

**A**dé (Ah-Day) sat cross-legged in the center of the well-lit living room; her head bent low twisting the dreads at her nape. The cool vocals of D'Angelo flowed evenly from her speakers as he crooned about his Brown Sugar. The scent of sandalwood danced into her nostrils. The combination of the smooth brother singing and the burning stick, which dangled dangerously over the edge of the wood grain entertainment center, sent a soothing sensation throughout Adé's body.

Once she was satisfied with the tightness at her nape she threw her head back sending the thick ropes of beyond shoulder length black hair backward to smack against her bare back and shoulders. She'd been growing them for the past five years and they were just as beautiful today as when they first began to knot.

Adé raised her body from the polished hardwood floor and walked barefoot down the short corridor, which was aligned on both sides with mirrors. She stopped halfway to grasp a vision of self through ebony eyes. The reflection was sheer black radiance, pure and sweet. Her skin, the color cream-less coffee, had not a flaw in its design. Few signs of ancestral tampering resided on her physical continent. Had her nose not been so keen, her hair not taken so long, so much coaxing to become coarse and knotty, were the 'baby hairs' that framed her oval face not been so fine she would swear that her mother carried her to America hitched on her back with a basket on her head.

After all her name, Adé Nia was derived directly from the Motherland. Adé meaning "crown" and Nia meaning "purpose" combined meant that her purpose here was to be great, to reign. Her beautiful black skin no blemish, nor blotch. A perfect color that always seemed to shine as though it were constantly oiled. Her being was regal, her mere flesh penetrating the very core of White Supremacy and its instigator and igniting it. Envy.

Adé dropped the sunshine yellow towel to her recently pedicured feet and smiled adoringly at her black body, at the way the rich shade of Africa continued perfectly. She raised an arm high above her head, placed her hand against her breast full like the Emerald Mangoes of Cameroon, and began caressing counter clockwise. Once satisfied she switched to the other side repeating the same procedure. No lumps. She breathed a sigh of relief.

She checked for signs of breast cancer the fifteenth day of every month without fail. She'd lost the lovely woman she respectfully referred to as Ma Dear only a couple years earlier to the terrible disease. Since her loss she'd done all she could in an effort to save others and increase awareness. She'd run for the cure, she'd walked for it, donated and spoke on it but the first step was to be aware and pay attention to ones own body.

Unfortunately Ma Dear wasn't as aware as she should've been. The woman, self named Akia Imani, was merely forty-nine when she suddenly fell ill. Ma Dear was a praying woman and depended more on God for her healing than the doctors to which the Father blessed with the gift to heal. That was the worst experience of Adé's brief twenty-five years. Her mother had put all of her faith and trust in God and as far as Adé was concerned he'd forsaken her. Adé would not make the same mistake. She decided it was up to her to take fate into her own hands and she vowed not to allow the sickness to take her down without a fight.

Adé admired her breasts reflection. Cupping them with her hands she gently pushed them a slight higher. Like her skin they too were perfect. She turned her body to get a look at the round rear that jutted forth from her backside.

"How dare he not recognize that I am royalty," she mumbled to herself referring to Kenny DiLaura, the partial Black, partial Hispanic, all over gorgeous brother who she'd been loving for the past five years. The brother who she was sure loved her just the same yet left her two months prior to prepare for a walk down the aisle with Graciela Nambo, the mother of his only child, a boy Israel José Nambo-DiLaura. Adé hated Gracie but more and unfortunately she felt a stronger hatred for seven-year-old Israel or Izzy as he was normally referred. Had it not been for the child her sweet Kenny would still be in her life.

But she had not always felt such disdain toward Gracie. Once upon a time she loved her like a sister, adored and admired her and above all else respected her. The two met in school, both first year students at Sullivan High. Both young women entering a new life, looking ahead to new experiences, unaware of what destinies their futures beheld. The two students assigned to Mrs. Cooley's division quickly became the best of friends. Inseparable. One was rarely seen without the other if they could help it. That was until Kenny entered their lives four years after a seemingly perfect friendship had begun.

