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THUG HARMONY



MR MALEFICENT

Disclaimer: While this excerpt does not spoil Volumes V-VII, it does contain spoilers for the first IV Volumes of the ThugHarmony Series.

Overview: Barry and the rest of the Washington, DC crew have arrived in Atlanta for the ThugHarmony Reunion/Black Gay Pride weekend. Reuniting with his friends from real life and online should be a blast, but it proves troublesome when the fractures that have occurred up North have followed the group into the South. Barry tries to foster peace, but with TJ on the outs with several of his closest friends and enthralled in an online feud with one of the site's largest personalities, Barry realizes just how hard he has his work cut out for him.

From Chapter 4:

I went off to college with the intention of being a social butterfly, living life untethered to any labels that others might let define them. But before long, I found myself back in the closet and somewhat ashamed to expose the depths of my attraction to others. But fortunately, before I could slam that closet door shut, I met my best friend, Elias.

During freshman year, Elias was part of BGAS, The Black Gay Association for Students. BGAS was essentially the gay and straight alliance but with more of an emphasis on issues that affected the black gay community. It was a group that his house brother started, and Elias was more than willing to continue. I'll never forget the day he tried to recruit me, which was my very first interaction with him. In the brief moments that we spoke, he looked me up and down, called me "Little Gay Boy," and told me to stop using my "trade voice" because he's "fam" and could see through the façade. After talking myself down from punching him in the face, I grew to appreciate his honesty- and it's one of the things I love about him to this day.

Since I didn't have a strong family foundation at home, I built one as soon as I found like-minded people. I do look at Elias and Toby (who joined BGAS a semester or so later) as my brothers; we've never gotten into it. We may have had 5 disagreements in the last decade between the three of us. And it's never been anything so deep that we'd cut each other off about nor consider getting physical to resolve. We were all similar in our train of thought, although very different in execution. Elias is more abrasive, far more expressive, yet less refined than I am, while Toby is the party boy. Toby is easily the most laid-back of the trio. He's a physical trainer who doesn't ever get into it with anyone. He's practically unmovable. Those are my boys, and I was truly glad that I'd be reuniting with them since we'd been apart for so long.

Part of me was extremely impatient as we pulled up to Elias' home. But another part of me was extremely nervous. You know what they say about the test of friendship: that true friends can go years without speaking to each other but always pick up right where they left off. Though I talked to Elias and Toby at least twice a week, it was much different from being able to relate in person.

Marcus was still in his car, with the kids chilling in the backseat. From glancing, I could see that Calvin and Chanté were probably still asleep, and Jerome was the only one who'd stepped out of the Denali to stretch. But here I was, standing on Elias's front porch, getting ready to knock.

Knock. Knock... I waited. Almost immediately, I heard dogs barking. They weren't big dogs; you could tell from the high pitches of their barks. Immediately following their yelps, Elias' loud voice yelled over them in an attempt to calm them down.

"Pebbles and Bam Bam, hush up, or I'mma lock you in your bedroom!" He said.

The door finally opened.

"Hi," I smiled.

"Little gay boy!" He threw his arms around me, and we hugged briefly, our weight balancing from one side and then tilting to the other. Elias was a stocky dark-skinned guy, but he carried his weight well. He carried it much better now than he did back in college, and he was sporting newly twisted dreads. When he finally let go of me, he said, "Welcome home."

"Literally," I chuckled. "When you said you moved into the area where I grew up, I had no idea that you meant right around the corner. But anyway, it's good to be back."

"Glad to have you."

After greeting me, Elias instantaneously looked past his porch at the big black truck parked out front.

"Is that you?" he asked.

"No, that's your other friend," I said.

Before he could fix his mouth to ask who, the passenger door opened, and Calvin stepped out.

"Well, if it isn't ThugHarmony and my next ex-husband, WhiteBengal," he mumbled to me. Then, he elevated his voice to ensure Calvin could hear. "Hey, Calvin!"

"Hey, Elias!" Calvin yelled back before walking up the lawn to meet us on Elias's stoop. Once making it, Calvin immediately gave Elias a hug. "Oh, it's good to see you."

