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

Overview: Fresh back from his one-week vacation, Jerome returns to Printing Central and finds a clusterfuck waiting for him. The money laundering software has created issues, the employees have proven unreliable, and switching back into work mode is more challenging than he expected. He's already dreading a last-minute date night with his husband when he suddenly receives a blast from the past that leaves the entire Printing Central crew shaken to their core.

From Chapter 2: Part 2 (After Atlanta)

"Yo Matteo," I called out to the college student from my office. It was the first Monday after Labor Day. Juelz and I got back from LA last Thursday, but I still wasn't all that excited about coming to work today. I hoped that Ian and Stefano could hold down the fort while I was gone that weekend, but when I came back into the office, the reports were wrong, we were low on stock, and the great app Matteo designed to make my life easier was fucking up.

"Yes, Sir?" Matteo answered, walking into my office.

"What the fuck is this?" I said, holding up the printout from Matteo's program.

"What's the problem?"

"Look at this shit. I just counted the intake from last week. It's nowhere near this number," I said, pointing to the first column that's supposed to accurately tally the money Printing Central brought in. Then, I pointed to the column that lists the amounts needed to be laundered. "And look at these. Why are there so many blank transactions?"

"I don't know," Matteo said. "It doesn't make sense."

"No shit, Sherlock."

"The register only opens when a transaction is made."

"And why is it showing blank transactions?"

"But then, again-"

"Then again, what?" I cut him off.

"I did see Ian go into the register and take a few dollars out before he went to lunch."

"What? Are you fuckin' kidding me?"

"No," Matteo confirmed. "Maybe he's putting in \$0 transactions to open the register."

"This many?" I asked, pointing to all of the times it said \$0.00 on the report.

"Well, these are the duplicates," Matteo explained. He quickly calculated in his head. "In actuality, there's only about 2 of them for every day last week."

"Ian and Stefano," I said, shaking my head. "And what? Are you in on this too?"

"No. I don't go near the register. I'm just the computer guy."

"Fuck... and where the hell is Papo? Did he come in while I was on vacation last week?"

"No. I've been trying to get in contact with him too, but no response."

"He's trying to fucking dodge me. He knows we're supposed to be discussing me bowing out sometime this month."

"You're leaving?" Matteo asked.

"Supposed to be, but I doubt he'll let me if the reports keep looking like this. I'm gonna fuckin' have to talk to these guys."

“Yeah. The UPS guy came by with a box last week, but I couldn’t sign for it.”

“Well, where were they?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I looked around but couldn’t find them.”

“So, they left the store unoccupied?”

“Mmm... I wouldn’t say that. After the guy left, I saw Stefano come from the back with Belinda.”

“Oh my God, this is bullshit! How the hell is Papo expecting to run a business with these guys?”

Matteo shrugged at my question.

“Did Melody at least come by?” I asked.

“About once a day, but they’d just pretend like they were busy.”

I exhaled. Matteo was putting himself on the line divulging all of this information. “You know they’re going to think you are a rat for this, right?”

“Papo says to protect the family. He said that you and Aunt Mel are family. Them guys? Not so much.”

“What about Marcus? How’s he been doing since he returned?” I asked this question out of my own personal curiosity. Marcus came back from Atlanta the Sunday before last. He wasn’t supposed to come back from Atlanta until Tuesday, and he was on the schedule for the rest of the week. I had few interactions with Marcus since my vacation ended, so I didn’t know how he was doing after the breakup with Barry. The little bit that I’ve seen, he seemed cool. However, I knew he had to be bugging about finding a new place for him and his kids to stay.

“He came in. He did the work. I don’t recall any infractions,” Matteo cited.

“Good. So, it looks like I’ve only got to discipline two of these motherfuckers.”

The phone on my desk began to ring. I could see the number on the ID and immediately recognized it. I shooed Matteo away and told him to close my door. After he closed it, I picked up the phone.

“Dick Depot,” I said. “If you’re looking for big dicks, Mr. Minnicelli’s got one in stock.”

“You’re funny,” Juelz said.

“What are you calling me for?”

“I was just bored.”

“And I’m busy.”

“Ok, fine. I’ll cut to the chase,” he said. “You did such a wonderful job blending in with the guys in Atlanta that I want to keep it up. I know it wasn’t easy being around when everything went down-”

“But that’s a normal day for you guys.”

“No,” he quickly corrected me. “None of that was normal. But I wanted to thank you for making the effort to blend in.”

