

LESLIE ANNE FRYE-THOMAS

PUM
PUM
ROCK

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOMO

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Pum Pum Rock
There's No Place Like Homo

written by
Leslie Anne Frye-Thomas

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Part One Unhinged

Chapter 1

Dear God

Adorned in her private school uniform, twelve-year-old Natalia Higgins stared out the luxury sedan's window as her mother, Cassia Higgins weaved in and out of Montego Bay traffic. "Just because they say I like girls, doesn't make it so," the preteen spoke with a sweet Caribbean twang that interrupted the car ride's deafening silence.

"Have you seen yourself?" Cassia scoffed. Her accent was just as thick. "Most days you look more like my son than a daughter," she sucked her teeth.

"It's not like that," Nate whined as she turned to face her mother. She then removed an ice pack from her mouth, revealing a fat, bloodied bottom lip. "I hate that school and everyone there," she sulked, remembering the conversation that they'd just concluded with Nate's school principal: "I've told Natalia this a thousand times," Nate's principal continued, "her bandmates would stop teasing her if she simply changed how she dressed and acted a little more, well, normal." By normal, the principal had, of course, meant girlie. Nate shook her head in disgust as her mother's nagging jarred her from the principal's office and back to the passenger seat.

"So obstinate!" Cassia rolled her eyes. "I just hope our new addition don't give as much grief," she said, rubbing her belly. You couldn't tell it by looking at her, but the woman was three months pregnant. "Sometimes, I feel like some duppy done curse me." It took no less than three miscarriages, but Cassia finally got pregnant with Nate. After years of high priced fertility treatments and trying the old fashioned way, Cassia was again with child. "You will be my saving grace," she said, rubbing her belly. Nate stared at her mother's burgeoning baby bump as Cassia accelerated and made a hard right turn.

"Your father and I hand everything to you on a silver platter. You choose to repay us by being a laughing stock. Don't you care what people think?" Nate glanced at the speedometer as Cassia clocked in at twenty miles over the legal limit. "There are places we can send you," Cassia's tone softened. "Places that will fix you."

"I not broken!" Nate protested emphatically.

"You know it's a sickness, Natalia. A sickness and a sin!" Cassia swerved around an SUV into what would have been oncoming traffic, had the road ahead not been clear.

"You don't understand—you never will," Nate grumbled under her breath.

"You can be cured. We can correct this," Cassia protested.

"Why can't I live with Auntie Earlene?" Nate pouted as Cassia grew quietly humiliated that her daughter preferred the company of her sister-in-law.

"You must be mad," Cassia said, cutting her eyes at Nate. She then veered around a slow truck, only this time, she ran directly into an oncoming passenger van. Moments later, the mangled sedan lay head over heels in a nearby ditch, spewing flames and exhaust into the baby blue sky.

"Mom!" Nate screamed for Cassia, who had already unbuckled her seat belt and slid out of the car. The last thing Nate remembered was begging Cassia for help. Although battered and bruised Cassia made absolutely no effort to save her firstborn from the smoldering, wrong side up vehicle. When Nate awoke in the hospital bed, her thighs were bandaged due to the second-degree burns she'd endured and Auntie Earlene was by her side to deliver the heart-wrenching news. "She lost the baby, Natty." Auntie Earlene gently rested her heavy body atop Nate's as they grieved the life of a child they never knew. "He's with the angels now."

#

Haunted by the memory of her childhood, 28-year-old Natalia Higgins tossed and turned in bed as she relived the tragic accident that had claimed her unborn brother's life. In the sixteen years since his death, Nate had grown distant from her family and had started a brand new life in California. Her two-bedroom apartment was small, but because she was a minimalist, it was all she needed. The view of Echo Park Lake, accompanied by Los Angeles' distinct skyline, provided just the right amount of street chic. The walls were covered with a bevy of Buddhas and West African masks, and the air wafted with the faintest combination of Nag Champa and weed.