"You too," he said heartwarmingly. He looked around the rest of his front yard, seeing that Jerome and Marcus had started a conversation on the street, and Chanté stepped out and stretched but had barely moved. "Now. Why is everyone standing outside like they're too scared to come into my house? Invite them on in, and I'll give you guys a quick tour."

Elias reentered his home, primarily to round up his dogs and put them away before the guests entered. Calvin and I waved to our parties to let them know that we were going inside. Calvin's party was more receptive, while mine was more hesitant. I waved to Marcus a few more times, but I could see him shaking his head in the distance. I followed him back out into the street for a sidebar.

"You don't want to come in?" I asked.

"I don't know if we should. Look, I got the kids, and I don't want to confuse them anymore."

It was hard to argue with that when JoJo was already inquiring about our lifestyle.

"Okay, then, what do you want to do? I guess you can go to the hotel if you want."

"Would you be okay if I left you?"

"Yeah, these are my people. I'll be fine."

"Okay, I'll see you later tonight then," he said.

"I don't know about that."

"What you mean?"

"I mean, this is my first night back. We're probably gonna go out," I explained.

"So what? Catch a ride back with Calvin."

"Calvin is not coming out with us. TJ and Braxton are supposed to be flying in within the hour. We're definitely all meeting up, and Calvin ain't gon' want no parts of that. And that's

probably a good thing because maybe I can get TJ and Elias to squash whatever issues they're having with each other without Calvin on the sidelines."

"Still playing peacemaker...."

"Well, there is still peace to be made," I said. "I'll call you before you go to sleep, though, and I'll see you bright and early in the morning."

"All right," he said. He looked at the kids inside the Charger, only to see their eyes peering right back at him. He thought to try to sneak a kiss from me but decided against it at the last second. Instead, he mouthed the words 'I'll miss you' before jumping in the car. I waved bye to both children and then Marcus took off. The Charger drove away, and I felt a twinge of guilt that I was relieved. I hate to say it, but I was glad he wasn't around, inhibiting my fun. With him and the kids gone, I'd be able to officially reconnect with my friends.

I stayed on the street just long enough to see Marcus turn the corner. Once out of sight, he was officially out of mind. I ran back up the lawn and walked into Elias's home just in time to meet his hefty boyfriend.

"... And there's my best friend, Barry," Elias introduced me. "Barry, this is my boyfriend, Gavin."

"Nice to meet you," I said.

Gavin looked familiar, but not someone I could pinpoint right off the bat. He was a thick guy, about as heavy as Devin. But he was light-skinned and had these big, enormous, pink lips. He also had a pretty big forehead. He wasn't unattractive, just certainly not my type.

"You too," Gavin returned. He looked at his boyfriend and kissed him on the cheek. "I gotta go, my shift is about to start, but I promise that I'm gonna be here for the couple's event."

"Yeah, you better."

Gavin came walking toward me because I was still standing right by the door. It was at that point that I recognized him. He was another member of ThugHarmony. His screen name eluded me, but I made a mental note to grill Elias about it later.

"Okay," Elias turned to the rest of us once his boyfriend left. "Follow me," he directed, leading us on the tour throughout his new home. He recently moved into this house after spotting it as a foreclosure. He got a pretty good deal too. The home had two bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a finished basement. Just from looking around, you could tell that there was work being done to this place, but that it was coming along nicely. The kitchen had nice countertops with matching tiles on the floor, but you could see a heating vent exposed. The lighting fixture on the wall was perfectly applied, but the wires from the ceiling fan were hanging.

"This is our kitchen. We're in the process of fixing it up. Before we got it, this whole area looked like a mess. When the house was vacant, there was apparently a leak in the pipes, and it flooded the whole kitchen."

"Was it smart to get this?" Jerome asked. "There's probably black mold in the walls."

"Nothing too out of hand, but we have had a remediator come out a few times to fix the issues."

"So, you bought this?" I asked.

"Yes, Sir. It's my first big purchase since I paid off my student loan, and I'm pretty happy about it."

"You should be. It's a nice spot."

"Wait 'til you see what all we're going to do with the basement," Elias bragged as he led us down the stairs.