“You know, I actually had fun. I kind of liked Elias’ crazy ass. He’s funny as hell.”

“I’m sure Elias likes you too. But, like I said, I want to keep it up. Dr. Shaard did say that I should keep you around my friends, and I figured maybe I’ll even help you make some friends of your own.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“I’m talking about how you and I are going to dinner tonight with Chanté and Duone.”

“Another double date?”

“Well, you know what they say? Nobody wants to hang out with a couple except another couple. Since Barry and Marcus busted up, I don’t have any other coupled friends,” he explained.

“So, we’re settling for the pregnant lady and her numskull husband?”

“Yeah,” he said sarcastically. “We’re settling for the pregnant lady and her numskull husband. But seriously, you and Duone may hit it off. You guys kind of come from the same background.”

“Yeah, but you know the real thugs have no love for the homo thugs.”

“Babe, you’re more street than 80% of the straight men I know.”

“That means a lot coming from a prep,” I teased.

“You guys will have plenty to talk about. And if you don’t, I’ll be there. You can always talk to me.”

“Juelz, man... I don’t know. I still got jetlag, and I didn’t even want to come in today. Ian and Stefano are stealing from the register, and my accounts and balances are off. By the time I get off, I’mma be trying to go home and go to sleep.”

“Jerome, come on. You need friends, and it’s not like you’re bonding with your uncles.”

“For the last time, Juelz, they’re not my uncles. They’re Papo’s girlfriend’s sons,” I broke it down for him. “And they’re half the reason I’m stressed.”

He began to talk over me, “I will do that thing you like tonight, and we can do that thing you really like when you come home tomorrow.”

“Mmmm...” I hummed. We hadn’t really gotten it in since Saturday, and sex tomorrow would perfectly fit my “need it every three days” schedule.

“Say yes,” he said seductively.

I groaned.

“Say yes,” he repeated.

“Ok,” I gave in.

“Thank you,” he said. “Meet us at the Steak Clubhouse as soon as you get off. We should be there by 5:30.”

“Alright. Love you.”

“Love you too. K, bye,” he hung up.

I put my head down on my desk. Couple socializing. What good has that ever gotten me? Sure, we’ve been on numerous couple dates with Barry and Marcus, but they’re over now. If you ask me, it feels like we have to go through the divorce with them since they split up. And then there’re all the disasters from trying to double date with TJ and his flavors of the week. And then, of course, there was Armageddon in Atlanta- the couple’s party that turned into fight night. I didn’t know if I was ready to do another fucking couple’s event. I’m suffering PTSD from all the bullshit.

There was a knock at my office door.

“Who is it?” I asked.

“Matteo, sir,” Matteo announced. “You have someone at the front looking for the manager.”

I groaned again and used nearly every muscle in my body to lift myself from my office chair and walk up to the front of the department. I opened my office door and nearly stomped like a spoiled child as I made my way to the front. I saw a group of black men, all standing at the entrance. As I got closer and closer, I began to recognize some of their faces. They’d aged a few years, but I definitely knew little GBaby’s face when I saw him. He was no longer Little GBaby,

though. That nigga was a grown-ass man now. I also recognized PimpJ and Lil' Man Jyboné. But these young ass niggas paled in comparison to the old ass nigga in the wheelchair that they were standing behind.

It was Black, the nigga that scooped me up back when I was a shorty and sold me the dreams about being a drug dealer. I hadn't seen him in years, not since I got jumped out. I hadn't been keeping up, but Marcus had mentioned that he was in a wheelchair now. He also let me know that Black's number 1 henchman, Steroid, was in prison. It was nice to know that he kept some of the same niggas around him since so many of the older ones were forced to move on.

"Looky here, boys. We're getting a two-for-one special," Black said in his hoarse voice. "We got Marky Mark and Romey Rome."

Marcus was at the computer by the register. Ian was eating a late breakfast at the counter, and Stefano had been sitting on the couch watching the TV in the lobby, but he got up to approach me as I was coming out.

"You want me to get these guys out of here?" he asked.

"Nah, I got this, man," I told him. "Stay behind the counter, though, and keep an eye on Matteo."

"Got it, boss."

I walked cautiously up to the front to greet my former foe.

"Rome... Lil' Romeo... Romeo hearts Juliette... or should I say Julio," he said, taking a dig at me being gay. He must've found out on the streets. Either that or he'd been having me followed; I wouldn't pull it past him.