*Lipstick. Powder. Stockings. Shoes. Hairbrush. Perfume. Everything should be perfect. The seventy-five dollar French roll, every strand of hair in tact and the forty dollar manicure and pedicure had bet' not clash with this dress. The annual pre-graduation jam was an informal extension of the prom and just as anticipated.*

*Adé, Gracie, and Nancy DiLaura had scrambled like mice, picking, pulling, pinching and perfecting and their peers assured each female that every effort was well worth it. Their eighteen-year-old male counterparts nodded their approval while their dates, their female peers sneered, turning their noses to the sky and rolling their eyes so far back it's a wonder they hadn't gotten stuck. Quiet envy, hmpf. But they weren't the focus for long.*

*Like a Cinderella fairy tale all eyes locked on the sexiest man to enter the room, including Gracie and Adé's gaze. His curly hair was faded close on the sides, his bright hazel eyes clashed against his natural tan complexion. He was tall, six two maybe six three yet built like a football player. He slapped palms with Icari Sweeten, smiling revealing pronounced dimples. Dimples so deep if you turned his face sideways and poured liquid inside it would hold for as long as his smile lasted. A few fine hairs dusted his top lip and an attempt at a beard was visible.*

*"Who is that?" Gracie asked her eyes scanning the length of this mystery mans tight frame.*

*"Girl, I ain't never seen him around here. He is too fine." Adé smoothed her dress with one hand, the other she used to make sure her do hadn't come undone. Out of the corner of her eyes she quickly scanned the appearance of Gracie and Nancy. Yea, she looked better than both of her friends.*

*"Oh please. Him?" Nancy asked pointing in the direction of the man who had to be God's ultimate gift to women. "He ain't cute. That ain't nobody but Kenny."*

*"Kenny?" Gracie questioned.*

*"Kenny who?" Adé's eyes lit up and her grin spread to an ear-to-ear smile. A hook up!*

*"Oh yea, Kenny!" Gracie's eyes lit up with the recollection. "Remember, he was two years ahead of us!"*

*"Yea, yea, what was his last name?"*

*"Ummm...Oh shoot it start with a D. D-D-D-"*

*"DiLaura!" the two shouted in unison.*

*"DiLaura?" the two questioned in unison.*

*"Nancy!" the two screamed in unison.*

*"Is that-"*

*"My brother? Yea his ugly behind is my brother. What, y'all like him or something?"*

*Adé and Gracie gave each other a "Now you know" look. Who wouldn't? The two stared long and silently at their partner in crime Nancy, each with the same thought. "When is this heffa gonna hook us up?"*

*"So y'all wanna meet him?"*

*"Sure."*

*"Why not?"*

Adé grabbed her house keys from the hook on the wall. She glanced at the dainty watch that graced her narrow wrist. Twelve twenty-eight. *Dammit.* It was a chilly Saturday afternoon and she was expected to meet Nancy in front of the TJ Maxx on State Street by one o'clock for shopping, their normal Saturday afternoon routine. If she was late one more time she'd never live it down.

It seemed as though she wasn't ever capable of being in front of that store at the designated meeting time. If she drove she would definitely make it but the problem lied in the fact that she would never find parking. There was no choice but to take the Dan Ryan to Washington where the subway exited outside the building that housed the discount shopping that they so craved every weekend.

Adé walked as swiftly as she possibly could to the Addison L stop just in time to miss the southbound train. *Shit!* Inside her Kenneth Cole boots her feet were killing her, she should've worn sneakers. It would be at least fifteen minutes before a subsequent train arrived. Adé searched her purse only to realize that she'd foolishly left her cell phone sitting uselessly on the coffee table. Nancy would be pissed.

*"Do you know Jesus?"* The soft feminine voice wafted into Adé's ear interrupting her train of thought.

Adé turned abruptly to face the source of the question. *"Excuse me?"*

*"I asked whether or not you know Jesus?"* The woman repeated, her genuine smile lighting her brown face. Her chubby cheeks puffed as she smiled.

*"I have a better question. Does Jesus know me?"* Adé scanned the stout woman standing with the pamphlets in her hand. She took a deep breath and stalked toward the end of the platform before the woman had an opportunity to respond.

"Jesus loves you!" The woman shouted after her before resorting to the trial of saving a different soul.

The April sun was arm against Adé's face yet the breeze that flowed seemingly non-stop embraced a coolness quite uncommon for this time of year. But in Chicago there were no guarantees. Adé tugged on the collar of her leather bomber jacket while leaning forward to see if the train could be seen off in the distance. She mumbled "*finally*" at the sight of the headlights taking the curve of the tracks.

Adé took a seat near the rear of the car. A heavy-set man who was seated behind her was asleep, his head resting on the window. His snoring was so loud, so rough she could feel each rumble. She decided to move and wound up in an aisle seat beside a woman who was speaking loud judgments against an unidentified acquaintance of hers.