The basement looked like a fancy lounge. I imagine that it looked rather basic before Elias added the finishing touches. It was essentially one huge room with off-white walls and tan carpet. But Elias added this movie theater effect by putting his big-screen television up against the north wall and coordinating all of his furniture to view it. Over in the left corner was an area for a bar that I was 100% sure he had loaded up with all his favorite drinks. Behind the bar was a hallway where the unfinished bathroom and the laundry room were. Elias's home was nice enough. Hell, it was much better than my idea of a starter home.

"What do you guys think?" Elias asked.

"Love it," Calvin spoke. "Jerome and I are actually looking for homes."

"-Oh yeah! I completely forgot that you guys are Mr. and Mr. Minnicelli now!"

The lovebirds smiled nervously, Jerome even going as far as to put his arm around Calvin's shoulder.

"How long have you guys been looking?"

"Not long," Calvin answered. "The truth is we don't need that much space. We already have two bedrooms in our apartment, but I just don't want to get too attached to the place."

"Well, like I said, I found this house on the foreclosure list. The monthly payment I'm making to the bank is a little bit less than I was paying for my apartment last year. Every little bit of extra money in the budget goes toward improving the house."

"Can I use your bathroom?" Chanté quickly interjected.

"Sure, it's a second door down there," Elias directed, leading Chanté to scurry off hurriedly. After she did, Elias turned back to his small group of guests. "Now, what do y'all really think? Y'all came from DC, so I know you all look down on my quaint little home in East Point. Throw all the shade you want; I can take it."

"There's seriously no shade to throw," Calvin said.

"You do kind of live in the hood, though," Jerome mumbled under his breath, to which he received a playful slap on the arm from Calvin.

"Ooooh, I know you shame," Elias shot back. "I remember hearing no less than ten gunshots when we were in your neighborhood."

"I'm pretty sure that was your cheap-ass car backfiring," Jerome squared up, drawing a couple of chuckles from the rest of us.

"Oh, Jerome is reading me," Elias said, smirking. "He is really turning into my kind of man. Do you guys want a drink? I know it's hotter than the devil's pussy outside."

"I'll take one," I said.

"Me too," Jerome added.

"What about homegirl?" Elias asked, inquiring about Chanté.

"I'm sure she'll want some water, too," Calvin said.

Elias went upstairs to get our drinks, and almost instantaneously, my cell phone began to vibrate. I pulled it out and read the new text message I received from Toby.

"You here yet?" He asked.

I texted him back.

"Where'd Marcus go?" Jerome asked.

"He was worried about bringing the kids in," I answered. "He went to go check in at the hotel."

"So, you gonna ride back with us?"

"Probably not. I mean, I assume you guys aren't going to go out tonight, right?"

“No, we’ve got some things planned,” Calvin answered. “And besides, I don’t want to be caught in all the drama y’all are about to cause.”

Just as I’d predicted...

“I don’t want to be an inconvenience. I’m sure Elias would have no problem with me sleeping in his guest room,” I said.

“No problem doing what, now?” Elias said, returning down the steps with four bottles of water.

“You’d let me stay here if I needed to, right?”

“Of course. There’s plenty of room. There’s a bed in the guest room, and there’s a pullout bed in that couch,” he said as he pointed to the couch centering in his little den area. “You guys can stay too if you want.”

“We already have reservations,” Jerome said.

“Yeah, we have some plans this weekend, so you guys might not see us that much,” Calvin added.

“Oh no, you guys aren’t doing anything tomorrow night, right?” Elias asked.

“Ah, nothing planned.”

“Good, keep it that way. Tomorrow I’m planning a couple’s event right here. I’d like you guys to be here; I want you to bring Marcus. Toby will bring his boyfriend, Sean will bring his boyfriend, and Anthony will bring his boyfriend. It’s gonna be a fun couple’s party. We are gonna get to know each other and maybe even build bigger bonds as friends and as couples.”

“And this isn’t just some method for you to be messy?” Calvin asked skeptically.

“No, no, no. I mean, we’re gonna do some exercises and ask some questions that I expect everyone to tell the truth about, but there ain’t gonna be no messy people here. This is strictly a couple’s event, no singles allowed. No Braxton and no Kyle.”

