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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: With the ice finally thawing between the two Simpson heirs, Jerome and Calvin accept the olive branch that comes in the form of an invitation to see their young nephew's acting debut in a church Nativity play. The only problem is that it's taking place at the old family church home, New Mt. Independence Baptist Church. The prodigal son and his well-meaning husband return to Baltimore and face family members he's long left behind.

## From Chapter 2:

I'm typically very excited for the weekends, but since moving to the new home, weekends have been a bit bittersweet. On the one hand, it marks the two days that Juelz and I get to be together without interruptions. But on the other hand, it marks the two days that we try to get everything in order before we return to our hectic work weeks. The weekends never seem long enough. And even though this is a long weekend, with Christmas Eve on Monday and Christmas on Tuesday, it'll still feel rushed. Before we know it, it will be over. On this day, we had to wake sometime around eight and drive out to Baltimore for Racer Joniah's play.

We got the call last week from Chastity. She told us that Juelz's family church home was doing a nativity scene and wanted to invite us. Racer was only going to have a small part, undoubtedly a nonspeaking part, since he was only three years old. But this was a huge step. It's the first time any of Juelz's family members have legitimately attempted to include us. There was the whole fiasco with the "wedding reception," but you know how that turned out. This is the first and only time they contacted us since dinner with Marleen. We had to go with an open mind and be willing to build.

The play wouldn't start until noon, and since we had a couple of hours to kill, we decided to hit Mondawmin Mall in Northwest Baltimore, not very far from the Baptist Church that Juelz grew up in. I could tell he was unsettled being back in his hometown and close to his childhood. The minute we hit the Baltimore City limits, he got really quiet. When I pulled up to the mall, it was packed. I drove around a few times and eventually found a nice parking spot in the back. When I shut the Denali off, I noticed the deeply pensive look he had on his face. Grabbing Juelz's hand on the armrest, I hoped my grip would pacify him. Don't know if it worked, but it snapped him out of deep thought. He turned to look at me and smiled.

"You used to come here a lot?" I asked.

"No," he answered. "This was the ghetto mall. They remodeled it since the last time I've been here. But this area ain't nowhere you want to be when night falls."

"Oh. I assumed that since y'all went to church over here, y'all lived in the area too."

"Uh- you've met Calvin and Charmaine Simpson. Do they look like they lived anywhere over here?" He asked. "You've even been to our house."

“Once,” I corrected. “And I don't even remember where that is.”

“Well, that was in White Marsh. That's way on the other side of Baltimore.”

“So, what? You afraid to be out here with your cousins, Ray Ray and 'nem?”

Juelz laughed.

Although this was the “ghetto mall,” it was well-maintained. I've seen far more ghetto behavior out of the Mall at Prince George's than I saw here. But then again, Juelz did say they remodeled it recently. We strolled through all the common stores. I stopped at GameStop to see if they had any Xbox games that I might be interested in. That was a fat chance, which was fine, because I haven't even unpacked my Xbox system yet. And I hadn't played it since early summer; I hadn't had the time. We hit several of the department stores, mainly browsing and picking up a few trinkets here and there. We decided to try out one of the toy stores to see if there was anything that we could gift Racer with this Christmas.

“I think I'm gonna get a LeapPad for Racer Joniah. You think Ethan would want one too?” He asked, pushing the cart in the store while I trailed a few steps behind him. We'd just turned down an electronics aisle.

“What's a LeapPad?”

“It's like a kid's iPad. It helps them learn colors, animals, numbers- all of that.”

“It wouldn't hurt,” I said. My guess was about as good as his. Ethan was six. When I was six, I was just happy to have something to unwrap on Christmas Day. I didn't care what the fuck it was.

“Okay, what about JoJo and Mickey?” He asked.

“Uh- they would probably appreciate it too. But hold up, how much does this kid's iPad thing cost?”

“Um... \$109,” he answered shamefully.

“You're gonna spend \$400 on some kids we barely see?”

“You think I shouldn't? I kind of want to make up for all the Christmases that I wasn't around for Racer.”