"Uh uhn gurl! You see dem shoes she be wearin'? Oh snap! They was all curled up at the toes an' shit," the woman spoke in the usual drawn out Chitown slang, which was synonymous with the South Side. The woman's hair was in an extra thick French roll with spiral curls piled high. She wore tight jeans and a freshly bought classic brand name jacket on her back representing the Miami Dolphins and just slightly dingy classic K-Swiss on her feet. Her red and gold fingernails could have easily been mistaken for claws and a gold band looped every finger.

Her girlfriend donned the same hair and all around style however she set her jewelry off with a gold front. Both obviously queens of the South Side, what were they doing coming from Adé's neck of the woods?

"Gurl, I know!" That was gold front speaking. "That broke bitch need to use that county check she be gettin' for dem fi' kids an' buy hu' ass one good pair o' shoes."

"She got fi' kids?"

Adé could feel "Claws" giving her a subtle once over. This was why she hated taking the CTA. She owned a car and didn't have to be subjected to silent harassment on the el-train. Adé didn't flinch nor acknowledge their curious eyes, which were now scanning her with obvious intent. She was being sized up by the South Side Queens. Here this beautiful chocolate dreaded sista sat erect and proud in tight black Ponte' pants and leather bomber with matching purse. French manicured nails folded atop her handbag. They were South Side cheap and she was North Side fine, plain and simple. At least that was how she felt.

Finally "Gold Tooth" realized the stare down was not achieving the desired results and so settled for, "Guurl, dem boots is tight." A meaningless compliment. Adé spoke her gratitude for the hollow adoration before turning her thoughts into reminiscent ponderings of Kenny D.

"This is Washington," the digital conductor announced over the trains PA. Adé rose and mingled with the crowd of hurried Chicagoans who pushed their way through the impatient. The thick stench of musty wetness associated with the underground filled her nostrils. A subway musician sat cross-legged with this back against one of the steel beams strumming beautiful acoustics with thick ashy fingers, his guitar case tiled with green, silver and copper open by his side. Unlike many of her fellow Chicago natives she appreciated the talent that the "underground" artists displayed. She bent to place a crisp five-dollar bill into his case before she sped off to meet her girlfriend.

"You're late again, Ms. Adé," Nancy spoke when she spotted Adé racing from the subway.

"I know, I know, I'm sorry."

"Yea, you're sorry alright. Come on, I don't have all day. I have to get to—" Nancy paused in mid-sentence and searched her friend's face to see if she should continue. "Well I got other business to tend to."

Adé pursed her lips and shook her head from side to side. She knew good and well the other *business* was in direct connection with the wedding of her former best friend and her former sweet lover. But Adé wasn't ready to go there anyway, not yet at least. It was too painful.

The ladies stopped in a store to scope the jean selection before criticizing the latest additions in the large downtown department stores. They thought to pull out the major platinum cards which would guide them to overpriced pleasures on the Magnificent Mile but weighed down with bags and much less energy than they had set out with decided against it and instead settled on lunch at a local restaurant.

Adé and Nancy took their pizza and lemonade into the dim cafeteria. They found a clean table near a back wall.

"So," Adé began, "What business do you need to take care of this evening?"

"Mmm, nothing much. Hey, are you still thinking about subletting your condo and moving out to Downers Grove?"

"Uh uhn, I'm keeping my place." She sipped her drink. "It must be important if you had to mention it."

"What must be important? What are you talking about?"

"The business you need to--"

"Girl--"

Adé hated this game. She knew damn well whatever *business* Nancy had was in direct correlation with Gracie and Kenny's wedding and Nancy knew she knew.

"Please, Nancy alright. Spare me the bullshit runaround and just tell me the truth. I think I can handle it. I'm a big girl now. Dang, Nancy I am a lot stronger than you think."

Nancy exhaled and took a bite of her pizza. She chewed slowly and deliberately to stall for time. She hated these situations, she hated to do anything or say anything that may so much as put a dent into her friend's feelings. But Adé was insistent and Nancy knew as sure as she knew her own self that she would not let it go.

Nancy leaned back in her chair and ran her fingers through her beautiful hair, caught it toward the end with both hands and looped it around. She held the healthy mane of auburn hair atop her scalp while using the other to massage her nape, a nervous habit gone unbroken.

"Nancy you're stalling."

"Alright, alright. I have to meet with Gracie and the girls for a dress fitting. That's all, no big deal."