“What about TJ?” I asked, just poking fun.

“Definitely no to that tired ass bitch,” Elias immediately shot back.

“Okay,” Calvin nodded, warming to the idea. “We’re all game.”



After about an hour or so, Calvin, Jerome, and Chanté went off to check into their rooms. I stuck around to hang out with my buddy. Elias and I poured a couple of drinks while we waited for the sun to fall and our nightlife to begin. When Toby got off his shift at the gym, he came to meet up as well. The sun finally set, and this restless group began to party. In the time since I’d moved up to DC, a new club had opened that Elias hadn’t yet been to. It promised drag shows, messy queens, and the occasional trade pieces looking for an ego boost.

Our group was the first to arrive, but we later met up with Sean (Vers-A-Style from ThugHarmony) and his boyfriend, Rashaad, who came in from North Carolina. We knew that at some point, we’d be seeing Braxton and TJ, so I simply tried to keep Elias feeling good and in party mode. He proved he didn’t need much of my help, though. After a few drinks in his system, he was on the dance floor dancing with anyone who’d have him to any song the DJ

chose to play, leaving Toby and myself at the bar. We giggled at him, watching him try to remember the dance routines from the respective music videos. I laughed especially heartily.

“So, how are you and Marcus doing?” Toby asked.

I hadn’t been upfront with him about some of my internal issues with Marcus. I hadn’t told anyone yet, not TJ, not Calvin, and not even Elias. And instead of giving the appearance that something was wrong, I gave Toby a generic response.

“We’re doing well,” I said. “What about you? Elias mentioned that you were seeing someone.”

“It’s nothing special; it’s just something new.”

“Somebody, I know?” I asked.

“Probably not, but you’ll meet him soon enough.”

“Yeah, I guess I will since you’ll be at Elias’s party.”

“Oh yeah, we’re gonna be there,” he confirmed.

“So, come on; what does he look like? You’ve never been secretive about someone you’re seeing.”

“Maybe it’s because I know you won’t approve,” he smirked.

“What does my opinion matter if you’re happy?”

“I know you well enough. You’ll find a way to make it matter,” he laughed. “But if you really want to know, he’s a white guy.”

“Oh...”

“See, I knew you would do that,” he laughed again.

“Hey, if you’re happy, then I’m happy for you.”

“But?” He egged me on, trying to get the absolute truth out of me.

“I just hope you’re not his ‘nigger’ in the bedroom.”

“And here we go...”

“Wait, I did say as long as you’re happy,” I explained.

“But here you go insinuating that he is racist, and you don’t even know him.”

“You’ve dated enough of them. You know better than anyone else; gay white men in this region don’t respect us.”

Toby was a gorgeous dude. He had all the makings of an Instagram model. He had smooth chocolate skin and a body he spent hours sculpting daily. He was tatted. He could make another black man so very happy. But he rarely chose to be with other black men. I didn’t hate him for it, but I didn’t understand it. We were in BGAS in college. Maybe I’m wrong to have expected more loyalty or preferential treatment toward black men out of him. I’d even understand if he dated Latino or Asian. Let’s just say that if he were going to go white, I expected white guys with a little swag or appreciation of black men or black culture. But he tended to date the type of white guys that fetishize us and get off on the fetishization.

“I’ve had some bad experiences with white men, but I’ve had bad experiences with black men too,” he shot. “My dick isn’t a black supremacist like yours.”

“It’s not about being a supremacist, Toby. It’s about loving my actual skin color. I love my people enough that it genuinely makes my skin crawl to think of them engaging in raceplay, no matter how subtle you convince yourself that it is.”

“Wow... raceplay?”

“Well, what else do you call it?”

“Why does it have to be about race? Why can’t I just love whoever I love, whatever race they are?” Toby asked.

“Because they’re never black, and you always make sure of that.”

I’d gone too far. I knew I was out of line for how I’d just reamed a good friend I hadn’t seen in a long time. I knew that I wasn’t only wrong but inaccurate. I regretted it as soon as I said it.

“I’m sorry,” I started. “That was... Look, this is getting too deep for me. We’re both gonna walk away from this conversation with the same opinions we had when we came into it, so let’s just end it now.” I offered a mild truce. I wasn’t going to be in town for long, and the last thing I wanted to do was spend the night arguing with or preaching to him.