Her government name was Natalia Higgins, but depending on the circumstance, she also went by Nate, Natty or her podcast moniker, Natty One. The Montego Bay native had moved from Jamaica fourteen years ago and hadn't been back since. In typical fashion, the podcaster and aspiring music producer had fallen asleep under an ice, gold and green throw in her apartment's converted recording studio. Its contents: a mixing board, keyboard, two computers, a futon and wall-to-wall framed posters of reggae and electronic dance music legends.

Nate's face was partially shielded by a set of wireless headphones and bleach-blond dreads. Yet, the outline of her body was still quite visible: a pair of long brown limbs tucked awkwardly into a fetal position, and a rear-end round enough for a baller, yet sensible enough to be seen on a Senator's arm. Suddenly her smartphone rang, and Nate stopped snoring. She was groggy and had a crick in her neck courtesy of the well-worn futon, but she still managed to answer the phone by its third ring.

"Hello?" Nate cleared her throat and opened her eyes partially, sliding the headphones off her ears and on to her neck.

"Natty. Hi, this is." The woman took a beat to collect herself. "This is Ms. Ruth. Your Auntie asked me to call you."

"Ms. Ruth?" Why was Auntie Earlene's closest friend calling Nate and so early in the morning at that? Nate sat up straight and threw her legs over the edge of the futon. She then listened intently as the woman who knew Nate well enough to call her by her pet name,

"Natty," continued.

"She's not doing so well." Ruth paused for a beat. "She's sick, Natty. Doctors say..."

"I'll take it from here, Ruth." Barrington Higgins, Jamaica's Minister of Youth and Culture, stopped Ruth mid-sentence and came on to the phone.

"Daddy?" It had been a good three months since Nate had talked to her father and even longer since she'd spoken to her mother. Officially freaked out, Nate turned the speaker function on and began to pace. Her silhouette breezed past the living room's picture window overlooking Echo Park Lake as the sun slowly made its debut across Los Angeles' expansive horizon.

"Hey, baby girl," Barrington's deep, island-tinged voice permeated Nate's apartment, causing her pause. "Auntie Earlene's not doing well. Natty, you need to come home straight away."

"What's wrong with her?" Nate emerged from the shadows and slipped into the growing patch of sun on the hardwood floor.

"They're running some tests." Barrington lowered his voice to a hush and Nate listened as his dress shoes clicked across the tiled hospital floor. "She's been at the hospital for weeks now," Barrington choked up as his voice began to tremble, "It's pancreatic cancer. The test will tell us how advanced."

"Cancer?" Natty stammered in disbelief as her heartbeat intensified, and tiny beads of sweat began to grace her temples. "Why am I just now hearing about this?"

"Auntie didn't want to worry you. She's stubborn as an old ox. You know that," Barrington joked, trying to lighten what had become an exceptionally solemn mood.

"Listen, little brother, I'm sick, not deaf," Auntie Earlene's voice resonated through Nate's speakerphone. "I asked you to call the girl for me. The phone now, please, Barry."

Exasperated, Barrington sighed and conceded to his only sibling. "Please, Earlene. Relax." He said, handing Auntie Earlene the phone. "It's bad enough you stopped treatment."

Earlene sucked her teeth defiantly, and Nate listened from her apartment as her aunt sounded off in her customary fashion. "First of all, I am relaxed, so don't vex me!" Nate couldn't help but laugh aloud at the irony of Auntie Earlene screaming about how relaxed she was. "And second, ain't nothing so serious that the Lord Almighty and some bush tea can't remedy." Earlene hadn't skipped a beat. She sounded just as sassy as she'd always been. Nate felt suddenly soothed as her heart rate began to normalize. Maybe Auntie Earlene did have a fighting chance.

"My talented niece, Natty One," Auntie Earlene spoke into the cell phone. "You know I play that last CD you sent me 'til it couldn't play no more." Earlene's laugh turned quickly into a cough.