Adé's eyes began to sting. She hated hearing about the wonderfully exciting details of that damn wedding. Two months ago when Kenny informed her that he'd asked Gracie's hand in marriage she wasn't fazed. It wasn't the first time the two considered marriage; it probably wouldn't be the last. And when Nancy advised her to get over him, move on, they were for real this time and had even set a date only a mere four months down the road she still didn't buy into it. But somehow dress fittings and caterers finalized things and she could not dodge the fluid that filled the rims of her eyes each time she heard something else about their stupid wedding plans. She still remained steadfast however her faith was diminishing bit by bit with each preparation.

Nancy closed her eyes and sighed. She leaned forward and took Adé's hands into hers. "Listen sweetie, I realize that you have feelings for my brother, deep feelings for my brother but Adé honey it's time for you to move on and find some peace and happiness in your life. My brother isn't the end all-be all. And you and Gracie--" Adé groaned, "--yes, you and Gracie need to put this foolishness behind you and get on with your

lives as friends if only from a distance. Y'all have got too much history to be torn apart by a man, any man, even Kenny. Kenny's made his decision Adé, it's time to let go and move on."

The ride home was brief, the return always seemed quicker than the going. Adé sat alone in the seat she'd passed up earlier thanks to the snoring man. She propped her tired feet up on the empty seat before her and tucked her bags beneath her legs. The side of her head was pressed against the dingy plate glass window. Her mind was full of thoughts that she really didn't want to think about.

Visions of Graciela standing in front of a church, all of 5'3" in heels, her size 13/14 body in the traditional white wedding gown in front of all her friends and family. Standing beside Kenny, her Kenny, looking fabulous as ever in his tux and gleaming Stacy Adams. His fade would be tight and his nails manicured. He would be gorgeous as he always is.

Silent tears stained Adé's sweet chocolate cheeks as she realized that it should be she standing beside Kenny at the alter. Her saying vows of love and devotion to this man and not some short, fat chic just because she was smart enough to have his baby first. She felt a burning sensation in her soul as she reflected on the realistic words spoken by her good friend: *"Kenny's made his decision Adé, it's time to let go."*

"I can't."

**D**amn.

I'm getting married in less than two months, I can't believe it. I knew I'd get married some day, settle down, raise a family. Own a dog, some fish, a white picket fence, the whole enchilada. What I thought? I thought it would be a whole helluva lot easier than this that's for damn sure. I'd always assumed that I'd meet the woman of my dreams, fall in love and live happily ever after. It's not a question of whether or not I love Gracie. I've loved her forever and I know it. And I love the beautiful child that we share. A life with Gracie and Izzy would be perfect if it were not for these nagging feelings that I have for Adé.

Never let it be said that one man cannot love two women, it is just not true. There is no perfect woman, only a fool would believe otherwise. But some women come pretty close; such is the case with Gracie and Adé. If there were a way to combine both women I'd surely become the first man on Earth with the perfect woman.

Unfortunately times are different and this is America. And no Sista or Latina in her right mind is going to allow a man jumping from one to another and back to continue. So I made a decision. And since I don't feel I prefer one woman over the other, I chose Izzy. It is just sad that while I was receiving so much overwhelming love, two best friends were torn apart.

It was time for me to get refitted for my tux. My Uncle Rogélio is a tailor albeit not a very efficient one. This was the fourth time Uncle Rogé had to make alterations. His work was very good – when he got it right. His problem was not a lack of skill but a desire to drink. This was ironically the very reason I'd gone to him. His once successful business was falling into bankruptcy and he needed all the money he could get his hands on to stay afloat. Unfortunately Tio spent half of it on booze as quick as it touched his hand. Either way, he'd been there for me my whole life and the least I could do was return the love by giving him my business.

There was a frantic buzz coming from the kitchen, I knew without asking that it was my older brother Philly, birth named Phillipé. He was always so damned impatient. I leaned out of the open living room window and yelled downstairs.

"Yo estúpido! I'll be down!"

"Well hurry up dawg, I ain't got all day homey!" he replied in his usual slow, dragged out dialect.

"Un momento por favor, hombre!"

I closed the window and turned off the stereo in one swift movement. I had to move quickly before Philly began to lean on the horn like a road-rager caught in rush hour traffic annoying all of my neighbors. Gracie and Izzy strolled through the door just as I was rushing out.

"You better hurry up Kenny cause I swear if Philly start blowin' that damned horn-" she started in on me so I shut her up with a kiss. It did the trick every time.

"I'm going, I'm going. Adios mi amor, adios muchacho."

"Adios Papi," Izzy answered.

Tio Rogé's shop was about thirty minutes away from my home; we were there in fewer than twenty. I held my breath as we entered the shop, silently praying that Tio was not drunk. He was not.