“Okay, I ain’t the one that brought it up anyway.”

If there’s one thing to take away from this conversation, it’s not that I’m a racist. I have nothing against gay white men, but I do have something against Black men that elevate them over their own. I love Toby dearly, but It’s always been hard not to see him as one of those kinds of black men. Whenever the conversation came up in the past, we’ve always butted heads about it, and neither of us has historically given any flexibility on our beliefs.

I took another sip from my drink, thinking the conversation was over. But when I looked back over at Toby, I could see something brewing under his skin.

“What?” I asked.

“That’s just like you. You sweep into town and judge who I’m seeing, but in the time that you’ve been dating Marcus, I’ve never said anything.”

“What does Marcus have to do with this?”

“First, Barry, we used to hook up. So, while you’re sitting here accusing me of *only* sleeping with white men, remember that you were somehow white enough to make it into that club. And secondly, you were the one who always said you weren’t looking for a relationship because you were so stuck on some roughneck, *hood-ass* dude that you used to fuck and you would rather focus on your career. Yet, as soon as you got to DC, you and Marcus were basically together. You were his nigga. And y’all been together for how long?” He asked rhetorically. “I always found that strange, but I never said nothing to nobody.”

“I wasn’t looking for anybody here in Atlanta.”

“Oh... So that was it? You were looking for somebody, just not someone in Atlanta.”

I had no idea where this was coming from. Toby and I had never been anything more than friends with occasional benefits. And the few times that we did hook up were never anything important. When we kissed, there weren’t sparks. He was attractive enough to have sex with, but I never wanted anything more than that with him. I always kept my guard up because there was zero chance of long-term compatibility. We viewed the world through two separate lenses. Hell, he voted for McCain in 2008. We butt heads on so many different issues. Sure, we could scratch each other’s itches, but we couldn’t possibly be what each other was looking for in a partner.

“I-I-I didn’t know you felt this way,” I said.

“Hey, I don’t feel anything,” he replied. “You found love, and I hope to do so too. But before you try to label me as a coon-”

“I never said that.”

“-Fine, before you try to imply that I hate the color of my skin or the person that I am, you should do some deep searching to find out exactly why I was never good enough for you.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?”

He scoffed. “Little Gay Boy Barry Dixon couldn’t settle down with someone else in Atlanta, so he ran off to DC to chase thugs. Hmm... Sounds like self-hatred to me.”

I didn't know what else to say. I might've just gotten clocked. He said some things that weren't untrue, and it made me rethink. Maybe I did need to do an introspective look at myself before I tried to lecture him. *Shit*. I'd never been so happy to see TJ in my life. He and Braxton approached the bar at just the right time. Ignoring the tension, I jumped up to hug him.

"Hey, how was your flight?" I asked.

"Stale as shit. This is the last time I ever let Braxton book a flight for me," he answered.

"Don't do it, bitch," Braxton squealed.

After exchanging hugs with TJ, I hugged Braxton. "How are you, B?"

"I'm doing well."

"You guys get checked in?" I asked.

"Yeah, we good," Braxton answered. "Hey, Toby. Where's Elias at?"

Almost as if he had planned it, Elias approached us from the dance floor.

"Hey Braxton, girl. How are you doing?" Elias said, leaning in and air-kissing Braxton on the cheek.

"I'm good. How are you and the hubby?"

"He's at work right now."

"Aww, oh! Speaking of hubbies, where is my Calvin?" Braxton turned his head to look at me. "He came with you, didn't he?"

"He is in town; he's just not up to partying with us tonight."

"Oh, ok. Well, I need to talk to her. I can't believe he didn't tell anybody that he ran off and got married. I only found out because he changed his name on Instagram to Calvin Meningitis."

I nearly choked, hearing Braxton mispronounce Calvin's new last name. Even Elias broke out into a cackle.

"What is his last name, child?" he asked.

"Minnicelli," I corrected him.

"Oh child, I thought it was Meningitis."

"It might as well be," TJ mumbled under his breath.

Instead of acknowledging the shade he threw, Elias just rolled his eyes. I got involved, but only to keep the conversation going in a positive direction.