"What do you want, Black?"

He chuckled. "No love for an old boss? You've come a long way since Subway, Rome."

"And you've come a long way to see me. So, what do you want?"

"You see, I'm hearing some things," he started. "My connect out in Philly told me all about this fabulous new drug hitting the streets. They say this shit is like heroin in a little white pill. So, since this is the new shit, I'm like, 'Yo, I need to get me some of this shit.' Me and my niggas roll out to Philly and shakedown this flashy-ass Italian boy, and he tells us they selling this shit in my own back yard. Now, Romey Rome, do you know anything about this?"

"Nah, man," I shook my head. "I don't have any idea what the fuck you're talkin' about."

"That's funny," he continued. "Cuz that's what I was thinking. But the flashy-ass Italian boy insists that this shit comes out of a print shop in downtown DC. He even gives me an address, and I stake out the spot. So, you must understand how conflicted I feel when yo' funky, high-yella' big bird lookin' ass steps out of this bomb ass Denali and walks into the address that flashy-ass Italian gave me."

"I imagine you were pretty conflicted. But maybe you should learn to comprehend a coincidence when you see one."

"A coincidence, huh?"

"That's right, Black. It's a coincidence. The information you got was faulty. Wait, let me dumb it down a bit more so you can grasp it. Wrong," I said. "The information you got was wrong. Now, roll your crazy cripple ass out of my store."

Marcus and Ian laughed behind me. Matteo still looked terrified, and Stefano looked a bit worried as well.

Black set his wheelchair to lock so it wouldn't roll. He put his hands on the armrests to lift his body into the air and stand straight up. Then, he walked over to me, not crippled at all. He got directly into my face, so close that I could smell the smoke on his breath.

“You still owe me money, bitch,” he said.

“I don’t think so. I paid all my debts a long time ago.”

He smiled. “Come on, man. Why can’t we let bygones be bygones? We used to work well together. I still tell my lost boys about your work ethic, man. I teach them everything about your business model, including where you went wrong.”

“Oh, I went wrong, huh?”

“Yeah, you did. You tried to cross Black,” he referred to himself in the third person. “But up until then, you were my protégé.”

“Nigga, I was your superior. And I still am. I make more money than you, and I don’t even touch drugs anymore. Sorry Black, but the man you’re looking for ain’t here. The drugs you’re looking for- they ain’t here either. Find yourself another print shop.”

“Alright, alright,” he said. “It’s a shame that a black man wants to keep another black man down, yet you employing these fuckin’ guidos.”

“Ay,” Stefano yelled. “I got your fuckin’ guido right here, you ashy, fuckin-”

“Stefano, yo,” I turned back to him. “Chill.”

“You see what they think about you?” Black asked, backing up to get back into his wheelchair. “They don’t think you’re any different from me. To them, you’re a nigger.”

“But to me, you’re still a bitch,” I said.

“And I’m gonna remember that.” Black looked up at Blockhead, his new number 1 henchman, a guy that got recruited about a year after me. Blockhead took it as a sign to turn him around and begin pushing him out of Printing Central. “By the way, nice truck.”

Me and my crew stood firm as we watched Black and his crew retreat. When they were gone, we all were relieved, but none more relieved than Matteo, who’d been on the verge of shitting his pants ever since he came to get me from the back.

“Stefano,” I called out to my ‘uncle,’ as Juelz would say. “Start watching these doors a little tighter. You immediately notify me if you see any of those guys lurking around.”

“I got you.”

“Marcus,” I called out to him. “You still holding a piece?”

“Yeah,” he established. “I got it back from Vita when I got out of prison. Been hiding it in a shoebox in the closet ever since.”

“Good, bring that shoebox to work. You can stash it under the counter.”

“Do I need to be scared?” Matteo asked. Whether I approved of his fear or not, he was going to be scared. The look on his face was beyond horrified.

“You need to get in contact with Papo,” I said sharply. I headed back to my office and closed the door.

I was edgy but manageable all day long. I gave Ian and Stefano a good talking to about how the register is not a petty cash drawer. I counted out some money from the safe to align with the accounts receivable report and shipped the funds off to the bank via Armored Guard. I sent Ian down to the UPS office to sign for the box of supplies that arrived while I was gone. When he returned, I stocked the office with paper, staples, and everything running low. By the time I finished, Printing Central was ready to close.