"I'm glad you liked it, Auntie, but daddy says you been in the hospital for weeks. You should've told me. And what's this about you stopping treatment?" Nate put the call on speaker and then used her tablet to search for flights home.

"Now, hold on, Natty. Catch your breath," Auntie Earlene insisted. "Let me hear it."

"I'm safe. I'm breathing. I got this." Nate ran through the mantra that her Auntie Earlene had taught her years ago.

"Very good, Natty." Auntie Earlene paused as Nate ran through the mantra one last time and then she continued, "Treatment made me feel worse than I already did. I just need a small break. Then I'll be back at it."

"I can be there tonight or tomorrow morning." Nate clicked around the page, checking departure times and fares, just as a calendar alert popped onto the screen: Brown Bag Cutie—Show Open Pitch—Simon and Chad Herbst—Four PM, Tuesday.

"Meh say hold on." Earlene's gentle yet firm tone got Nate's attention. "There's no need to rush back. Get here by Friday, that's when doctors will have the results."

"You sure, Auntie?"

"Natalia," Auntie Earlene sighed. Calling Nate by her government name meant she wasn't playing. Nate knew better than to make Auntie Earlene repeat herself.

"Yes, Auntie." Nate clicked the flight search close.

"Until then, all I ask is that you pray for your Auntie. You'll do that for me, right?"

"Of course, Auntie."

"Good. Now, your daddy wants to talk, but y'all make it quick. I won't have you running up my minutes."

"Yes, Auntie," Nate laughed as Auntie Earlene passed the phone back to Barrington.

"Email me your flight info, and I'll send a car," Barrington said, hopping back on the call.

"I'll catch a cab," Nate quickly declined the offer.

"Nonsense," Barrington maintained his position.

"Fine, daddy. Thanks."

"Mommy and I can't wait to see you."

"I'll email you." Nate hit the end call button before Barrington could finish his goodbyes.

"Love you, Natty," Barrington spoke into the phone, although Nate had already hung up.

Suddenly lightheaded, Nate's cell phone slipped from her grip as her stomach did summersaults. Her hand covering her mouth, Nate reached the half bath just in time to hurl. After heaving for a few minutes, she flushed last night's leftovers away and tried best to compose herself. Nate grasped the porcelain throne firmly and then slowly rose to her feet. Next, she grabbed her fanny pack from the hook behind her. She then pulled out a CO2 reducing inhaler and took several deep breaths. Nate had come to rely on the inhaler ever since discovering it on a late-night infomercial. She'd struggled with panic attacks after surviving a violent assault in Jamaica and had depended on the device's anxiety-reducing effects along with Auntie Earlene's mantra ever since: "I'm safe. I'm breathing. I got this."

Auntie Earlene having cancer, was horrible, but the thought of seeing her parents face to face after all these years had brought Nate to her knees. Nate was scared and gripped instantly by panic. Thankfully, with the help of her inhaler and a reassuring phrase, she was able to force those emotions down. Hell, she had to! Albeit self-diagnosed and largely untreated, the fact of the matter was Nate had endured years of posttraumatic stress and a bulk of it stemmed from her parents abandoning her when she needed them most.

Rocked by the tragic death of Nate's unborn little brother, the family exuded a brave exterior, but on the inside, they were crumbling. Even two years after the tragedy, Barrington and Cassia insisted that they did not have the emotional bandwidth to support a lifestyle Nate could always, as they put it, "choose to correct." Unable to deal with her budding love for women and its potential to affect their standing in the community, at the tender age of fourteen, Nate's politically entrenched family shipped her to California to live with relatives. Her relationship with her parents all but flat-lined, Auntie Earlene had been the only one who remained consistently close. She had been there for Nate since birth, and although she refused to fly, Auntie Earlene had for years kept tabs on Nate.