“I understand that. But Ethan will be cool with a couple of hot wheels, JoJo can get a coloring book, and Mickey will be straight with a baby doll.”

“You are terrible,” he laughed.

“I'm serious. And why are you in a rush to spend so much money anyway? You just went furniture shopping with Lily. You probably spent thousands of dollars on blinds and curtains.”

He chuckled. “No, she's aware of my budget. Now that the living room and kitchen are done, I don't want to spend more than \$2500 a room.”

“That's a high budget, even for me,” I chimed in.

“You think so?”

“Yeah. \$2500 on a room that nobody is sleeping in yet?”

“But I also don't want guests sleeping on the floor or in air mattresses like my mom had to do when they visited. That was a horrible first impression to leave.”

“She understood,” I assured him. “We had just moved in.”

“And we've barely made any progress since then,” he sighed. I did hear the stress in his voice. “Are we crazy for this?- Buying this big house and moving so far away from everything we know.”

“Come on, don’t doubt it now. I think we made the right decision; we just need to adjust to it. It’s gonna take some time,” I pulled him close and hugged him while he rested his head on my chest. He took a deep breath to try to calm himself. “So, until then, let’s just buy these fuckin’ kids some iPads.”

He smiled. “Why? What were you planning on getting them? Hot wheels and baby dolls?”

“Sheeiiiiit, I was just gonna give all the kids five dollars.”

“Five dollars? Who’s the cheapskate now?”

“Nigga, do you know how many nieces and nephews I have? They’ll be lucky if I can afford to give each of them a quarter.”

“Well, Ethan’s different. He’s gonna be spending Christmas with us,” he argued. “We should make sure he has plenty to open on Christmas Day.”

“I know,” I sighed and thought. “Mom did say that he needed some new clothes for school.”

“What about your mom?” He asked. “Did you get her gift yet?”

“Simple is always best with my mom. She’s getting a digital picture frame, a gift certificate to her favorite spa, and a neck massager.”

“Damn, Sexy Santa. I can’t wait to see what you got me.”

“I can’t wait until you see it either,” I said, 100% certain that the gift I would give him would blow every gift he’s ever received out of the water. But there are times when I wonder if he already knows. It’s no secret that we often end up on the same wavelength. I’ll be thinking something completely random and out of the blue, but then he’ll turn around and say that exact same thing. So, if I got the perfect gift for him, he may already know it’s coming.

“We never finished that conversation about our children,” he said. *See?*

“What conversation?”

“We need to start setting some things in stone if we’re going to do this. You just turned 30- and I don’t want you to be an 80-year-old trying to chase a toddler around.”

“Well, what do we need to discuss?” I questioned.

“You never decided if you wanted to find a woman or if you had one in-”

“Let me stop you there. I’m not gonna run out, knock up some random woman, and then share custody. If I do this, I want this to be our kid- not ours and somebody else’s.”

“Okay,” he said, still pushing the cart down the aisle. He stopped and picked up a Furby.

“I remember a while back, there was this lesbian couple that wanted to have kids. They use each other’s brothers as sperm donors.”

“And they raise the kids as siblings?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t they?” I asked.

“Because they’re technically cousins- at least genetically.”

I thought. He was right. The two would be cousins instead of siblings.

“I thought it was a creative way to procreate,” I said.

“Oh really?” He chuckled. “So, which one of my sisters do you want to procreate with? The one that hates you or the two that are under 18?”

“I didn’t say that-”

“Or better yet, which of your sisters do you think would be willing to have my baby? The married ones, the lesbian one, or the one in jail?”

“Juelz, it’s just a discussion. Plus, I told you I would be okay with adopting.”

“If you’re serious, you know we could have a kid in as quick as a month.”

“I thought it usually takes a couple of years to get approved,” I said.

“That’s if you want an infant; they’re the ones in the highest demand. I’m sure we can find a Black adolescent or a toddler.”

“I think we should do it.”

“Really?” He asked, an excitement resonating in his voice.

“Yeah. Can we just walk in there and pick one up, or do we need to make an appointment?” I joked.

