beside him and balled his fist up menacingly.

Karen’s eyes grew large when she observed her father’s body language. He seemed to be more intoxicated than usual. The teenager automatically flinched when her father made a fist and immediately felt the ache in her neck from the last time her father had forcibly molested and beat her, only a few short days prior. The sexual predator did so nearly every time Karen’s mother got drunk and passed out, which had been at least two to three times per week since Karen had turned fourteen.

The battered teenager quickly contemplated whether or not her body could tolerate any more punishment after dealing with nearly constant physical and sexual assaults from her own biological father for over two years. Karen quickly decided she was finished dealing with the abuse.

Karen looked in her father’s eyes and already knew what was to follow – another sexual assault and physical beating – and she was not in the mood to endure it. The sixteen-year-old girl eyed the half-empty bottle of beer sitting on the coffee table next to her father and calculated whether she could reach it from her position seated on her father’s lap. Once she realized she could, the adolescent reached over, grabbed the bottle by its neck and...

Crash!

“I kept asking you to leave me the fuck alone, you bastard!” Karen screamed as she leapt from her father’s lap and threw the broken bottle onto the ground before him.

“What the fuck, Karen?” the man screamed in agony as he clutched his bloody, beer-soaked head with both hands. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“You fuck your own daughter and you’re asking what’s wrong with me?” Karen hissed as she stood over the man. “Fuck you, Jerry! I hope you rot in hell! I’m leaving and I’m going to live with a Black man! How do you like that?”

“Fuck you, you ungrateful, nigger-loving cunt!” Karen’s father screamed as he attempted to pull the small shards of broken glass from his bald head. “You’ll regret this shit! Get the fuck out of my house!”

Karen grabbed her purse, stormed out of the house and walked as fast as she could to the nearest payphone. She had a part-time job at a local fast-food restaurant and had met an older Black man, named Jerome, who flirted with her, bought her presents and spent time with her during her lunch breaks. She vented to the man about her situation at home and he previously told Karen she could call him for assistance and a place to stay if she ever needed it. The teenaged girl spontaneously decided that this would be the opportune time to take Jerome up on his offer.

Ring... Ring... Ring...

“Hello? Who is this?” a gravelly voice answered the phone.

“Jerome?” Karen softly replied. “It’s Karen... from McDonald’s.”

“Hey, baby,” Jerome warmly replied. “It’s kind of late. What’s going on?”

“Well...” Karen sniffled. “Remember all that stuff I told you? I finally had to leave home. I was wondering if I could stay with you...”

“Of course, you can!” Jerome confirmed. “Where you at? I’ll come scoop you.”

“I’m around the corner from work. Can I just meet you there?”

“Yeah,” Jerome replied. “Give me like twenty minutes. I’ll take care of you, baby...”

Jerome, however, did not take care of Karen. He treated her well just long enough to mold her into the perfect “bottom-bitch.” Karen was only sixteen years old when she ran away from her abusive family of origin to live with Jerome. She was unaware the twenty-four-year-old Muslim man was an aspiring pimp in search of the perfect young girl to jump-start his stable.

Once Karen moved in with Jerome, he treated her well and nursed her back to health physically and emotionally for several months. That was all part of his plan. Once the grooming phase was complete, he relocated the couple from Karen’s hometown of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania to a public housing complex in Reading, Pennsylvania, where he gradually introduced her to the profession of prostitution by pressuring her to allow his “friends” to have sex with her. The naïve sixteen-year-old didn’t even realize the men weren’t even Jerome’s friends and that they were paying Jerome for the chance to have sex with the “pretty, toned, young snow-bunny.”

By the time Karen realized she had become a prostitute, it was far too late for her to do anything about it. She lived in a project apartment with four other young women who she unwittingly helped recruit over time. Jerome introduced Karen and the other girls to many acts they never thought of engaging in before. In addition to prostitution, they were introduced to smoking PCP, snorting cocaine, lesbianism, boosting merchandise and more. After years of living this lifestyle, Karen grew tired and wondered if

she would have been better off staying at home with her abusive and neglectful parents. She started to feel like her father had been correct because she regretted leaving her parents' home to live with Jerome.

"I thought you loved me, Jerome!" Karen whined.

"I do love you, baby! I love all my bitches!" Jerome snickered.

"Fuck you, Jerome! You treat me like all these other hoes! I've been with you five years and I'm tired of this shit!" the twenty-one-year-old complained. "I'm about to leave you!"

"Go ahead," Jerome callously replied as he lit a cigarette. "That pussy got too many miles on it now anyway!"

"I fucking hate you!" Karen sobbed as she stormed into her bedroom, quickly packed her clothes and discreetly retrieved the three thousand dollars she had been hiding from her pimp.

"I love you too, baby! You'll be back!" Jerome chuckled smugly as he watched his first prostitute angrily carry her lone bag out of the front door in a huff.

But Karen would never return to Jerome. She was through with him and that lifestyle. She had become jaded towards Black men and could finally understand many of her father's negative views towards Black people because of how poorly Jerome treated her over the years.

On the bright side, however, Karen used her wit and determination to escape yet another, abusive, toxic relationship with a man. She returned to Harrisburg, found a job as a waitress, used the money she stashed away from Jerome and rented a room. The resourceful young woman obtained her GED and eventually enrolled in community college.

After obtaining her Associate's Degree, Karen went on to pursue a higher degree in Criminal Justice and Law. While attending the university, she entered a whirlwind romance with a white man named Brad, who would become her husband and the last man Karen would officially be associated with sexually.

Things went well between the couple at first, and Karen thought she finally found true love. The couple spent every moment together when they weren't working or in school – even if they just sat silently in the same room while they were both studying. Karen and Brad married while still in college obtaining their Master's Degrees, working full-time before they truly had the opportunity to get to know each other's daily routines and personalities.

Karen learned too late that although she and Brad shared many characteristics – intellect, ambition and tenacity – Brad also had many things in common with her father. The man was an abusive, sadistic alcoholic. Unfortunately for Karen, she did not learn this information until after she married her husband and it was too late to turn back.

Karen decided to remain married to Brad, although she was miserable, because he was a focused career person like herself. Remaining married to the man who graduated law school and became a prominent Harrisburg-area attorney, was a strategic career move for the young, childless woman.

Karen only needed to endure her miserable marriage for a decade before her husband's drinking and heavy smoking took a premature toll on his health. During her ten-year façade of a marriage, Karen carried on secret affairs with women and became a full-blown feminist. After over a decade of misery, deceit, abuse and lies, Brad died of liver and throat cancer at the tender age of thirty-five, widowing Karen, who pretended to be devastated to secure sympathy from her and her husband's mutual

professional associates. It was a calculated move. Karen had been around long enough to know how to survive and play the game of office politics.

The childless widow received her relatively large life insurance payout, focused on her career and was now unencumbered by her covertly abusive and tyrannical, albeit superficially charming husband. Karen immersed herself in her work until she became a household name in the Pennsylvania state capitol buildings, rubbing shoulders with the “right” people, receiving constant recommendations and promotion after promotion.