I walked out to the parking garage and caught a glimpse of the Denali. The shit had all of the windows busted out. There were scratches all over it, the tires were slashed, and in big white spray-painted letters, it said “Fag” on the windshield. I had a fit. They fucked up the Denali, man! Who does this shit to a nigga’s brand-new truck?

“Yo, that’s fucked up,” Ian said.

“You didn’t see this shit when you went to go get the box?” I asked him.

“No,” he said. “There were more cars. I didn’t even think to look.”

“Shit, man! Fuck!”

“Yo,” Stefano started. “I bet it was those fucking guys, the guys that came into our shop this morning.”

Ian popped him in the back of the head. “Of course, it was those guys, stupid. Stop being such a fucking jerkoff.”

“Fuck!” I yelled out into the evening air.

“Yo man,” Marcus said. “I’d stay, but I gotta go pick up the kids.”

“Yeah, yeah. Go ahead and go,” I told him. I told all of them the same. I pulled out my cellphone and called AAA, arranging for the Denali to be towed to a shop run by my sister Patrice’s husband. When I called, I told him that I’d spare no expense. All I wanted was for it to be fixed up like brand new. After I got that squared away, I grabbed a few bills from the safe and called a cab to take me to the restaurant.

I arrived late like hell. I hoped to be there by 5:30 but was coming in a quarter after 6. Juelz, Chanté, and Duone had already started eating and having a lively conversation when I arrived with my shirt unbuttoned, my tie in my pocket, and my shirttail loose.

“Hey, I’m sorry I’m late,” I apologized.

Juelz smiled, but one of those forced smiles that had him cheesed with a psycho stare.

“Jerome, if you were going to be dressed like that, you should’ve just gone home,” he said with his tight teeth.

So now he tells me...

“I didn’t want to miss dinner or the chance to meet Chanté’s boyfriend. Duone, right?”

Duone sat in the seat next to Chanté and right across from me.

“Yeah, dat’s me, man,” Duone said.

I reached my hand out to shake, and Duone generously accepted. “Nice to meet you, my man,” he said.

“You too.”

Juelz went back to talking to me through his tight teeth. “You have sweat stains under your arms.”

I leaned into his ear. “But I’m here, right? Better late than never.”

“Says who?” he responded, his teeth still tight while he smiled that crazed, Tom Cruise looking smile.

“Ok,” Chanté said. “We can hear you guys.”

She and Duone giggled. “Y’all reminding me of my parents back in the day, G.”

While I was on my way, I texted Juelz to let him know that I would be late and that he should order something off the menu for me. Now here and seated, I looked down at my plate.

“What the hell is this?” I asked.

“It’s Salmon with starch-free mashed potatoes and corn,” Juelz said, almost too happy to be telling me. He knew this meal was going to be torturous.

“This is a steakhouse, ain’t it?” I said, looking at the half-eaten steaks on both Chanté and Duone’s plates. I looked over at Juelz and saw that he’d gone with a sad-looking chicken breast. “What? Did we go broke? We can’t afford the steak?”

“Jerome, you don’t need the steak. We settled on this a while ago, you can only eat red meat on the weekends.”

“I thought I could only eat red meat if we went out to eat.”

“Seriously, Jerome? You mean to tell me that you’re going to fast-food restaurants for lunch every day and you’re eating beef?” he complained. “This is why you now have Salmon.”

“Ok,” I accepted the salmon, but I still had questions about this meal. “What the hell are starch-free potatoes? How they get the starch out of ‘em?”

And back came the tight-teeth monster. “There is no starch, Jerome. They aren’t potatoes.”

“Then, what are they?”

“It’s cauliflower.”

“Then, why don’t they call this shit mashed cauliflower?”

Duone and Chanté seemed to be really getting a kick out of our comedy routine.

“Just eat it, Jerome,” Juelz begged, wanting to ease off the bickering so that we could eat dinner in peace.

“Alright,” I agreed. “Mmmm... Mashed Cauliflower.”

Our little scene broke the ice, and strange enough, Duone and I connected. We had shared interests in the NY Giants, had strong opposing opinions about the Drake and Chris Brown fight this summer (although our opinions were not strong enough to turn bitter), and we even had a nice discussion on the similarities between the old mobster movies and the 90’s gangsta flicks. But most of all, we united in our opinions of the waitress working the table a few rows over. She was fine as fuck. She had the short Halle Berry haircut with Gabrielle Union cheekbones. Yeah... me and the new homie were feeling her, and I guess we were a bit too obvious.