"I think that's how we all found out. Jerome didn't tell Marcus. When we were in Vegas, Calvin only told me that Jerome proposed, but I had no idea they were going to get married so soon."

"Wait," TJ interrupted. "Calvin told you that Jerome proposed in Vegas?"

"Uh- yeah, didn't he tell you?"

"Yeah, but he told me after we all found out they got married," TJ cut his eyes. "But you knew while we were in Vegas?"

I could tell that this struck a nerve with him, somehow. Even with them in the middle of whatever beef they had, it bothered TJ to hear that he wasn't the first to find out this news from his ex-best friend.

"Umm... yeah, but I think they just wanted it to be an undercover thing so we wouldn't make a big deal out of it. They went up to the courthouse and did the deed."

The group had gotten tense, and everyone could feel it. Luckily, Braxton's comedic timing kicked in to break that tension. "Well, I still need to have a conversation with that bitch. He knows better than to keep secrets from me."

“I didn’t even know for the longest,” Elias said. “I thought they were just playing. You know how when you’re in love with somebody, you post little cute things like Mr. and Mr? I did not know they were legit until Barry told me a few months ago.”

“We can all be happy for them, though, right?” I looked around the group.

“Of course,” Braxton spouted. “I’m nothing but happy for them. Meanwhile, where’s your man?”

“He’s back at the hotel. He is here with the kids, and this ain’t really his scene. You’ll probably see him tomorrow, though.”

“Why? He’s gonna be at the parade?”

“No, he’s gonna be-” I happened to catch the look on Elias’ face. He was subtly shaking his head. I had to remember that TJ and Braxton weren’t invited to his couple’s event tomorrow night. I corrected my statement. “-around. He’s just gonna be around.”

“Good, good. I’ll be sure to be on the lookout.”

The group got quiet, eerily so. Braxton looked around, his eyes bouncing from TJ to Elias- an indicator that he had just realized an opportunity to be messy.

“So, y’all not gon’ speak to each other?” Braxton asked.

“Nah, I ain’t got nothing to say,” TJ replied.

Elias waved his hand at the exact same time. “I spoke to everybody I wanted to.”

Toby began to chuckle purely out of nervousness. Like a chain reaction or an infection, the giggle fest spread around the entire group. The giggles and smiles broke the tension, allowing us all to move on from the awkward moment.

“Well, anybody else got any news to share?” Braxton asked. “Elias, you haven’t gone off and got married too, have you?”

TJ rolled his eyes and murmured something under his breath.

“Damn near,” I answered. “He just moved into a new house with his man.”

“Oh nice, am I going to get a chance to meet him?”

“Probably not,” Elias answered. “He’s going to be working all weekend. He won’t really have the time to come out and play. But what about you? Last I remember, you were playing a top for some poor unsuspecting boy in the Bronx.”

“Yeah, and I grew out of that real fast,” Braxton snickered. “But we’re still friends. I’m kind of talking to someone new, though.”

“He from Thugharm?”

“He might be.”

“Is he gonna be here this weekend?” I asked.

“No, no, he won’t. He’s clear across the country, so we are just talking. Nothing serious.”

“Good,” Elias jumped back in. “Look at us all coming up. We ought to do a toast. Calvin and Jerome are married. I have my boo, Toby has his, Barry has his, and Braxton, you have yours.”

Oh God...

Purposely excluding TJ, Elias turned to the bartender behind us. “Can we get FOUR Vodka shots for us FOUR married ladies?”

Braxton smirked, “Shady....”

“Elias...” I muttered, leaning into my southern brother.

“What? I’m getting us some drinks.”

TJ finally spoke up. “I think I see somebody I know over there. I’m going to go say hi. I’ll catch up with you ‘married ladies’ later.”

TJ sloped away from the group in a way that made me feel sorry for him. It made me lowkey sick to my stomach, along with making me annoyed with Elias.

“Why would you do that?” I said.

He only giggled. “I’m the king of ignoring a bitch, ain’t I?”

“You don’t think that was a little rude?” Toby asked.