Although the woman endured all of this and seemed to prosper, she still had her demons. Her husband had been deceased for approximately a decade, she hadn’t seen Jerome in roughly twenty-five years, and although she lived in Harrisburg, she hadn’t visited her monster of a father in so long that he might as well have been dead to Karen. Despite all of this, at forty-five years old, Karen still had nightmares almost every night about at least one of her past traumatic experiences, causing her to be an extremely difficult person for her subordinates to deal with during her waking hours.

Ring... Ring... Ring... Ring... Ring...

“H-Hello?” Karen O’Shaughnessy stuttered into the phone, waking from a disturbing and traumatic dream about one of her many past traumas.

“O’Shaughnessy. Sorry to wake you,” the Attorney General genuinely apologized after Karen answered her mobile phone designated for work.

“No problem, boss,” Karen sighed. “I was having a bad dream anyway!”

“Okay, then. I guess I did you a favor!” the Attorney General quickly chuckled before regaining his business countenance. “I have an emergency

assignment for you. The mayor of Philly has an issue he needs your help with. I need you to be at his office first thing in the morning.”

“Yessir!”

“Good girl! I knew I could count on you!” A.G. Cohen replied with a smile in his voice. “He’ll brief you when you get there. Be safe. Keep me posted.”

“Will do, sir,” Karen confidently replied.

“Thank you. Talk to you soon.”

Karen O’Shaughnessy was a driven career-woman in her mid-forties. While Attorney General Cohen and Mayor DiCicco were holding a conversation deciding the future of Karen’s career, the single, middle-aged woman was alone in bed, experiencing night-terrors; a nearly daily occurrence for the deeply traumatized functioning-alcoholic.

Karen’s subconscious had a plethora of subjects to cover during her nightmares. Her nearly five decades on the planet had been filled with trauma and pain. She was relieved to be woken up from her bad dream because it was only a matter of time before she would have woken up screaming and soaked in sweat anyway.

The woman rose from her bed, turned on the lights in her bedroom and retrieved the medium-sized suitcase from her closet. Karen packed the luggage full of designer clothes, took a shower, dressed and rolled her suitcase to her vehicle before loading it into the trunk. She entered her car, entered the address of her preferred Philadelphia hotel into her phone’s GPS, and embarked on her trip to the “City of Brotherly Love.”

Chapter 4

Rocky and Antoine stared at the display on the center console of the dashboard of Rocky's 7-Series BMW as a random "717" number appeared on his Bluetooth wireless display.

"You gonna answer it, partner?" Antoine asked as Rocky's ringing phone echoed through the premium speakers of the luxury sedan.

"Who do you think it could be?" Rocky asked.

"Only one way to find out..."

"This is Shabazz," Rocky said after reaching for the console and pressing the green "accept" button. "Who's calling?"

"Hi, Detective Shabazz... this is Karen O'Shaughnessy," the woman began, trying her best to sound simultaneously friendly and professional. "Is Detective Godfrey with you?"

"Yeah, you're on speaker," Rocky replied.

"Godfrey here," Antoine chimed in.

"I'm with the Attorney General's office in Harrisburg," Karen informed the men as they made their way to Yolanda's home. "My boss, A.G. Cohen, personally assigned me to your case. I have to tell you guys – it's not looking too good for you."

“Oh, for real?” Antoine scoffed. “Well, based on what we learned; it’s not looking too good for the Chief of Police or the mayor either! So, maybe your boss needs to sit down and listen to what we have to say!”

“I have no idea what you’re referring to,” Karen lied without skipping a beat as she navigated the Pennsylvania Turnpike. “What I do know is two decorated detectives were killed earlier tonight and the two of you were at the scene and took important files from the dead detectives’ vehicle. How do you think that makes you look?”

“Look, lady, we don’t care how the shit looks,” Rocky bluffed. “We know what happened and we have proof that will bring the corrupt political structure of this whole city to its knees. It just depends whose side you want to be on when shit hits the fan!”

“Listen, detective... this is Shabazz I’m speaking with, right?” Karen replied.

“Yeah.”

“Well, Detective Shabazz... that’s the thing – shit has already hit the fan,” Karen retorted. “Two detectives were murdered and you have files in your possession which need to be returned to the mayor’s office immediately.”

“That’s not gonna happen,” Rocky abruptly replied.

Rocky’s response was followed by a brief period of silence. Only the background road noise of both Karen and Rocky’s vehicles could be heard for the thirty seconds that followed Rocky’s statement. Antoine glanced at his partner but Rocky kept his eyes fixated on the road ahead. Karen sighed before continuing.

“Do you speak for your partner as well?” Karen asked.

“We’re a team, but Ant’s a grown man,” Rocky huffed. “He can hear everything we’re saying. I already told you you’re on speaker phone.”

“I stand with my partner,” Antoine hesitated.

“Aw... isn’t that cute?” Karen sarcastically replied, her annoyance apparent in her voice.

“Whatever, chick!” Rocky scoffed, rolling his eyes as he drove.

“Look... I’m trying to work with you here, guys,” Karen tensely replied, trying her best to maintain her composure as she unconsciously tightened her grip on her steering wheel. “Let’s make a deal. I’m on my way to Philly. You can meet me at a place you’re comfortable with before noon. Bring the files and I’ll make sure we restore your jobs and clear your names. I know McGowan and Callahan were dirty. Those were righteous kills. I can make sure the brass and the media see it that way.”

“We have a lot going on... what if we’re not able to meet up with you by the morning?” Antoine asked.

Rocky shot his partner a perturbed expression for even asking the question. He couldn’t understand how Antoine could consider handing the files over to a woman from the state capitol who they never even met and who displayed such extreme levels of micro-aggression during their first conversation. Antoine shrugged and redirected his attention to the console, listening for Karen’s response.

“Well, I don’t possibly know what could be more important than this!” Karen sighed attempting to hide her growing frustration. “It’s very simple.

You asked me what side of this I want to be on when the ‘shit hits the fan.’

Now, I have to ask you the same question.”

-Click-

“What’d you do that for, partner?” Antoine roared after Rocky abruptly disconnected the call.

“I don’t trust that bitch!” Rocky exclaimed. “You’re sitting up here trying to negotiate and shit! She’s literally a ‘Karen,’ dog! You know how *Karens* treat Black men!”

“I’m just saying, Rock!” Antoine sighed. “What other choice do we have but to trust her? She’s from Harrisburg. She’s with the Attorney General’s office for god’s sake! Do you really think the corruption goes that high? I didn’t see Cohen’s name in the documents.”

“We didn’t study them in detail yet,” Rocky smugly retorted. “Better safe than sorry. Let’s talk about it later... after we have more time to look at the documents in detail. We’ll be at Yolanda’s crib in a minute anyway. We need to focus. But on some real shit, I really don’t trust that Karen bitch, bro!”

Karen stared at the console of her dashboard for so long that she swerved into the adjoining lane and was jolted from her trance by the blaring of a horn and the flashing of another vehicle’s high-beams.

“Those Black bastards!” Karen screamed as she pounded her fist against her steering wheel. “They want to play hardball?”

The infuriated, emotionally-charged woman looked for an opening in the unusually heavy late-night traffic and abruptly pulled to the shoulder of the road. She retrieved her phone from the seat next to her and scrolled through her contacts until she found the numbers she was searching for. A devious grin filled her slim face and her thin lips curled at the ends as she contemplated exacting revenge on the defiant Black men who refused to comply with her demands.