“Duone, will you stop looking in that girl’s chest every time she comes out with a plate of food?” Chanté asked him, annoyed with his wandering eye.

“I’m just lookin’ at the damn lady,” he defended himself. “Like I ain’t caught you checkin’ out niggas.”

“I can’t take it,” Chanté expressed. “I don’t see how you can either. Jerome keeps looking at her ass too. If I didn’t know better-”

“Oh, Jerome is the worst. If she was our waitress, he’d be stuttering up a storm,” Juelz said.

“I wouldn’t either,” I objected, wondering how I got brought into this.

“Jerome, please,” he turned away from me and back to Chanté. “But she doesn’t surprise me. I know his types. Most times, I can see them coming. Anytime there’s a sort of mild muscular dude with a smooth face, he’ll turn his head. And the women? Lord, it’s even worse with the women.”

The shit he was saying sounded like gibberish to me. I couldn’t think of one time that I had ever checked out anybody while he was around outside of this moment with the waitress a few rows over.

“Let me tell you about that flight to LA,” he continued. “As soon as I got on the plane, I saw this flight attendant. She had long hair, she was pretty, and I just knew that she was gonna be Jerome’s type. I don’t think he saw her at first because she was sitting down when we got on the plane. And he might not have seen her ass then, but he saw her ass later. Every time she came by, he was like, ‘Duh-duh-duh-duh-duh-do you-u-u-u ha-a-a-a-ave a-a-ano-no-no-nother pillow?’”

Chanté and Duone laughed. I even smiled because he had me. I did do that, and I was smitten by ole girl on the plane. I just didn’t know he knew that.

“But I didn’t even say anything. He can look. Sometimes, he needs the fantasy.”

“Man, I don’t know how you do it,” Chanté said. “I don’t think I’d ever be able to date a bisexual man. Twice the problems? No thanks.”

I laughed at that. “I remember the flight attendant he’s talking about, but I wasn’t staring because I was attracted to her. She reminded me of that chick from that reality show.”

“What? Love & Hip Hop Atlanta?” Juelz answered.

Before I could respond, Chanté jumped in.

“Ooh, I love that show. I was tryna’ see Ms. Joseline when we went out to Atlanta,” Chanté said. “Duone likes that show too.”

“That shit is crazy as hell,” Duone smirked. “That Stevie J is a fuckin’ clown ass nigga.” The table laughed.

The night progressed. As we finished our food, we bounced from topic to topic, pretty much covering every major current event. Before we knew it, we were coming on 8 o’clock, and our waiter was waiting for us to get up and leave, so he could get his tip. He slid the check over to us. Duone pulled out his wallet.

“No-no,” I said. “We invited you guys out, right? I got this.”

I pulled out my wallet and pulled out one of the \$100 bills that I took from the safe earlier. Juelz side-eyed the hell out of me as I put the bill between the fold and handed it to the waiter.

“Damn,” Chanté said.

“Yeah,” Juelz cosigned. “Looks like Ian and Stefano aren’t the only ones stealing from the register.”

“I had that in my wallet for the longest. And I need the change.”

“Okay,” Juelz backed off.

“Jerome just bought a Denali,” Chanté brought up out of nowhere.

“Oh really?” Duone asked. “Is it this year?”

“No. It’s a 2011,” I answered.

“Man, I gotta see this.”

“Maybe another time; I don’t have it with me.”

“Where the hell is the Denali?” Juelz asked.

“I was gonna tell you about it later. By the way, I’m gonna need a ride home.”

Juelz sighed.

Our waiter came back with my change, and I set out about fifteen dollars on the table, keeping the rest. All of us grabbed our belongings and headed out.

“It was really nice to meet you, man,” Duone said.

“You too, man.”

“We’ll really have to get together again sometime,” Chanté said.

“Yeah, sometime soon,” I added.

We all waved goodbye to each other and went off our different ways. I aligned myself with Juelz, following him to wherever he’d parked.

“This was fun,” I said, genuinely surprised that I enjoyed myself.

“It was,” he agreed.

As you can see, we were proactively incorporating the lessons we learned from Dr. Shaard into our daily lives. And for the most part, the lessons made us stronger. In that first session, she let us know that the main thing she wanted to tackle with me was my need to keep Juelz on a leash. And she’d be working on getting him to put more faith and trust in me. If we graduate or decide to stop seeing Dr. Shaard, these are the two issues she wants us to resolve.