“I don’t know, maybe it’s the ‘roach’ in me,” Elias said, throwing back to the comment TJ made about him online. Elias turned around after the bartender finished the shots. He handed one of them out to each of us. “Let’s toast.”

“To?” Toby asked.

“To being in love,” Elias said.

“To being a bottom,” Braxton added. We all laughed.

“Hmmm,” Toby thought for a second. “To being a top.”

“Ohhh,” the three of us moaned in unison quizzically.

“...60% of the time,” Toby added, causing us all to laugh.

“What about you, Barry?”

“Uhh,” I thought. *What did I want to toast to?* I was in love, but I had been for a little while. I wasn’t exactly a bottom, nor was I a 60% top. What exactly was I? Or at least, what was I grateful for? “To... being back home.”

“Ayyy,” Elias sounded off as we all tossed our heads back and took the shots into our mouths, letting the fiery liquid burn down our throats.

I hissed.

“Oooh, I needed that,” Toby said. Then, he collected all of our shot glasses and put them back on the bar so we could continue talking.

“So, what’s really tea, bitch?” Braxton asked, directing his question to Elias.

“What?”

“You and TJ, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you all argue before.”

“I’ve never had a problem with him. I may not have seen it for him, but I’ve never had a real issue with TJ,” Elias answered. “And you saw what happened on ThugHarmony.”

“I did. But I didn’t think it was that serious. I’ve dragged all of y’all worse than y’all dragged each other that night, and we still the best of friends.”

“Well, I don’t know about us being the best of friends-”

“Elias, stop. You know you family,” Braxton affirmed.

“Ok, if you say so.”

“Good. So as a friend to all of you, I just want to share the little bit that I know. TJ’s been having a rough year. His real good judies aren’t speaking to him anymore, and he’s never fallen out with Devin and Calvin at the same time. Imagine if y’all all fell out and weren’t speaking to either of the other two-”

The three of us shared a look.

“He’s having a hard time not having anyone in his turf to relate with,” Braxton explained.

“How you know all this?” I asked.

“Cuz I talk to him. I wasn’t his best friend like Devin and Calvin, but we always talk on the phone. And he’s been going through it, especially the last couple of months.”

It felt a little awkward to hear this. Maybe I wasn’t on the same tier of friendship as Devin and Calvin, but I hung out with TJ a few times since he and Calvin fell out. He never mentioned having a tough time to me. I would’ve reached out more had I known.

“Why hasn’t he said anything to me?” I asked.

Braxton's face lit up. His eyes bucked for a second as his eyebrows rose and lips tightened. When his facial muscles relaxed, he spoke.

"No," he said. "No, he hasn't."

"What was that?" I said, calling out that flash of skepticism that was all over his face.

"What was what?" he said, his pitch heightening.

"You."

"Nigga, you look like you just shit a nickel," Toby interrupted.

"What the fuck did that look on your face mean?" I asked. "Does he have a problem with me or something?"

"No," Braxton said. "No, he doesn't. I've said too much as it is. But I want to make it clear. He does not have a problem with you, Barry. And he doesn't really have a problem with you either, Elias. He and Calvin are just in the worst place since the whole bottle situation a few years ago. He feels like the whole site is choosing Calvin over him all over again."

"So, what exactly happened between them?" Elias asked.

"That, I don't know. I was actually hoping Barry would enlighten me on the low."

"No luck," I responded. "All I know is that they got into a fight. Neither one of them would tell me what it was about."

"Ugh- the only time any of you sissies keep a secret is when it's about y'all-damn-selves," Braxton joked. We all laughed.

"Do y'all think they fought over Jerome again?" Toby inquired.

We all looked to Braxton for insight.

"I don't know. TJ hasn't really mentioned Jerome-"

"Which means it could be," Elias instigated.

"No, I don't think that's true," I said. "TJ has a certain disgust every time Jerome's name even comes up. He's definitely not trying to sleep with him."

"Well, we probably aren't going to get any answers tonight," Toby spoke up. "And we are in a club. We can either sit around and ponder the messy love lives of our friends, or we can enjoy the music, dance, and have a few drinks."

Toby posed the question for us to decide how we wanted to spend our evening. After a second of thought, we all came up with our decision in unison by sharing a seemingly telepathic nod.