"Que pasa? Come in, come in. So how are my boys, eh? Philly my man, sigues conquistando los panties de la mujeres?"

"Todo el día, cada día, you know what I'm sayin' Tio. You feel me dawg."

"Hell yea! Usted sabe que usted tiene que mantener su nariz el gatito siempre. ¡Crece el pelo en sus tuercas!"

The two slapped hands and grinned like school boys who'd seen up they're teachers dress. They always did this to me, talked about sex in Spanish as though I hadn't been brought up in the same Puerto Rican family on Chicago's North Side. I simply shook my head and walked to where my tux was hanging.

"Alright enough of that pussy talk, time to act like grown men," I scolded in jest. "Should I even bother?" I asked eying my uncle suspiciously.

"I swear mi hijo, this one will fit. Perfectemente. I haven't touched a drink all week."

Now he was outright lying. But he was right about the tux. It was definitely cut just for my body. Tio stood beaming with pride as he watched me strut and pose before the mirror. He'd done well.

My house was live when big brother brought me home. I invited him inside with the thought that we would sit in the living room, sip on a 40 oz, listen to a little Pac and play some Madden. I was wrong. Lauryn Hill was beating from the speakers. The smoke intense room was filled with females giggling and gossiping. My baby sister Consuela, or Sweetie as my family affectionately nicknamed her (though she'd become far from one), offered Philly a hit of the blunt she was puffing on. She knew better than to ask me. I began to search the small two-bedroom apartment for Izzy but Gracie grabbed my arm and kissed my lips before assuring me that he was safe at her parent's home.

She was well aware of my strong feelings toward my son's exposure to negative influences. I had no issue with her friends enjoying their indulgences in our home as long as my child wasn't there and they cleaned up after themselves. Hell they were grown.

"So Papi, wassup wit' choo and me?" Danela, better known as Dolly, asked my brother. "You still messin' wit' dat white bitch Julie or Judy, or whateva hu' name is?"

"Yo' wassup girl?" Teeter spoke up. "Don't go hatin' on us white sista's Dolly."

"I ain't hatin' on white girls Teeter, I'm just statin'. She's white and she's a bitch. I just don't like that white hoe. It don't mean you a white hoe though." Teeter accepted that response and Dolly gave her a pound. What she didn't realize was that Dolly was in fact hating on Philly's ex Jill simply because she was white. Hell they were high. "So wassup Philly? When you and me gone do that thang-thang?"

Philly inhaled deeply and held the smoke in his lungs not breaking his gaze from the massive cleavage that sloppily spilled forth from her blouse. "Wassup shorty, you know me and you can't get down like that."

"Why? Cause of Lucita? Man fuck that broad."

Philly chuckled heartily. "That's your sister, don't be like that."

"Like I said, fuck dat broad. Yo' Philly pass the blunt man, quit hoggin' dat shit!"

I could not tolerate these females for too long. They gave me a migraine every time. I didn't like the fact that my future wife hung around what I considered to be trifling women (my baby sis included) but I wasn't about to go into a marriage telling her how to live her life. I realized that the video game match was off. Philly had encountered his two favorite things, his namesake Philly's (blunts that is) and free lovin'. I retired to my bedroom.

**D**olly calm that mess down girl, you lettin' that weed affect your judgment chula."

"Girl quit trippin'," Dolly spoke through a mouthful of marijuana smoke. She exhaled slowly speaking to me but looking at my fiancé's brother Philly, "You know he the fine one in the family."

Wouldn't you know Philly had the nerve to blush as if he were shy? I left them to mack each other and joined my man in the bedroom. I stood in the doorway watching him watch me, "Que pasa sexy? How did the fitting go? Tio Rogé wasn't drunk was he?"

"No, naw baby it went just fine and it fit perfectly."

"So where is it?" I asked, visibly excited.

"You can't see it before the wedding day," he replied as he smacked me on the behind.

"That don't apply to you, silly," I said and pinched his cheek. He pulled me to him and slid his tongue into my mouth. His kisses were slow and deliberate; he always knew just what he was doing. I felt a tingle between my thighs, which incited me to ease my body on top of his. He placed his large hands on my rear and massaged it to the rhythm of his oral massage. As a reflex I began to move my hips, rubbing myself against the swelling in his jeans, my moans beginning to escape my lips-

"Oh snap, l'il bro, what you got happenin' here?"

"Girl get yo' big ass off him and let's be outta here," I looked up to see Philly and Teeter standing in my doorway interfering in my business. I kissed my man gently on his forehead before pushing my body from his. I adjusted my clothes and headed out of the room.