She would make Rocky and Antoine pay for their transgressions, along with the sins of the older Black man she had lived with when she left home at sixteen. Karen harbored deep resentment towards all men, but she hated Black men in particular. Ironically, she had an affinity for them ever since she lost her virginity to her pimp, Jerome, who manipulated her into believing he truly loved her and would save her from her abusive situation at home. Her former affection for Black men, based on her father's hatred for "everything Black," and the subsequent pain she suffered at Jerome's hands is what drove Karen's animosity towards Melanated males.

To be quite frank, the single, childless career woman was a miserable person in general and did not really enjoy other people's company anymore. That included men, women and children. First her father abused her, then Jerome abused her, then her white husband neglected and abused her. Even her lesbian lovers misled her and left her emotionally starved. Karen was an emotionally traumatized woman indeed. She devoted herself to her career and used every available opportunity to use the power she gained through her position to make others feel a measure of the pain she lived with on a daily basis. Unfortunately for Rocky and Antoine, they were Karen's next targets.

The devious, focused woman sat on the side of the highway in the dark of night with her vehicle's hazard lights blinking. Karen dialed several

phone numbers and held several short conversations providing instructions to the editors of a half-dozen newspapers, radio stations and television news broadcasters.

“We gotta pull around back,” Antoine observed aloud when he and Rocky arrived on Yolanda’s block and noticed a marked police vehicle parked outside.

“Yeah, I would call her, but her line is probably bugged,” Rocky noted as he drove around the block to Yolanda’s alleyway.

He pulled up behind Yolanda’s home, turned off his headlights and powered down his vehicle before he and Antoine exited the BMW.

Rocky tapped lightly on Yolanda’s back door after the two detectives carefully crept up the stone walkway leading up to the rear entrance. The men waited patiently for a few minutes, noting that there were several lights already turned on inside the house. After waiting for what seemed to be an eternity, the back door creaked and slowly cracked open revealing an attractive, short, voluptuous, brown-skinned woman clutching a butcher knife in her right hand. Her frumpy pajamas and hair bonnet failed to conceal her beauty.

“Oh, hey!” Yolanda smiled reluctantly; a look of relief plastered across her face. “I’m so happy to see y’all! It’s been such a crazy night! *Please come in!*”

Rocky and Antoine slipped into Yolanda’s basement as she held the screen door open for the men. They followed Yolanda through her basement and trailed closely behind her as she led the way up the stairs. Rocky found himself admiring her plump butt cheeks switching nicely in her pajama pants as she ascended the basement stairs. He caught himself, shook his head and

laughed internally as he and Antoine continued up the stairs, through Yolanda's kitchen and into the living room.

"Have a seat. Make yourselves comfortable," Yolanda instructed. "Do y'all want anything to drink?"

"Yeah, thanks." Rocky nodded. "Can I have some water please?"

"You got anything stronger... like liquor or something?" Antoine asked, his face contorted with a childish smile. Rocky shot his partner a perturbed look. Antoine shrugged and replied, "you know I'm long overdue for a drink, Rock! It's been a long day!"

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Rocky shrugged as he turned to face Yolanda. "Do you have any liquor?"

"I think I have some Henny..." Yolanda said as she raised a finger in the air, turned on her heels and walked into her kitchen. She returned a short time later with a bottle. The attractive, young woman shook the glass bottle as she held it by its handle, revealing that a third of the brown liquor remained inside. She held two glasses in her other hand as she approached the detectives seated on the sofa, facing the television, placed the glasses on the end table and poured the men a shot each.

"That'll work! Good looking!" Antoine exclaimed. "That's right on time!"

"Yeah, thanks, Yolanda," Rocky added.

"No problem!" Yolanda sighed as she plopped down in her father's recliner opposite the sofa. "I should probably have a drink with y'all! It's been a crazy fucking night! There was a bunch of shooting outside earlier. Two detectives got shot in front of my house a couple hours ago!"

“Yeah... we heard about it,” Rocky raised an eyebrow as he glanced over and made eye contact with Antoine. “We wanted to come over and make sure you were okay.”

“Thanks so much!” Yolanda continued. “It sounded crazy out there. There was some yelling, then a few shots. I went into my boys’ room to make sure they were okay. The detectives just left a little while ago, but they assigned a cop to guard my house for some reason. They were being real secretive, though...”

“For real?” Antoine asked. “What do you mean?”

“The detectives wouldn’t tell me anything about who got shot or what it was about,” Yolanda explained. “Then when I asked about y’all, they looked at each other and started acting really strange. It was weird.”

“Well, Yolanda... it’s complicated,” Rocky began. He looked over at Antoine, who nodded at him, giving his consent to continue. “There’s a lot of crazy shit going on in this city...”

“Breaking News: Rogue cops snap and kill two of their own in the Logan section of the city. Stay tuned for more details in five minutes.”

A heavy tension consumed the room as pictures of Antoine and Rocky as suspects and Dick and Brian as victims flashed across Yolanda’s large television screen along with video footage of her city block. Although the television program continued to play in the background, all three adults were stunned speechless.

“What the fuck?” Yolanda’s shaky voice finally broke the silence. “That was y’all on the TV! That was my house! That was Dick! That was the dude who came to my job! Y’all killed them? What *the fuck* is going on?”

“What the fuck, partner?” Antoine shrieked as he looked up at Rocky, despair plastered across his plump, brown face.

“It was that Karen bitch!” Rocky growled. “I knew we couldn’t trust her!”

“Would y’all tell me what the fuck is going on?” Yolanda screamed as she abruptly shot up from her seat. “Y’all killed those cops?”

“Well... yeah,” Rocky reluctantly confessed. “But...”

“Y’all need to leave,” Yolanda concisely instructed as she pointed towards the door.

“But...”

“Leave now or I’m gonna go call that cop they have posted up outside!” Yolanda snapped.

“We *are* the cops!” Antoine huffed.

“Yeah, and you killed two other cops!”

“Yeah... because they were coming to kill *you!*” Rocky interjected.

“What?” Yolanda asked in shock as she slowly sat back down on the sofa and rested her palms on her knees. “But why?”

“Because you witnessed a murder they committed,” Antoine explained as he looked Yolanda in her eyes. “Dick, Brian and their squad killed Kareem and you were the only person who knew the van had municipal plates – at first.”

“Oh, shit!” Yolanda gasped.

“Right,” Rocky added. “We were assigned to the case and were making headway, so Dick and these broads from Internal Affairs got us suspended. We found out Dick and Brian were coming to kill you so you wouldn’t lead the trail back to them, so we came to stop them, and we had to kill them and flee the scene.”

“Oh, my god! Thank you both!” Yolanda began to tear up. “But why are they presenting it on the news as if you’re bad cops? Don’t your superiors know better?”

“Evidently, they’re corrupt too,” Antoine sighed as he shook his head in dismay. “Shit, Rocky! What the hell are we gonna do?”

“We need to go on the run. At least for now,” Rocky stated matter-of-factly. “You too, Yolanda. It’s not safe for you here.”

“Me? Why me?” Yolanda asked, puzzled. “I’m just a civilian. I didn’t do anything! I didn’t kill anybody! I don’t even own a gun!”