"So, let's go find a table in a corner and ponder the messy love lives of our friends," Braxton said.

"Here, here!" Elias agreed.

God, I loved these guys...

Over the next 15 minutes, we huddled together at a small, 4-chair bar table in a corner, trying to conjoin the little fragments of information we had as if we were piecing a puzzle together. We'd concluded that the fight likely had to do with money. Braxton mentioned that one of the people TJ had vented to him about was his work rival, Deanna Colter. I recognized the name because that was the woman that had replaced TJ in looking over the financials for M-KAI. And I was able to deduce that she started working with us a few weeks before this fight supposedly happened.

"I think that's it," I said.

“I don’t know. They’re both kinda professional,” Toby interjected. “I can’t see them fighting over money when they both have it.”

“I still like my idea that TJ tried to fuck Jerome again, so Calvin had to two-piece him,” Elias repeated.

“Don’t nobody want to fuck Jerome except you,” Braxton said, taking a sip from his cocktail. After he sipped, he muttered, “And me.”

“And me,” Toby mumbled facetiously.

“You guys are ridiculous,” I laughed.

We hadn’t really noticed in all the fun, but TJ was back, standing right in front of our table.

“What’s so funny?” he asked.

“Uhh- nothing,” I replied.

“Y’all have been cackling nonstop for the last 20 minutes.”

“We’re just catching up, BB. Come pull up a seat right next to me,” Braxton offered him.

“Um, no,” TJ took one look at the person on the other side of Braxton and decided to avoid it. “I think I’m going to head back to the hotel. Maybe hang out with some of the guys that are still there.”

“Good,” Elias said out the side of his neck. The volume was low, but TJ did hear it. TJ also witnessed the eye roll that accompanied it.

“Besides, it smells a little poor in here,” TJ added that last sentence while looking Elias directly in the eyes. “There’s just one bum ass nigga too many in here for me.”

“Yeah,” Elias stood up, kicking his chair back. “And when you leave, that number will go back to zero, the way it should be.”

“Bitch, Fuck you...”

“Don’t make me...”

The commotion started so quickly. We all jumped up from the table, careful to keep the two of them apart before they could get too close, and things went haywire. Braxton got up to take TJ away while I escorted Elias off into the bathroom. The last thing I could hear was TJ thanking me for “getting that fat bitch out of here.”

“Fuck! I hate that bitch!” Elias yelled, his voice echoing throughout the bathroom.

“Come on, we were just talking. There was no need for it to escalate like that.”

“Why you pull me off when that’s the bitch talking shit?”

“Because you were taking it to a place it didn’t need to go, Elias. We were just talking,” I explained to him. “Everybody throws shade.”

“Nigga, I don’t give a fuck!”

“Calm down. It’s not that serious. I was hoping to sit y’all down so we can, at least, cut this tension before all the events tomorrow.”

“Fuck TJ! You worried about me, and you need to be sitting down and having a talk with TJ yo’ damn self!” he shot. “You sittin’ here trying to make us be friends, but clearly, he’s talking to Braxton about yo’ ass!”

“Elias, just chill-”

The bathroom door swung open, and Toby peeked in.

“Ay, we gotta go,” he said, with urgency in his voice.

“Why?” I asked.

“When Braxton was pulling TJ away, they walked right past Sean, and he just started bombing on Braxton.”

“Oh my God,” I sighed.

“Yeah, the bouncers broke it up and are kickin’ us all out.”

I looked over at Elias, disappointed in him. “See what you started?”

“I know you’re not blaming me for this.”

No, I wasn’t blaming Elias for the fight that happened after I pulled him into the bathroom. The fact was that Braxton’s personality garnered him a lot of enemies. It was always smart to keep him away from the group whenever we had reunions. There was always somebody that he’d done wrong online who was looking to get revenge. And I knew this. I was just so occupied with trying to keep TJ, Elias, and Calvin at bay that I completely forgot about the flame wars between the screen handles Rebecca and Vers-A-Style. We hadn’t even been here for five hours yet, and niggas were already throwing hands. *What a trip this is going to be...*

“No, it’s not your fault,” I agreed. “Come on, let’s go.”

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