"You won't be out too late right?" he asked.

"Of course not!" I lied while being dragged down the hall toward and out the front door by Teeter.

The thumping beats coming from the popular nightclub and our favorite hang out could be heard two blocks up the street. Pigeons were flocked in front of the spot attempting to be spotted by every brother in a nice ride. I was ready to get my party on. These days were limited. Kenny didn't trip too hard about my appetite for the nightlife though he'd made it clear that once I became his wife he'd be much less tolerant of it.

Q-Tips *Vivrant* was coming through loud and clear as we were proving our age to the bouncer while simultaneously being mean-mugged by the chicken coop. I could ignore such colorless scrutiny but I knew my girls well enough to know that if Sweetie or Dolly were to catch on there would definitely be some mess. I quickly diverted their attention in the direction of some fine Latino men who were pulling up for valet service.

I paid my fifteen-dollar cover charge and grabbed a seat at the only empty table. I scanned the crowd recognizing many of the same old faces grooving to DJ D Rockwell's selections. The young, petite Filipino waitress seemed to float through and around the gatherers making her way to our table. She leaned a little too far over the allowing her disproportionate breasts to spill forward from the tight black vest she wore.

"What'll it be?" she called over the music.

"A *Sex on the Beach* for me," I said. The waitress took Dolly and Teeters order and committed it to memory before disappearing into the crowd.

"You think we should have ordered for Sweetie?" Teeter asked.

"I don't know what she wants," I answered.

"Please. Forget Sweetie she'll be aiight. She gone spend the night acting like she don't hardly know us anyway. One of these nigga's will cop her a drink, she'll be straight," Dolly chimed in.

Dolly was right; we likely would not see much of Sweetie throughout the evening. We'd been inside the club but a couple of minutes and she was missing in action already. She had to cause a scene as usual, make a grand entrance. Kenny's baby sister was very outgoing by nature and as a result well known in our environment. Her beauty and the arrogance resulting from it contributed to her popularity – and her antagonism. Standing at 5'7" with a brown sugar complexion and hazel eyes, perfect hourglass shape and thick dark flowing hair, Sweetie was the perfect target for bitter frustrations. A byproduct of the Black and Boricua DiLaura family unit, she was at once their most beautiful and most insecure.

Being 5'3" and 170 pounds, short brown hair and Mexican made Sweetie and I complete opposites. This is not accounting for the personality difference. But those differences are where our attraction to one another lies. And though it's courtesy to my mellow demeanor that got her out of many a jams throughout our friendship, sometimes her feistiness returned the favor.

"Wassup bitches?" she yelled across the room as she half-walked/half-danced her way to our table, "Y'all order some drinks?"

"Yea," I answered.

"What you get me?"

"Nothing. I didn't know what you wanted," I protested.

"The same thing I always get mami, oh my goodness. You know better shorty."

"Please, we didn't even know if we were going to see you before the lights came up."

"Graciela why you trying me, ma?"

Not a full minute passed before a dreaded cutie approached Sweetie for a dance to which she of course accepted and disappeared into the crowd.

I sipped enough alcohol to erase my insecurities by getting me tipsy before I headed out onto the dance floor. I grooved my way to the center planting myself beside Teeter, mouthing the words to Black Rob's *Whoa*. The crowd thickened, I felt a bead of sweat escape from my armpit. I adjusted my steps in a subtle search for more personal space. In the process I made a side step and accidentally mashed the unsuspecting toes of a

fellow dance floor grinder. I quickly turned to apologize but was met with a hostile glare. Not thinking twice about what I thought was about to go down I accepted the expressional challenge for I knew to whom the rotten look belonged. The music paused, everyone in the room stopped their motions and watched us, waited for our reaction – or at least it felt that way to me.

Instead my ex-best friend Adé turned and made her way back through the massive crowd. What was she doing here? She hated club scenes, always has. Teeter, who was now getting her freak on with a big light-skinned brother with cornrows who'd probably just recently been released from the pen, was oblivious to the entire scene. I breathed carefully trying to calm my rage. I shook it off, turned up the drink that I held in my hand and returned to partying.

The night was young and the fun was ending. The drinks diminished all concept of time and all I knew is that home was not where I wanted to be headed. The overhead lights exposed the large room while telling the crowd in a nonverbal manner, *"You ain't gotta go home but you got to get the hell out of here."* Giggling and inebriated I pulled my arm from the grasp of a man just barely taller than me who I'd been dancing with. Seeing him in tungsten light only made me laugh louder. Sweety quickly intervened taking my arm in hers, separating his rising anger from my being. She asked how many drinks I'd consumed, I couldn't remember. She led me to where Dolly and Teeter stood flirting near the exit.