“We can’t tell you everything right now, but there’s a woman from Harrisburg who works for the Attorney General’s office. She reached out to us on our way here,” Rocky explained. “We have files that prove the Chief of Police and the mayor are taking payoffs. They’re corrupt as fuck! She demanded the files and basically gave us an ultimatum. I know she’s the same bitch who has us on the news looking crazy!”

“Goddamn!” Yolanda whimpered. “That’s some bullshit!”

“Tell me about it!” Antoine sighed.

“Yeah, but complaining about it ain’t gonna fix shit,” Rocky noted. “We need to get the fuck out of here. Yolanda, you need to find somewhere else for your father and kids to stay for a while and come with me and Ant.”

“What? Nah...” Yolanda protested. “I can’t leave my father and my boys. Besides, my dad is sick. He’s an amputee with a missing leg. It just wouldn’t work, Rocky.”

“Damn, that’s drawing!” Rocky groaned. “We need to figure something out, like ASAP.”

“Can’t they stay here?” Antoine suggested. “I mean, they want Yolanda, not her father and her kids.”

“Yeah, but these motherfuckers are ruthless,” Rocky quietly protested. “Who knows what they’ll do to try to get to Yolanda when they realize she went on the run with us?”

“I really don’t want to leave my family, y’all...” Yolanda interjected with tears in her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Yolanda,” Rocky solemnly replied as he approached the distressed young woman, knelt before her and stared in her eyes. “But you don’t really have a choice. If you stay here, you’ll be putting your whole family in danger. You really need to pack some of your shit, go tell your father the deal and dip with us... like, now!”

“This is some bullshit!” the frustrated young woman exclaimed. “Fine! I’ll go... but only because I trust y’all. Y’all haven’t steered me wrong since I met you two and I always got a funny vibe from that Dick guy!”

Yolanda shook her head and rolled her eyes as she wiped the tears which had forced their way out of her brown pupils due to the stress she was under.

“Yeah, Dick was always a piece of shit!” Rocky added as he rose from his position crouched before Yolanda and extended his hand to help her up

from the recliner. “Go handle your business as quickly as possible. Me and Ant are gonna figure some shit out while we wait for you.”

“Okay,” Yolanda complied as she took hold of Rocky’s hand and rose from the recliner. The man and woman locked eyes as they momentarily held hands and an organic energy exchanged between the two of them. The brief exchange sent chills up the young woman’s spine, causing her to quickly release her grip on the young detective’s hand. Yolanda quickly turned and walked away, climbing the steps leading to the second floor of her home.

“Damn, partner... what the hell was that about?” Antoine whispered as he looked up at Rocky, who had made his way back to the sofa and reclaimed his seat next to Antoine.

“What?” Rocky asked nonchalantly as he retrieved a burner phone from his pocket and started to dial. “I’m just trying to help her... just like you are!”

“Nah, nigga!” Antoine quietly chuckled. “Not ‘just like’ me! I know you, my guy! I saw how y’all looked at each other! This ain’t the time to be trying to catch another body, Rock.”

“Whatever, man! It ain’t even like that,” Rocky protested as he held a finger up in the air when the man he had been calling answered the line. “Yo, bro! I need a favor. Yeah, I know... crazy right? They set niggas up! Shit is goofy! Yeah, so we need a place to stay. Me, my partner and this jawn we have with us. Can you help?”

Rocky waited silently for a moment as he listened for his brother’s reply.

“Damn, nigga!” Rocky chuckled. “You sound just like my partner. I ain’t even on that type of time right now, though. She’s the witness jawn. But good looking though. I also need two soldiers to sit on her crib and help watch her kids and her disabled father. Can you hook it up?”

Rocky paused and waited for his brother’s response once more.

“My nigga! That’s why you’re my favorite brother!” Rocky chuckled. “Alright. I’ll text you the address and wait for you to get here. Oh, and make sure you park around back. The law is posted in front of her crib. Peace.”

“Everything’s a go?” Antoine asked after Rocky disconnected the call.

“You already know,” Rocky confirmed. “He’s gonna have two niggas he trusts follow him over here so they can help Yolanda’s father and her kids and keep them safe. And he said he’s going to hook us up with fake IDs when we get to the spot. E’s got us, yo...”

Chapter 5

“**W**hat’s up, E?” Rocky said after answering his cellular phone.

“Yo, bro. We’re out back.”

“Here we come,” Rocky replied as he disconnected the call before turning to address Antoine and Yolanda. “Let’s go.”

“Okay. Let me go kiss my boys goodnight, real quick,” Yolanda answered as she scurried up the steps.

Rocky and Antoine exchanged impatient glances as they waited for Yolanda to return. Once the young woman descended the stairs, she knelt to pick up her bag. Rocky, however, beat her to it, quickly scooped up her luggage, placed his right foot forward and turned to look at his companions.

“Y’all ready?”

“Yeah, I’m ready, partner,” Antoine replied.

“Yeah, but I can carry my own bag,” Yolanda hesitated.

“I got it. Let’s go. My people are waiting.”

Rocky and Antoine walked behind as Yolanda led the way through the kitchen, down the basement steps and through the back door. As the trio exited Yolanda’s rowhome, Rocky caught sight of his brother, E, and his two associates whose vehicles were sitting idle in the alleyway.

“Thanks again for doing this, bro,” Rocky greeted E with a handshake as he approached the man. “I appreciate you.”

“You already know,” E whispered, “I can’t believe my detective brother is on the wrong side of the law again after all these years...”

“Who you telling?” Rocky shook his head, “this shit is in the way.”

“Well, anyway... we’ll talk when we get back to the spot. Where do you want Lil and Reem to post up?”

“Um,” Rocky scratched his chin as he turned to face Yolanda. “Yolanda can probably tell you better since this is her crib.”

“I’ll let y’all in,” the woman replied. “You can follow me.”

“Okay, cool. We’ll wait out here,” Rocky informed her.

E, Rocky and Antoine waited in the darkness behind Yolanda’s rowhome as she led E’s crew members, Lil and Reem, into her house and gave them a quick tour. The men took note of the woman’s physique and nodded to each other approvingly as they followed her around the residence. Yolanda woke her father up and introduced Lil and Reem to the confused man as she quickly explained the situation.

“I’ll be in touch with you every day, Daddy,” Yolanda said as she kissed her father on his forehead and tucked him back into bed. “I love you.”

“I love you too, sweetie. But I’m not sure I feel comfortable with this,” Mr. Evans yawned as he glanced at Lil and Reem who were standing in the bedroom doorway, the outlines of their handguns visible through their lightweight t-shirts.

“Sorry, Daddy, but I don’t have time to debate about it right now. I have to go. I’ll call you as soon as possible.”

Once she finished showing the men around her home, Yolanda said good night to Reem and Lil, descended the basement steps and exited through the back door to join E, Antoine and Rocky.

“Shorty is bad as shit,” Lil whispered, his dark brown eyes protruding from between his coffee-colored eyelids.

“You ain’t lying, cuz,” Reem chuckled. “You think Rocky’s hitting that?”

“*Shit!* If he isn’t, I will!”

“You’re crazy dog! But I feel you, though. I’m about to go post up in the basement. You wanna stay up here and guard the front door?”