Nate used a hair tie situated amongst the beaded bracelets on her wrist to gather her dreads into a loose topknot. Next, she let the faucet run for a beat, then doused warm water on to her face and the back of her neck. As the water ran, it was as if Auntie Earlene was standing right beside her. "All I ask is that you pray for your Auntie. You'll do that for me, right?"

Auntie Earlene's instructions were as clear as the water that cascaded down Nate's wrists onto the bath mat on which she stood. "Of course, Auntie." Nate turned the faucet off and then slowly raised her head. She allowed her face to drift up to the mirror and then locked eyes with her own reflection. Nate smiled at how much she did, in fact, resemble a younger version of her sassy Auntie Earlene, although she had no idea how deep their kinship indeed ran.

Nate soaked in this image of self for a beat and then shut her chestnut-colored eyes as tight as possible. She took a deep breath and then started to pray. "Dear God."

*** Check out this [sneak peek](#) from Dear God

Chapter 2

Brown Bag Cutie

Beside a Jacuzzi atop a downtown Los Angeles rooftop, Nate scanned the expansive skyline. Since she'd hung up the phone with her family earlier that morning, her mind had been clouded with thoughts of Auntie Earlene's diagnosis. A welcomed distraction, Nate gripped her boom microphone firmly and silently thanked God for work. It was past morning rush hour, but the downtown streets below were still bustling as the skeleton film crew assembled for their first shot of the day on the most asinine dating show to ever hit reality TV. While she pursued her musical ambitions, Nate had found work as a boom operator and sound engineer at Herbst Studios on that very same dating show. The show was called "Brown Bag Cutie" and its premise was simple—one picker chooses between several masked daters.

This was Round One of the competition, and by its end, the pool of five potential mates would be reduced to one female picker and four male daters. Two of the men sported authentic Lucha Libre wrestling masks, while a couple rocked customized brown bags and the final contender, also known as the wild card, remained bare faced. The goal was to see whether winning personalities or striking physicality carries the most weight when looking for a potential date.

"Okay, fellas, congrats and welcome to Brown Bag Cutie," the female picker squealed.

"Cheers!" The group clinked their glasses together and toasted mimosas as Nate angled the boom microphone in their direction. "Now this may be a little premature, but I want to see whose got the best victory dance," she demanded.

"Nothing premature about me!" Dater #1 exclaimed. Nate rolled her eyes at the proclamation as the unmasked dater hopped from the Jacuzzi and commenced a rhythm-less two-step. The director hung back, offering camera cues as the date unfolded on a series of monitors. "Camera Two, go tight on this idiot. Camera One, you stay wide," she whispered into the camera operators' earpieces.

"I'd actually rather take a victory lap," Dater #2 responded. He then plunged below the water's surface and headed straight for the picker's thighs.

"Camera One, slow zoom on Mr. Two Left Feet and Camera Two, same move on the picker," commanded the director. Nate held the boom as steady as possible. In her earphones, the indisputable moaning of the female picker grew intense. Was Dater #2 really doling out underwater head?

"Man, just cut! Cut already!" The bare face dater yelled and then stormed off as Dater #2 emerged and waved goodbye.

"Later, dude," The second dater laughed.

"I suggest you gargle, dude!" The bare-faced dater screamed while pulling up faded jeans over his swimming trunks. "Y'all don't pay me enough," he said, bolting toward the exit. Nate was in shock as the busty blonde pushed Dater #2's head back underwater. The director was thrilled.

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"Follow him to confessional," the director ordered as the producer leaped to her feet and trailed behind the frustrated contestant.

"Camera One, go wide. Camera Two, keep rolling on the picker."