"Dolly!" I yelled in an awful southern accent, "Parton me Dolly!"

I slapped Sweety's hand and doubled over in laughter at my own lame joke.

"She don't drink much," Sweety explained to Dolly and Teeter's new interests.

That was the truth although not actually by choice. There was a time in my life when I loved to party and get my drink on but when Kenny's uncle began to lose his life to his heavy drinking Kenny started tripping on me. And I admit I did begin to feel the sting of guilt whenever I'd come home drunk knowing what he was dealing with. So I slowed down a lot. Resorting to indulging on the limited occasion when my girls and I hit the club together.

Giggling at nothing and everything at once I headed out of the door, shielding my eyes from the artificial light. The night air was warm and comfortable. A warm breeze hit me on my left side as negative energy hit me on the right. I turned and found myself face to face with my arch nemesis. Adé's nostrils were flared and her dark skin appeared maroon. Her fists were tightly clenched; she wanted to hit me that much was clear. What she didn't realize was that I was wasted and hardly afraid of anything that she may threaten to do to me.

I laughed, a deep hearty laugh, a cackle actually. It was funny to me to see the woman who slept with my man any chance she got, threatening me with physical violence. Again the world seemed to pause, except this time in a way it actually did, at least in the little section of the world that we occupied. I was causing a scene and enjoying every second of it. I had a secret plan, only I knew what was really about to transpire. Once enough witnesses gathered I was going to knock Adé directly on her ass. I was set, psyched, and prepped when Sweety decided to be Ms. Goody-Goody and pushed us apart.

"Mind your business, Connie," Adé demanded not taking her eyes off me.

"Forget that Day-Day, I ain't phenna let y'all go out like this," Sweety turned to face a young woman whose nose was so deep in the business she had to be affiliated somehow, "Is this ya homegirl?"

"Naw I don't know her but you need to step and let them handle that," she replied.

"Bitch--"

"Bitch? Who you thank--"

A short stocky female with long cornrows stepped forward and claimed sisterhood with Adé and with a glance dared the nosey female to test her. Sweety recruited the woman's assistance in separating an enraged Adé and me. The two managed to pull Adé aside while her gaze remained affixed on me. Over the bumping sounds pouring from car speakers and amped after party voices, I couldn't hear what Sweety was saying. However I could see the tension in Adé's face diminishing as she refocused her line of sight on Sweety. That was not what I wanted. This was the opportunity that I had been longing for and I finally had enough "ghetto juice" in my bloodstream to not give a damn.

"Nah Sweety, let her go!" I yelled over the avenue's sounds, "If that bitch got something to say let her come say it!"

The mini crowd had now regrouped like scavengers with a thirst for blood. I was more than willing to feed their carnal craving. I watched as Adé's eyebrows knitted together, her tension rebuilding rapidly. I nodded my head and clenched my fists tightly. With two Long Islands, a Sex on the Beach, and an Apple Martini in my system, I was ready for her.

"Dolly! Teeter! Y'all get her drunk ass out of here! Now!" Sweety called and like two loyal servants each took an arm and pulled me away shouting threats and profanities and fighting hard to break free. Basically, making a complete ass of myself on a warm and comfortable night.

I was angry beyond redemption when Teeter dropped me off at my apartment complex at three o'clock in the a.m. angry and still drunk. Although I was not excited about going into my house I was thrilled to be away from what I deemed to be traitors. Irritation was burrowing through my flesh like acid as I listened to the three of them try to convince me that Adé and I needed to get over our issues and put this ugliness behind us; how we needed to end this war with each other and take it to the source – Kenny. It wasn't a matter of me not agreeing with the idea of confronting Kenny; in fact I myself had done so on several occasions. My goodness, why did they think that he was marrying me now and so soon?

Several months prior, I'd come home from work and checked my messages. The very first message was from Kenny. As I suspected would soon happen, he and Adé were having problems. I didn't know this because he told me outright, I knew it because he insisted he needed to come by and see me to "talk". From my experience I was well aware that this was code for him and Adé having trouble. So I made the best decision I've ever made during the course of our relationship, I erased the message. And when he paged my cell I ignored it and when a number associated with him appeared on my caller ID I disregarded it. Eventually he caught on but he was persistent. He would call from unfamiliar numbers or have others call on his behalf but as soon as his voice came through the receiver...click.