“Jerome, you’re not taking this seriously.”

“I am.”

“No, you’re not. You’re making jokes, and this isn’t a laughing matter. If we get a child from an adoption agency, we can’t just take it back whenever we feel like it.”

“Why not? The kids don’t come with receipts?”

He rolled his eyes.

“I’m done with you,” he said, pushing the cart over into the next aisle.



The New Mt. Independence Baptist Church has been around since the 1950s. It’s the church the Simpson family was raised in. Juelz’s great-grandfather, Clarence Lionel Simpson, was one of the original pastors. Sadly, he is no longer with us. However, his legacy is still regularly active in it. After years of being estranged from his family, Juelz was less than excited to possibly run into every single one of them. He had no idea what they’d heard and was more than prepared for all the religiously evil glares he would receive. He always expects the worst out of his family; judging from my own experiences, I could see why.

“It’s not too late,” he said as we pulled up to the church. “We can head back to the apartment, and I’ll tell Chastity that we got caught up in traffic.”

“What’s the worst that could happen here?”

“You’ve never been to a Baptist Church, have you? These people will literally stone us as we enter and salt the ground where they bury us to ensure that faggotry will never walk that spot on Earth ever again.”

“If they don’t want you to support your nephew, what kind of Christians are they anyway?”

“I’ve been asking that question for 26 years.”

“We can sit in the back if you want. And we can leave as soon as Racer is finished, but we have to go in,” I told him. It may have been too much to ask for him to face everyone today,

but I wasn't going to let him cower his way out of this. If it meant that we were going to raise hell in the Lord's house, then so shall it be.

The parking lot was already pretty filled up, which meant the pews probably were too. We needed to hurry and get inside before we wound up without a seat. The church was a standard size. At least it seemed to be, coming from someone who had only been to church twice in his lifetime.

When we walked in, an usher standing at the door handed us a program for the presentation. We took a couple of seats in the back row, so we could sneak out if Juelz got too uncomfortable. He pulled out his phone to text Chastity and let her know that we were there while I looked over the program to see if Racer was listed. I couldn't help but smile when I saw what he was cast as. After sending his text, Juelz noticed the grin on my face.

"What are you smiling about?" He asked.

"Racer is playing Sheep #2."

He smiled to himself, imagining how adorable this kid was gonna look when he took the stage. The smile didn't last long. From the corner of his eye, he could see his sister in the first few rows as she was looking around to spot her brother. Next to her sat her husband, Adam. And the whole cluster of folks sitting in that area were descendants of the Simpson line. Juelz recognized some of his cousins, even though many had changed now that they were older. He recognized one of his gray-haired uncles and aunt up front, along with his grandmother. Lastly, he saw his father and stepmom at the very end of one of the pews.

He murmured under his breath. "I can't wait till this is over."

I only smiled. I got him to the church; I did my good deed for the day. From here, I only hoped for the best possible outcome. The lights fell soon after, and the play began.

The Nativity scene's castmates were all children of the New Mt. Independence Baptist Church, ranging from age 3 to 12. The oldest was a young girl named Patrice Taylor, who was supposedly the great-great-granddaughter of the New Mt. Independence Baptist Church's founder, Meshach Cole. She scored the role of Jesus's mother, Mary- while a very tall 10-year-old played Joseph. The role of Jesus was played by a cheap baby doll from Walmart.

But the real showstopper was Racer. He was the youngest character in the play and by far the cutest. He, along with Sheep #1 and several other barnyard animals, popped on the scene at the same time, right around the birth of our lord and savior. Poor Racer was completely oblivious to what was going on around him. Five minutes after witnessing baby Jesus's birth, Racer waved to his family in the first few rows. And a few minutes later, the poor sheep wandered into the audience. Chastity had to get up to get him, and when she did, she just sat him on her lap until the play ended.