“That’ll work,” Lil shrugged as he retrieved his gun from his waist, strutted over to the front door, slid a chair under the doorknob and sat down.

“Alright, bet. Hit me up if anything,” Reem instructed as he made his way to the basement stairs. “Just make sure you watch out for those cops outside. Let me know if they try to come in.”

“I got you.”

“Y’all ready?” E asked his brother, Rocky, as Yolanda exited her back door and joined the men who were standing near their vehicles.

“Yeah, we out,” Rocky replied. “Where are we going anyway?”

“I got a spot in Southwest I’mma have y’all stay in for now,” E informed the group. “It’s in the cut, so y’all will be good.”

E walked to his jeep, entered it and pulled away slowly after observing Rocky, Antoine and Yolanda enter Rocky’s BMW and close the doors.

Rocky slowly followed his brother's vehicle down the alley. Once they reached the end of the alleyway, E turned left, away from where the police were parked in front of Yolanda's home, and led the way to the safehouse in Southwest Philadelphia.

"Um," Yolanda spoke up after a few minutes of riding in silence. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"We don't have any other choice, Yolanda," Rocky replied.

"I guess you're right. I'm just worried about my boys and my dad."

"They'll be cool. My brother is a G and Lil and Reem are some riders," Rocky replied as he made eye contact with Yolanda through his rear-view mirror. "They're loyal too. Your family is safe."

Ring... Ring... Ring...

"A.G. Cohen. How can I be of service?"

"Sir," Karen spoke into her wireless headphones, getting straight to the point, "Godfrey and Shabazz are tough eggs to crack. Permission to assemble a squad to handle things as I see fit?"

"I trust you which is why I assigned you to the task. Permission granted."

-Click-

Four men stood in Karen's hotel room which she had converted into a makeshift office with stacks of files littering the desk, table and chairs. She sat on her bed and chain-smoked cigarettes as she looked up and addressed the men.

"Those bastards don't want to cooperate," Karen fumed, "so we'll force their hand."

"So, what's the plan Kare-Bear?" Roy chuckled, revealing a goofy grin.

"Don't call me that! I didn't like when you called me that in kindergarten and I hate it even more now," Karen locked eyes with her childhood friend as smoke slowly exited her nostrils. "Besides, I'm your boss. Cut the shit and let's get to work!"

"Jesus, Karen! Chill out," Roy grimaced. "You know I love you like a sister. I'll do anything for you. Just tell me what you want."

"Yeah, Karen," Reggie interjected. "You know we got your back, sis."

"Thanks, Reggie," Karen smiled curtly and took another drag of her cigarette. "Let's focus, though, guys. This is serious. We need to behave like the professionals we are. What I need you to do is extremely dangerous."

"I'm with it!" Reggie smiled as he rubbed his palms together in anticipation.

Roy, a navy veteran, grew more attached to Karen after his divorce several years prior when she started using him extensively in the field for covert missions. Roy recommended Karen recruit their other childhood friend and navy veteran-turned Harrisburg detective when she called him early that morning and asked him to report to her hotel room in Center City Philadelphia. After receiving approval from Karen, Roy called and informed

Reggie they had been assigned to a covert operation in Philadelphia and offered to pick the man up so they could make the trip together.

Reggie was a light brown-skinned, mixed-race Black man who identified more with his European heritage because he was raised by his single, white mother and her family. He did not really identify as Black although his melanin-rich skin betrayed his Caucasian view of himself.

He stood six-feet-four-inches tall and was solidly built, much like his longtime friend, Roy. The two of them grew close when they played varsity football together in high school and even closer when they served in the U.S. Navy several years later, enduring live combat in the ongoing war in the Middle East.

“What’s the mission, ma’am?” Jonathan asked.

The thirty-three-year-old South Carolina native moved his wife and four daughters to the city less than a year prior. He retired from the army after ten years of service and became a police officer in Spartanburg, South Carolina. He quickly exceeded his commanding officers’ expectations, making hundreds of arrests in his first year on the force.

Fast-forward several years, and Jonathan’s wife’s job transferred her to Philadelphia, so Jonathan, who had been recently promoted to detective, joined the police force in the city. The right-wing conservative developed a friendship with Dick several months before his demise.

Dick and Roy had both proven relatively successful in their careers, so upon meeting, the men quickly formed a bond over their shared racist, misogynistic and violent tendencies. They did not work together closely but Roy was infuriated to hear of Dick’s murder and to learn that two Black

detectives were the main suspects. The man was eager to aid in bringing Dick and Brian's killers to justice by any means necessary.

"I need you all to go visit Yolanda Evans and see if she's willing to help us catch these rogue detectives, Rakim Shabazz and Antoine Godfrey," Karen informed the group of men as she neatly placed pictures of Antoine, Rocky and Yolanda side-by-side on her bed before them.

"She's cute!" John, the fourth and final member of Karen's special unit said as he leaned over and retrieved the picture from Karen's bed. "She kind of looks like Nicki Minaj. I'd like to bend that ass over!"

"Nicki Minaj? Whatever, John! Remember what I said about professionalism?" Karen snapped as she snatched the picture out of John's hand and placed it back down alongside the photographs of Rocky and Antoine.

"I'm a professional, alright!" John snickered as he glanced longingly at the picture of Yolanda, his mouth salivating at the thought of encountering the attractive young Black woman.

"Maybe you should stop shooting steroids in your ass so you can focus, John! You have too much testosterone running through your veins," Karen stated pointedly as she rolled her eyes at her subordinate. "Anyway, she's the witness to the homicide that started this whole mess, so we need to see where her head is at."

"And what if she's loyal to the dirty detectives?" Roy asked.

"Miss Evans has two young boys and a sick father who lives with her," Karen replied. "I'm sure she doesn't want anything bad to happen to them.

But if she doesn't see things our way, you'll have to do what is necessary to get her to comply. We need to make sure she keeps quiet, whatever it takes."

Karen paused and scanned the men's faces to assess whether they understood the gravity of her last statement. The deafening silence in the room, coupled with the solemn expressions on the men's faces told her all she needed to know. Karen scribbled onto a piece of notebook paper, ripped it from the pad, folded it and handed it to Roy.

"Here is her address. You all are dismissed."

The four men nodded to Karen and turned to exit her hotel room. Roy hesitated as he stepped onto the carpet in the hallway outside the room, then turned around and peaked his head back inside.

"Hey, Karen. Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"What's up, Roy?"

"You know I'm with you," Roy sighed, "but what the hell is going on?"

"You've already been briefed. That's all you need to know."

"But Karen, we've known each other--"

"It's above your pay grade," Karen callously interrupted. "Now, can I count on you to do what I brought you here for, or do I need to replace you?"

"I told you I'm with you," Roy huffed, "it's just that--"

"Thank you, Roy," Karen interrupted again. "I appreciate your loyalty. Let me know how it goes. You're dismissed."

Roy shook his head in frustration as he turned and briskly left Karen's room, closing the door behind him. He jogged until he caught up with the

rest of his crew. The men walked outside and stood in the parking lot for an hour smoking cigarettes and discussing the details of their mission before they entered their respective vehicles and drove away.