After several hours of day drinking and crude commentary disguised as getting to know each other, it was Round Three and the picker had narrowed her choices down to two daters. Dater #2, his identity still obscured by the traditional Mexican wrestling mask, had remained charming throughout the day and seemed to genuinely connect with the picker. Although his face was hidden, you could tell he worked out. Plus, the way that the setting sun saluted his bronze skin had Nate betting he was a shoo-in. His competition—an alpha male rocking a bedazzled brown bag and an over-the-top television persona. While the wannabe reality star had a solid physique, he'd managed to irk the hell out of everyone on set. His first faux pas, shorting out a wireless microphone because he felt the need to cannonball into the infinity pool. Idiot.

Chapter 3

Affirmative Action

"So who did she pick?" asked twenty-seven-year-old Karina Zakaryan, leaning in—more buzzed than curious. She and Nate had been friends since high school, and even back then, Karina liked to get what she called, lifted.

"Mr. Brownbag," Nate replied, lowkey annoyed at the increasing difficulty inherent in their conversation.

"The frat boy? No!" Karina screamed, slamming her hand down hard on the glass table for emphasis. She was loud and doing way too much for a Monday night.

"Girl, yes." Nate scanned the down-home Armenian restaurant, locking eyes with curious customers and waitstaff. "And please keep your voice down," she continued. "You just got off work. How are you this lit?" Nate squeezed fresh lime into her Vodka tonic and took a sip.

Out of nowhere, Karina's nose began to run, making it apparent to Nate that Karina's sudden case of the sniffles was actually a California cold. She then watched as Karina scanned the popular Eurasian restaurant. Other diners did their best but were unsuccessful in averting their gazes. Karina laughed hysterically, enjoying the attention. Although she had gained a noticeable twenty pounds in the last few months, Nate knew better than to mention it.

Thick or thin, the woman was striking. Karina was a full-figured, first-generation Armenian-American with fair skin, dark hair and a smile that rivaled the night sky's brightest constellation. She was also intoxicated.

"Don't get your burka in a bunch," Karina joked. She then poked at the ice in her cup, while gesturing for a waiter.

"Yes, ma'am." The waiter approached.

"One more Vodka on the rocks for me," Karina instructed.

"And you, Miss?" The waiter asked, smiling in Nate's direction.

"I'll have another," Nate accepted, her eyes trained on Karina. For as long as she could remember, her long-time friend had been a functioning addict. Presently, her drug of choice was cocaine, but back in high school, her addictive personality revolved around boys, booze and homemade sizzurp. In fact, it was no secret that for a few months during sophomore year Karina sold the mixture of Codeine, grape soda and jolly ranchers to students. Luckily for Karina, her parents were big-time donors, so she never got into any real trouble. Even when the cops busted her for selling on school grounds, her family's lawyers were able to make the entire situation go away.

"Loosen up," Karina laughed, tearing off a piece of lavash and tossing the traditional flatbread in Nate's direction.

"I've been working through a lot today, plus this meeting with Simon has me so anxious. If he likes my track and uses it for the Brown Bag Cutie show open, I will legit lose my shit."

"How could he not like your music? I've been talking you up nonstop since we ran into each other at Runyon last week," Karina squealed, strategically omitting critical details about her strained relationship with Simon. "He's a gatekeeper—if you get this right, you'll be scoring movies, TV, touring. And it'll all be thanks to me!" Karina bragged.

"Oh, so you after your ten percent?" Nate was only partially joking. She and Karina had been friends since high school and one thing she knew for sure about her dear old friend was that Karina rarely did something for nothing.

"I just want to see you win," Karina maintained.

"Simon and his brother Chad are just so connected," Nate said, sipping her cocktail. "Especially, Simon. I still can't believe he left Masquerade Records to take over for his pops."

"You're meeting with the newly named joint heads of Herbst Studios," Karina continued. "It would be weird if you weren't at least a little nervous, but no worries. You got this. And by the way, Simon Herbst is a teddy bear." A grizzly bear was more like it! Karina again stretched the truth; however, it would take Nate several days to discover it for herself.

"I've spent the day listening to my parents complain about how I'm not as dedicated to real estate as my brother while you've spent the day surrounded by hot boys and D-cups," Karina teased.