The play lasted for all of 50 minutes if that long. After that, the lights came up, and the preacher gave a small sermon. The play had turned into Saturday afternoon service, which I have to admit was nice to hear. But with the lights up, we were visible. With all of the head shuffling Chastity did, she finally pinpointed us in the back row. She whispered to her husband, Adam, who also turned to look at us. And from there, you could see it spread like wildfire. The rumor about the prodigal son's return infiltrated the group as the family all began to look back at us one by one. Juelz began sweating bullets, and I wasn't so comfortable either.

"You want to slip out?" I asked him, whispering in his ear.

“Please,” he agreed wholeheartedly.

We were just getting ready to make our move when the preacher said, “Let us stand,” so he could deliver the final prayer and dismiss the service. Our departure plans were stalled for at least another minute. The preacher prayed effortlessly for the safety of his congregation through the four-day weekend and throughout the holidays. Scattered Amens and other forms of praise rang out from different areas of the church as the congregation showed their unity in God’s house.

“This we pray, in your son, Jesus Christ’s name, amen....”

As soon as the prayer was over, Juelz’s head popped up so quickly as he began a dart for the door. Unfortunately, he’d run into another barrier standing right in front of the exit.

“Calvin Jr.,” this husky older man said. He had to be in his 60s, a round man with thinned-out salt-and-pepper hair. He wore a black and white sweater with black slacks and shiny black dress shoes. “Look at you, looking just like Baby Calvin.”

Juelz blushed, partly out of embarrassment and partly out of a youthful excitement that he hadn’t felt since he was a kid. The man standing in front of him was his favorite uncle, Charlie Simpson.

“Hey, Uncle Charlie.”

“Yo’ daddy know you here?” He asked.

Calvin Sr. had to have known that we were in attendance. He was definitely in that web of people that glanced back at us and made solid eye contact with Juelz during the sermon.

“I don’t know,” Juelz said, avoiding the topic altogether.

“Where you been at, boy?” Charlie asked.

Before Juelz could gather an answer, Charlie had proceeded to show his discovery off to the family.

“Gene!” He called out to his brother-in-law, his sister’s husband. “Look who I found over here looking just like Baby Calvin.”

Charlie escorted Juelz away so quickly that I could only follow. Juelz turned to look back at me and mouthed, “Help!”

I didn’t know what to do. I shrugged, keeping a small distance from the two men charging toward the pulpit. They finally made it up to the front row, where Eugene Talbot III sat with his wife, Christine. The Simpson siblings looked alike, with minor touches showcasing their individuality. Charlie was stocky and sloppy, but Christine was tall and slender. She also wore thick glasses and had a thinning hairline that had been combed as far forward as possible. I’d say that Christine was somewhere in her mid-60s, a year or two older than Charlie.

Eugene stood up and eyed Juelz, looking him up and down. “I see you finally lost that baby fat, boy.”

Juelz smiled. “Yeah...”

“When’s the last time I saw you? 2003?”

Juelz didn’t answer. Not because he was being impolite but because his attention had been taken away. For a split second, he locked eyes with his father, who was standing a couple of pews behind where Juelz was standing with his uncles. The two men saw each other; there could be no mistaking it this time. But instead of Calvin Sr. acknowledging Juelz, he proceeded to put on his jacket and escort his wife out of the church. Juelz was flabbergasted, hurt even.



After all these years of ignoring his father and family, he finally realized how painful it felt once they ignored him in the same fashion.

“Calvin!” Eugene called again to get Juelz’s attention.

“Uh- I think so,” Juelz said, answering his uncle’s question. “It was your 50th birthday.”

“That’s right. It’s been too long.”

Juelz got a tap on the shoulder. When he turned to look behind him, his face lit up. He saw his cousin, an athletically built woman sporting a long curly wig. They immediately embraced.

“Calvin!!!” She squealed with joy.

“Ruby!!” He yelled back. “Are you back in B-more?”

“Yes,” she answered. “I’ve been back for seven years, foo!”

“Awww, you didn’t stay at UCLA?”

“No, I tore my ACL and lost my scholarship. I’ve been trying to get a hold of you ever since I got back.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know,” he apologized.

“Yeah, do you know how many Calvin Simpson’s are on Facebook?” She laughed.