Later that evening, Roy, Reggie, John and Jonathan met in a small strip mall parking lot at the corner of Broad Street and Wingohocking Street to confer once more before heading over to Yolanda's house. John and Jonathan exited their vehicles and joined Roy and Reggie inside Roy's dark-tinted Dodge Charger. The men shook hands and Roy drove away from the parking lot, turning left onto Broad Street to transport himself and his crew to Yolanda's house.

Back in Logan, Lil and Reem were already growing tired of sitting in separate parts of the house alone instead of being out in the streets earning money. They were both streets guys who enjoyed being outside in search of excitement. The only time the men usually stayed inside was when they were preparing drugs; cooking cocaine into crack and packaging the product.

Both men had children with multiple women but spent most of their time in the streets earning money to provide for their seeds instead of spending quality time with them.

“Yo, Lil,” Reem greeted his associate as he ascended the basement steps, “what you been doing up here, cuz?”

“Shit! Just scrolling the Gram. What you been up to down there?”

“Same shit,” Reem said as he walked up the stairway leading to the second level of the house. “Any movement from the law out front?”

“Nah. Shit is quiet and boring as fuck!” Lil chuckled.

“Real rap! I guess that’s a good thing, though,” Reem shrugged disingenuously. “I’m gonna go use the bathroom and check on everybody while I’m upstairs.”

“Bet.”

“Who’s there?” Mr. Evans called out, stirring in his bed when Reem exited the bathroom and peeked his head into the boys’ room to check on them.

“It’s just Reem, Mr. Evans.” The young man trudged down the hallway and slid his face through the half-opened door. “You good, sir?”

“You woke me up,” the older man grunted as he turned over and fell fast asleep.

Reem chuckled as he turned and walked back down the steps into the living room.

“Yo, it’s kind of crazy,” Reem began as he sat on the sofa and placed his gun on his lap.

“What’s that, bro?”

“I was just checking on shorty’s kids. They looked so peaceful sleeping,” Reem shook his head as his lips slowly curled, forming into a half-smile. “It’s crazy because I don’t remember the last time I’ve been in the crib when any of my kids went to bed. Shit is kinda drawing. They’re getting older and I’ve been running the streets so crazy. I’m missing getting the chance to watch them grow up.”

“I feel you on that,” Lil sighed. “I’m on the same type of time. Maybe niggas should fall back and start spending more time with our kids.”

“Yeah, I think I’m gonna do that. You never know what might happen...”

“Oh, shit!” Lil exclaimed as he abruptly rose from his seat, turned and peeked through the blinds after seeing headlights shining outside in the darkness. “Four motherfuckers just hopped out a Charger, dressed in all black, and are talking to the law like they know them.”

“Aw, shit,” Reem sighed as he rose from the sofa, his gun in hand, and joined Lil at the front window. “They’re walking up the walkway now. Shit!”

“Nah, look. Two of the white boys split off. They’re probably going around the back. Hurry up and go back downstairs.”

“Say less,” Reem complied as he jogged down the steps and into Yolanda’s basement. He stood beside the door, cocked the hammer of his .357 Magnum and held the gun in the air as he waited. Less than a minute later, Lil was alarmed to hear an extremely loud pounding on the front door of Yolanda’s home.

Lil’s heart pounded in his chest as his mind raced to calculate the best way to handle the situation. He hadn’t been given much information about their duties other than being told that Rocky, Antoine and Yolanda were in trouble and that E needed them to guard the house and Yolanda’s family from would-be intruders until Rocky figured out a resolution. He was unsure how to approach the sudden arrival of these strange men and contemplated how to proceed.

An even louder, more rapid banging followed on the door as the men outside impatiently waited for a response from the inside.

“Shit,” Lil sighed as he tucked his forty-caliber pistol into his pants and cautiously approached the front door. “Who is it?”

“Detectives,” Roy called out from behind the closed door. “We’re here to talk to Yolanda Evans.”

“She went to bed already.” Lil lied.

“Well, would you wake her up? This is urgent. It’s about her safety,” Reggie urged.

“She has to wake up early tomorrow for work, so now is not a good time,” Lil expanded his story. “Why don’t y’all come back tomorrow around six?”

“This can’t wait, sir,” Roy insisted. “Come on. Open up. We need to talk to Miss Evans.”

Lil preferred to avoid dealing with the police at all costs. In fact, he resented the fact that out of all the members of E’s crew, he was picked for this assignment since he made his disdain for the police known every chance he got.

“Isn’t that what the cops are for?” Lil protested when E explained why he and Reem needed to accompany him to Logan and prepare themselves for war.

Lil was a loyal soldier, however, and the fact that his closest associate from the crew accompanied him and that they might have the opportunity to “put in work” served as his consolation. Besides, Lil knew he didn’t really have a choice in the matter. He had been assigned his task and his duty was to fulfill his assignment to the best of his ability. But it had been less than twelve hours since Lil and Reem started guarding the residence, and there

were already two detectives at Yolanda's front door demanding entry.

Things were not going the way Lil had hoped.

"Give me a minute," Lil huffed as he scrambled around the living room, checking for any signs of Rocky and Antoine's visit to the house.

Once he realized everything was all clear, he sent a concise text to Reem which read, "they're coming in," opened the front door and blocked the entrance with his stocky six-foot tall frame.

"Y'all not coming in," Lil defiantly addressed the detectives as he stood in the doorway.

"And who are you?" Reggie asked, his eyebrows furrowed in frustration.

"I'm Yolanda's dude and she's asleep."

"Look," Roy huffed. "We understand it's late and it's not a good time. This is urgent, though. We need to speak with Yolanda."

"I'm not letting y'all in. You're not disturbing my girl," Lil defiantly replied as his jaws clenched causing the tendons in his temples to flex.

Meanwhile, downstairs in the basement Reem strained to listen through the vents and hear the conversation taking place above him while simultaneously watching for suspicious activity out back. He alternated between holding his ear close to the ceiling vent and running to the back window to watch for the other two detectives.

"Move out the way or I'ma move you," Reggie commanded, his left fist clenched, his right hand on his holstered nine-millimeter handgun.

“What, nigga? You gonna shoot me? They ain’t stop making guns when they made your department-issued bullshit!” Lil replied, his face contorted in disgust.

Upon hearing Lil’s response, Roy glanced at the man’s waistline and noticed the outline of his large, forty-caliber pistol protruding under his t-shirt.

“Gun!” Roy exclaimed as he reached for his side, unholstered his gun and gripped the handle, raising it in the air. Reggie quickly pulled his own gun from his holster and aimed it at Lil’s face. Lil reacted quickly, reaching for his own gun. Unfortunately for Lil, his reaction was several milliseconds too late.

Pop! Pop! Pop!
Pop!

Roy and Reggie pumped fourteen shots in Lil’s face and chest as he attempted to pull his gun from his waistline. Blood flowed thickly from Lil’s bullet-ridden body, soaking his shirt. Lil was dead before his body hit the floor.

“Come on!” Roy panted as he kicked Lil’s gun aside and hopped over the man’s dead body, entering Yolanda’s living room. Reggie followed closely behind his partner, his gun aimed ahead of him as the men cleared the living room and headed upstairs.

“Oh, shit! What the fuck?” Reem exclaimed in the basement as he turned and ran for the basement steps, his gun gripped between both of his palms as he ran.