I refused all contact with him. His visits to Izzy were accomplished by me taking our son at no specific time to Mrs. DiLaura's and always at times when I knew Kenny would be working. After nearly three weeks of this Kenny caught me off guard and was at his parents' house when I brought Izzy by. We had to talk. That day I gave him an ultimatum, love me or leave me alone. He chose marriage.

The light from the television in our bedroom created a short path to guide me through the dark. I walked slowly and carefully. My ankle bent slightly as I stumbled on an unidentified object but I managed to maintain my balance. Kenny's long hard body was stretched out across the bed on top of the sheets. He was wearing nothing more than a pair of boxers and one ankle sock; the comforter had been kicked to the floor. Watching him sleep I began to think which was not a good thing for a person driven by weed smoke and alcohol. I wondered if he'd ever had her in my bed. There were many evenings that I worked late and Izzy was gone

leaving him with the house to himself. When was the last time he was with her? According to him it was at least two and a half months ago but how was I to know if he was telling the truth? Adé was damn upset.

Anger and irrational behavior consumed and controlled me. I flipped the light switch into the on position and grabbed a gym bag out of the closet. I could hear Kenny's body stir on the bed. I jerked drawer's open and slammed them shut, removing articles and stuffing them inside of the bag.

"What you doing babe?" Kenny mumbled in a state of semi-consciousness.

I turned to face him sharply in time to see him wiping drool from the corner of his mouth and attempting to adjust his eyes to the light. I turned my back and continued my task. I tossed various lipsticks and body fragrances on top of a heap of panties, socks, and shirts that were stuffed inside one of Kenny's gym bags. Before I realized he'd moved, Kenny was on his feet by my side trying to snatch the bag from my grip.

"Gracie, what are you doing?" this time his voice was clear and raised.

"I'm leaving," I answered bluntly.

"Huh? What? Leaving? Where do you think you're going?"

I released my grip on the bag and with both hands shoved palms up on his chest, "You're fucking her aren't you?" I accused.

"Fucking who? Gracie c'mon to bed."

"Who? What do you mean who? Don't play dumb with me Kenny, you know who! Fucking Adé, that's who!"

"You're drunk," he said in astonishment as though he'd just at that very moment realized the reeking stench of alcohol was coming from my breath.

"I am not drunk, I am just right and you hate it! I only had a coupla few drinks anyway. I'm not drunk. Give me my bag."

"Gracie baby, come on to bed. We can talk about this when you sober up alright?"

"Dammit Kenny, I'm not drunk! Read my lips okay. Cause I know what you're up to Mr. Kenny. You think I'm stupid, a stupid little woman but I know! You and that fucking bitch, my best friend. Ha! She was supposed to be my best - fucking - friend!" Tears streamed from eyes against my will. I snatched the bag from him and charged out of the bedroom and down the hall to our living room. I paced back and forth mumbling incoherent accusations and profanities as I tossed miscellaneous objects into my bag.

Kenny inhaled deeply trying to maintain his composure, "Where do you think you're going Graciela? You've obviously had a lot to drink and I'm not letting you out of this house like this. For Christ sake Gracie it's damn near four in the morning."

"Teeter's waiting for me and no she ain't drunk so kiss my ass Kenny."

"Do I look stupid Gracie?" his anger was rising and he struggled to subdue it, "Ain't nobody waiting for you and even if Teeter was that bitch is a lush, now baby come on to bed and get some rest and I promise you we will discuss this in the morning. Okay?"

"Go to hell Kenny!" I yelled. He grabbed my arm but I snatched it away. His grip locked firm on the bag, "Fuck Adé and fuck you. Both you bitches can kiss my ass."

"Hell naw girl, I ain't lettin' you walk out the door in this condition at this time of morning I don't give a damn who you say you got waiting for you. Give me that bag and take yo' ass in that room and carry yo' silly ass to sleep. My patience is wearing thin Grace," he overpowered me and snatched the bag from my grip.

Before I realized what I was doing I reached back and with all of my strength connected my open palm to his cheek.

I watched the fire in his eyes as his blood boiled, his face turning a shade of red less from the sting of the smack but more from the rage of the woman he loved having the audacity to lay a hand on him. I had never hit Kenny before but in my state of foolishly drunk was rather proud of what I considered to be checking my man. I was amped and ready to fight; all he needed was to give me a reason. Instead he tossed the gym bag at my feet and turned his back to me walking toward our bedroom in silence. Realizing I wasn't going to get the fight that I was starved for I took the bag in my hand and left the apartment, slamming the door behind me.