Juelz’s attention was diverted again, this time by a male cousin of his who was standing in the pew behind the front row, holding a toddler in his arms.

“Hey, Calvin,” the cousin said.

“Hey ‘Twan,” Juelz said. “How have you been?”

“Been cool. Here is baby number five.”

Juelz’s eyes bugged out. “Baby number five? You know there are other things to do when you’re bored, right?”

“That’s the same thing I’ve been telling this knucklehead,” Charlie said, in reference to his 24-year-old son and the starting five that his son begot.

“So, Calvin, how long are you in town for?” Christine asked.

“Not long. We are about to go back home, so we can set up for our Christmas party.”

“We?” Nearly everyone said in unison.

*Oh shit...*

“Yeah,” Juelz looked back at me. I must’ve looked like a deer in headlights. “This is Jerome, my husband.”

If you could’ve seen the looks on their faces: Jaws dropped, eyes bulged like they were ready to pop. Twan handed his child off to his girlfriend as if it were his attempt to keep the baby sheltered and away from hearing about this “foreign” lifestyle. If there was anything I learned at this moment, it was that that look of judgment Juelz sometimes gives me whenever I say something crazy is not a facial expression that can be learned. It’s purely genetic and unique to this family. And though the clique was only of about 7 to 10 people surrounding us, it felt like a million eyes staring right through me.

Juelz took a step back and grabbed my hand.

“I knew it!” Screamed one of his random female cousins. What she knew, I couldn’t tell you. But her outburst definitely made me a bit self-conscious. From what I knew of Juelz’s childhood, everyone had been aware of his sexual confusion when he was a child. Though



through my eyes, he wasn't all that effeminate now, he was apparently very flamboyant in his early years.

"Oh, sookie sookie now," Ruby blurted, looking me up and down. It was hard to tell whether she was approving me for Juelz or if she was just approving me in general. "Welcome to the family, cousin," she said, extending her arms to me.

When she embraced me, she held me tight and close. It was a genuinely warm and friendly hug, something I wasn't sure that Juelz's family was capable of. And even while I was wrapped in the midst of it, I looked around at the expression on the various other members of his clan. There was disgust: in several of the male figures, including Uncle Eugene and 'Twan. There was disappointment in Uncle Charlie and his wife, Janice. There appeared to be a little bit of anger in a couple of the female cousins in the back. One of them shook her head, her neck twirling like a King cobra being charmed by a snake charmer's flute.

"So, I guess that's why you haven't been around?" Eugene said.

Juelz clenched his lips and nodded his head.

"You don't have to be a stranger, Calvin," Janice chimed back in. "The family still loves you."

When Ruby finally let go, Janice was the next to embrace me. Her hug was not as warm as Ruby's, but she received an A for effort.

"Your daddy told me you got married. I guess I forgot that kind of thing is legal now," Charlie said.

When Janice let go, she nudged her husband forward. He definitely wasn't in the mood to welcome me with a hug, but he extended his hand and shook.

"You say your name is Jerome?" He asked.

"Yes, Sir."

"Nice to meet you, Jerome."

For the next five minutes, I was passed around to different members of Juelz's family and greeted with hugs or handshakes. The pastor of the church, one Timothy Cole, even came down to address me even though he wasn't Juelz's family member. I don't think he was aware of what was going on, just that something big was occurring right smack dab in the middle of his church, so he had to get involved. When he saw Juelz, he gave the traditional greeting, "Boy, I ain't seen you since you were this big!" Then, he bent his knees and motioned with his hand to suggest that the last time he'd seen Juelz was when Juelz was a tiny tot.

"Where is your daddy at?" The pastor asked. Oddly enough, this was the first time anyone questioned the whereabouts of Calvin Sr. since Juelz's discovery. The family looked around for him, somewhat ashamed they hadn't noticed he was gone.

"I think he had to leave," Juelz answered.

"Ah, that's a shame. How amazing would it be to get the two of you right next to each other; You lookin' like your daddy, and him looking like his."

Juelz smiled graciously, although the thought of standing next to his father turned his stomach, especially after how quickly his father jumped up and left the church with Charmaine.