Boom! Boom! Crack!

John and Jonathan crashed through the basement door, their rifles drawn and aimed forward. As they entered, they spotted Reem running towards the staircase.

“Freeze, asshole!” Jonathan commanded as his flashlight shone on Reem, lighting the light-skinned Black man’s figure up in the darkness. Reem spun around and aimed his .357 at the geared-up detectives.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

Jonathan fired three shots at Reem’s frame, hitting the man in his chest and shoulder with .22 caliber bullets, dropping Reem in his tracks. John shuffled over to Reem’s body, retrieved his gun from the floor, then followed behind Jonathan as he rapidly ascended the basement steps, taking them two at a time.

“Miss Evans! Yolanda!” Roy called out as he reached the top of the second-floor steps and crept towards her room, gun in hand. As he did so, he and Reggie walked past Mr. Evan’s half-opened bedroom door. All the commotion jolted the elderly man from his sleep. He sprang to an upright position and watched quietly as shadowy figures lurked through the hallway.

“Who’s there?” Mr. Evans called out nervously, his voice shaking as he tried to remain calm.

John and Jonathan backtracked, walking backwards to the direction of the voice they heard call out. After reaching the doorway, Jonathan led the way, pushing the door open with the barrel of his rifle.

“Who the hell are you?” Mr. Evans spoke gruffly, his right hand gripping the handle of a wooden baseball bat he kept stationed next to his bed.

“We’re detectives,” Roy replied. “We need to speak with Yolanda. It’s urgent.”

“Oh. Do y’all work with the other detectives? She just left with them. I’m pretty sure their names are Rocky and Antoine.”

“She left with them? Voluntarily?” Roy gasped in shock.

“Yeah, do y’all work together?”

“No,” Roy replied as he squeezed the trigger of his rifle.

Pop!

Roy callously sent a single shot careening across the bedroom into Mr. Evan’s head. It exploded out of the back of his skull smearing blood, flesh and brain matter across the man’s headboard.

“What the fuck did we walk into?” John gasped as he and Jonathan reached the middle of the second-floor steps.

“Karen said it would be dangerous,” Reggie replied, shrugging his shoulders.

“The witness left with the dirty cops,” Roy informed John and Jonathan. “Get the kids.”

“The kids?” Reggie belted. “Like, we’re gonna kidnap them?”

“You heard me,” Roy flippantly replied. “Karen sent us to see where the witness’ loyalty lied. She left her family alone and went with Rocky and Antoine. Grab the kids so we don’t leave here empty-handed. We’ll use them as a bargaining chip.”

Chapter 6

“**D**id you talk to your father yet?” Rocky asked Yolanda the next morning when the group convened in the safe house living room.

“I tried to call him when I woke up, but he didn’t answer,” Yolanda shrugged, a look of worry forming across her face. “He’s usually up early.”

“He probably just slept late,” Rocky replied. “Last night was probably emotionally draining for him.”

“I know it was for me,” Yolanda sighed as she plopped down onto the soft, fabric sofa.

“It’s been rough on all of us,” Antoine added.

“Don’t worry, Yolanda,” Rocky said as he sat down next to her and gently rubbed her shoulder. “Me and Ant are going to figure this out. Everything will be back to normal soon.”

Ring... Ring... Ring... Ring...

Rocky glanced at his cell phone and noticed the same unsaved “717” number on his Caller ID.

“It’s that Karen bitch again,” Rocky rolled his eyes as he reached for his phone.

“Hurry up and answer it before it goes to voicemail,” Antoine insisted.

“Yo, Karen,” Rocky abruptly answered.

“Are you near a television?” Karen asked without greeting Rocky.

“Yeah.”

“Turn on the news,” the alpha-female instructed. “Any local channel will do.”

“Pass me the remote, partner.”

Antoine quickly complied, picking up the remote control and handing it to Rocky. Rocky quickly powered on the television and flipped through the channels until he reached a local news network.

“...More violence in Logan last night as disgraced detectives Rakim Shabazz and Antoine Godfrey continue their psychotic rampage. The rogue detectives broke into the home of the sole witness to a homicide they were formerly assigned to investigate, killing the woman’s father and abducting her two young children. A gunfight ensued with two of the young woman’s associates. The former detectives killed one of the men and severely wounded the other. The whereabouts of the detectives, along with the witness, Yolanda Evans, is currently unknown. The detectives are considered armed and dangerous. Do not try to engage the suspects if you spot them. Law enforcement urges you to keep a safe distance and call 9-1-1 if you see them. A twenty-five-thousand-dollar reward is being offered for information leading to their arrest.”

“That’s bullshit, Karen!” Rocky screamed as he abruptly turned off the television and slammed the remote to the floor, shattering the plastic into pieces. “We didn’t have nothing to do with that shit!”

“The public doesn’t believe that,” Karen sneered into the phone as she sat behind her desk and nonchalantly examined her cuticles.

“My Daddy is dead?” Yolanda gasped as tears filled her large ebony eyes. “My babies were kidnapped? Who has them?”

“Karen... who the fuck did this shit?” Rocky snapped as he rose from the sofa, placed Karen on speakerphone and paced around the room. “Who killed Yolanda’s father and kidnapped her kids?”

“You did, of course,” Karen snickered.

“That’s bullshit and you know it, Karen!” Rocky bellowed. “You’re dead wrong for this shit! That man was innocent! Those kids don’t have nothing to do with this!”

“Well, everything will only get worse and it will all fall on your heads unless you give me those files,” Karen continued as she retrieved a nail file from her purse and went to work on her fingernails. “I want every dollar inside those boxes, too.”

“We’re not giving you shit!” Rocky growled.

“If that’s how you feel, then, ditto,” Karen shrugged. “But I think Yolanda might feel differently since her father is dead and her children are missing. Feel free to contact me if you want to end this, Miss Evans.”

-Click-

“Fuck that slimy bitch!” Rocky hissed after abruptly disconnecting the call.

“But Rocky... I need to get my boys back,” Yolanda whimpered.

“I know, Yolanda. I know,” Rocky empathetically replied as he embraced the emotionally fragile young woman. “We’ll get them back. I’m so, so sorry about your dad.”

“Oh, my god!” Yolanda groaned as she buried her face in Rocky’s side and sobbed deeply. “I can’t believe they killed my Daddy!”

“Damn, Yolanda... I’m sorry,” Rocky said as he rubbed her back. “I don’t know what to say. We’re going to get your boys back.”

“This is bad, partner,” Antoine sighed as he paced the room.

“No shit!” Rocky snapped. “Yolanda’s pop got killed, her kids were kidnapped, and my brother’s soldiers got hit up. Plus, we don’t even know exactly who did that shit! I gotta call E and holler at him about--”

Ring... Ring... Ring...

Rocky looked down at his phone and noticed his brother, E’s, number appear on the screen of his burner phone. He removed his arm from around Yolanda’s shoulder, reached for the mobile device and swiped up to answer the call.

“Yo, E.”

“What the fuck is this shit I’m seeing on the news, bro?” E yelled. “My niggas got hit the fuck up guarding your bitch’s crib? What the fuck is going on, Rock?”

“Chill, fam. I don’t know exactly what’s going on, but you know better than to be talking all reckless over the phone,” Rocky replied. “We gotta figure out what happened with Reem and Lil because the news is trying to say we shot them, killed Yolanda’s father and kidnapped her kids!”

“Yeah... shit is crazy, fam. They said one of my niggas is dead,” E’s voice trailed off.

“I heard,” Rocky hesitated before continuing, “but this white jawn from Harrisburg is trying hard as fuck to set us up, so I don’t even know what to believe any more,” Rocky sighed. “I really hope they’re lying about everything they’re saying on the news...”

“I don’t know, bro,” E solemnly replied.

“I’m sorry to get you involved in this.”

“We’re family, man. You know I’m always have your back.”

“Good looking, E,” Rocky thanked his brother. “I think we should change locations, though.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right. But I just got some work in and I’m real busy today, so can you meet me at the spot?”

“What spot, nigga?” Rocky chuckled. “I ain’t fucked with y’all on that tip in over fifteen years!”

“The same spot off Manheim and Pulaski. Same as fifteen years ago!”

“Oh, shit! Y’all niggas still moving work out that jawn?” Rocky gasped.

“Facts, my nigga! If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it. And you know your brother is far from broke,” E laughed.

“Say no more,” Rocky chuckled. “I’m still hoping to get my detective job back one of these days!”

“Say less, bro. So, get y’all shit together and come holler at me so I can take y’all to a new spot. Just make sure you lock up before you leave.”

“I got you.”

-Click-

“What did E say?” Antoine asked when he noticed Rocky had ended his conversation with his brother.

“He’s fucked up about the whole situation, as expected, but he’s got our backs,” Rocky explained. “He said to meet him in Germantown so he can take us to a new spot. We gotta get our shit together so we can bounce.”

“Roger that!” Antoine nodded as he strutted across the living room, out of sight and into the bedroom to gather his belongings.

“What about my boys?” Yolanda sniffled as she looked up at Rocky with tears streaming down her face.

“We’ll get them back. I promise.”

“You promise? But how?”

“Look, Yolanda,” Rocky knelt in front of the young woman and held her hands as he stared into her glistening brown eyes, “I know everything is fucked up now. Things are out of control and it’s scary. Do you trust me, though?”

“To be honest,” Yolanda hesitated, “y’all are the only two people I think I can trust anymore!”

“Well, we won’t let you down. We’re in this together.”

“Okay. I believe you.”

“Y’all ready?” Antoine asked as he reentered the living room, his duffle bag in tow. He stopped in his tracks, a perplexed expression plastered across

his face, when he saw Rocky crouched in front of Yolanda, holding her hands.

“I’m gonna go get my stuff together so we can go,” Yolanda abruptly released Rocky’s large hands, rose from the sofa and walked past him and Antoine into the second bedroom of the small rowhome to gather her belongings.

“Did I interrupt something, partner?” Antoine smirked.

“Nah, you freak-ass nigga!” Rocky whispered. “Get your mind out the gutter!”

“Oh, so, now *I’m* the freak-ass nigga whose mind is always in the gutter?” Antoine chuckled. “When did we switch roles?”

“Chill, Ant. I was just trying to comfort her,” Rocky explained as he knelt down, picked up his own duffle bag and strapped it across his broad shoulders. “She’s real shook up about what happened to her father and her kids. I promised her we would find her boys.”

“Oh, shit, Rock! Why would you promise her that? You feeling her or something?”

“It ain’t even like that, bro,” Rocky rolled his eyes. “I’m just trying to do my job.”

“Do I need to remind you; we don’t have jobs right now?” Antoine scoffed. “We’re on the wrong side of the law, fighting for our lives and you’re busy making promises we can’t keep! I mean, damn partner!”

“I’m not making promises we can’t keep,” Rocky whispered fiercely. “We have to figure out how the hell we’re going to clear our names without

giving that bitch, Karen, the files back anyway. We might as well help find Yolanda's kids in the process."

"You're right, Rock. I'm tripping," Antoine sighed. "I'm just stressed out. I need to talk to Jena and the baby and get grounded. I'ma call them on the way to Germantown."

"I'm ready when y'all are," Yolanda said as she lugged her suitcase into the living room.

"I got you, ma," Rocky said as he hurried to Yolanda's aid and took her bag from her.

"Thank you, Rocky," Yolanda batted her eyelashes and nodded as she released her grip on the handle of her suitcase. Antoine shook his head and smiled as he observed the interaction.

The trio exited the house, locking the door as they left, walked around back to the alley and entered Rocky's BMW. As Rocky pushed the button to start his vehicle and drove off, Antoine retrieved his burner phone from his pocket and dialed his home phone number.

"Hello?"

"Hey, baby," Antoine softly replied with a lump in his throat when he heard his wife's voice.

"Don't 'hey baby' me, Antoine," Jena snapped. "You've been running around this city acting like a damn pyscho!"

"Come on Jena. You know better than that! That's fake news!"

"Fake news? Now you sound like Trump," Jena scoffed.

“Please don’t compare me to that racist, orange motherfucker,” Antoine sighed. “I’m just saying... there’s a lot of crazy stuff going on out here. It’s all political and me and Rocky are caught up in the middle of it. We’re being set up, Jenae. You gotta believe me. You don’t really believe I would go crazy and start killing innocent old men and kidnapping kids, do you?”

“Hey, I don’t know, Antoine,” Jenae huffed. “With your drinking and some of the stuff you say to Antoinette... I feel like I don’t even know you anymore.”

“Stop frauding, Jenae!” Antoine snapped. “As long as we’ve been together... you know exactly who the fuck I am!”

“See! That’s exactly what I’m talking about! That darn temper – I can’t deal with it, Antoine.”

“Whatever, Jenae! You stay on some bullshit! At least let me talk to Antoinette.”

“No!” Jenae objected. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. Her father is all over the TV as a psycho cop-killer and kidnapper. She doesn’t need to talk to you right now.”

“Jenae! Are you fucking kidding me right now?”

“No, I’m dead serious. And with that tone, I’m not going to continue to talk to you either,” Jenae snidely replied. “Bye, Antoine.”

-Click-

“Jenae. Jenae! Jenae!” Antoine screamed as he heard nothing but silence on the other end of the line. He slammed his phone to the floor of the vehicle’s cabin near his feet. “That’s that bullshit!”

Meanwhile, neither Antoine nor Jenae were aware that their young daughter picked up another line in the house and listened to the entire conversation between her parents. The confused young girl had not been offered an explanation as to her father's whereabouts and she missed him dearly. Any time the house phone rang, Antoinette hope and prayed her father was calling and developed the habit of eavesdropping on her mother's conversations.

She was delighted to hear her father's voice on the other end of the phone and was biding her time until she had the opportunity to speak to him. She became hopeful when she heard her father ask to speak with her but was devastated when her mother refused her father's request. She was even more hurt when her mother abruptly disconnected the call. Tears welled up in Antoinette's large brown eyes as she sat on the dining room chair and held the kitchen phone in her hand.

"Daddy?" Antoinette sobbed alone in the kitchen as she spoke into the phone. "Daddy, are you there? Daddy... I miss you! I love you! I know you didn't do it, Daddy. Daddy!"

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