"I hope you come back to see us for tomorrow morning's services."

"Maybe," Juelz lied. He knew he wasn't coming back, but it was easier to give them hope than to tell everyone he planned to keep his distance.

“Alright, and bless you.” The pastor gently walked off, with an usher following behind him. Juelz played catch-up with some of his family members for a little while. That is, until everyone got silent. One of Juelz’s second cousins, a 13-year-old child of one of the first cousins, came pushing Juelz’s grandma up to the front row. The room suddenly got tense, for this woman was not the fun-loving grandmother who baked cookies or was as sweet as pie. Everyone knew that Grandma Simpson had a harsh reputation and a fierce spirit. In fact, Juelz knew it best.

Grandma Simpson’s treatment of Juelz was a huge source of contention between him and his father. I knew the details of the story because Juelz had told me before. And judging by the reaction of so many of the cousins, they knew it as well. Juelz’s grandmother, Jackie, was one of his biggest adversaries growing up. She spent many years treating him differently because of the “gay demon” that lived in him. But even with their jarring history, Juelz still chose to be the bigger person.

Juelz exhaled and smiled. “Hi, Grandma.”

Her face was stone cold, emotionless. She was a hard woman to read. You would think she would’ve reacted positively after years of not seeing her grandson. I would’ve expected to see excitement reminiscent of Uncle Charlie’s. But nope. She didn’t even respond to Juelz; she only turned her head to Charlie and said, “I’m ready to go whenever y’all are.”

Everyone was stunned at her coldness. Long ago, she washed her hands clean of Calvin Jr. and vowed never to welcome him back.

“Uh- uh- all right, Mama,” Charlie said. He walked over to her wheelchair and wheeled her down the aisle and out of the church. The children that rode with him weren’t too far behind.

Juelz sighed heavily again. Ruby rubbed his back soothingly.

“I see she still hates me,” he said under his breath.

“That woman still hates everybody,” Ruby said, matching his tone and volume. The two snickered with each other.

From the corner of his eye, Juelz saw Chastity, Adam, and Racer exiting from backstage, approaching us near the pulpit. Racer was no longer dressed in his sheep costume but in his regular attire. Chastity came up to us with a gentle smile on her face, a smile that Juelz returned. They were gonna attempt to make nice with each other.

“Thank you for coming,” Chastity said.

“Of course, I had to come and get some pictures of the little man.”

“Well, thank you.” Chastity looked over at me and smiled. She tried not to keep me excluded as she had done in the past. “Thank you for coming, Jerome.”

“It’s no big deal. Like he said, we had to come and represent for Sheep #2,” I said, pointing at Racer. “You did your thing out there, boy.”

He smiled but couldn’t have cared the least bit about what I was talking about.

Chastity tightened her grip on him and bounced him up and down on her hip. “Can you say thank you, Uncle Jerome?”

I couldn’t believe she said that. I wasn’t even sure if she knew that she did. It came out of her mouth so naturally, and she didn’t react positively or negatively once it ejected. Could it be that Chastity Simpson was trying to turn a new leaf with me?

Though she gave him a transcript, Racer only met half of his line. “Thank you,” he said.

“No problem, little man.”

Adam interjected. "It was nice to see you guys again."

"Yeah, you too," Juelz said to him.

Adam grabbed Racer from out of Chastity's arms. "I'm gonna go put him in the car seat and warm up the car."

"Okay," she said, watching as the two walked toward the exit. After they left her presence, she forced herself to smile again while looking at us. "I really am glad that you guys came."

"You said that already," Juelz responded, seeming equally as nervous as she was.

"I know."

The brother and sister fell upon a deep silence in this tense minute, to which neither of them knew how to react. They tried to make small talk. Chastity started to ask about our Christmas plans, and Juelz started to ask if she'd been keeping in contact with Marleen. They stumbled over their words and spent the next 2 seconds politely deciding who would speak first.

"You go," Juelz suggested his older sister get the chance to talk first.

"No, you go," Chastity flipped it around on him.

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