"You're ridiculous," Nate smirked. Karina had a point. Nate's job was pretty cool on paper, but in truth, being a black woman working production on a reality TV show was far from transcendent.

"You should be grateful. People would kill to be in your position. And speaking of positions, see if that were me, Lucha Libre or not, I would have been all up on the brown-skinned brotha with the chiseled chest. Yum-my!"

Some things never change. Growing up, Karina had a real fetish for black boys and black culture. In truth, the only thing that came easier than hooking up with black guys was high school track. The summer before her sophomore year, she'd discovered that cocaine not only made her feel great but was also an appetite suppressant. After shedding some weight, the formerly chubby teen found that her long limbs and athletic build made her a natural at the sport. So for two years of high school, she ran and got high. She liked getting high for obvious reasons—being inebriated felt phenomenal, plus escaping reality was a definite incentive.

Eventually, Karina came to enjoy track. Competition was thrilling, but in all honesty, the brothas were her primary motivation. To Karina, their swag was even more intoxicating than the Codeine laced concoction she slang in the cafeteria. As politically correct as her parents pretended to be, they did not want their daughter dating outside of her race or religion. They never outright said it, but Karina knew that her infatuation with black boys got under their fair skin, which to her made dating guys named Jahvon and Tre all the more enticing.

"What did he look like under the mask anyway?" Karina wrapped her crimson painted lips around the straw and began to suck.

"I guess you'll just have to tune in and see," Nate replied, eyeing Karina curiously. Inebriated or not, she was more than fine.

The woman oozed sex appeal without even trying. And sure, they were besties, but Nate was first and foremost a lesbian with very real needs. Sitting across from Karina, she couldn't help but think back to the one time these needs almost got the best of her. It all happened late one night, a year ago. After partying with some friends in Karina's downtown loft, Nate volunteered to help clean up. Eventually, she and Karina ventured to the rooftop Jacuzzi, where they indulged in one too many shots of premium Vodka. Laughter led to lust, and the next thing Nate knew, Karina was straddling her in the warm water and kissing her deeply. The kiss was a mystical, drunken blur of which Nate stopped as soon as she considered the repercussions of hooking up with her best friend. No matter how one-sided their friendship sometimes was, it meant more to Nate than any fling ever could. Besides, Karina was straight, and from experience, Nate knew that getting involved with straight girls, even if they asked for it was a headache waiting to happen.

"So let's talk Simon," Nate said, leaning in. "Tell me everything." She shifted her focus from her off-limits friend to the matter at hand.

"Like I said, he's a teddy bear," Karina shrugged.

"Go on." Nate signaled the waiter as Karina continued.

"We met at an all-white party, Memorial Day weekend." Karina used the straw to draw figure eights in the short, fat glass as she told the story of how she'd met Simon several months ago. "My parents were hosting a party for some of their VIP clients on the Queen Mary and Simon was there. His dad had just purchased his third home in Malibu through our agency before he passed."

"Tragic," Nate said, shaking her head somberly.

"I know, right? We almost didn't get the commission because his fourth wife hated the house, but my dad was like, no backsies, boo," Karina snickered.

"I was referring to the tragic car crash that took his life, but hey, a deals a deal," Nate's sarcasm was palatable.

"Basically," Karina replied and smiled at the waiter as he approached, cocktails in hand.

"One Vodka tonic and one on the rocks. Can I get you ladies anything to eat?"

"I never eat past seven," Karina replied while using her smartphone as a mirror to primp.

"That's a lie," Nate laughed aloud. "Another order of lavash and hummus, please."

"So anyway, the Queen Mary was cracking. Simon was hanging with his brother and a couple other guys," Karina continued.

"We started talking about that plastic surgery reality show you guys produce, what's it called?" Satisfied with her appearance, Karina asked, placing her phone back on the table.

"Replace My Face," Nate retorted, mortified at the roster of absurdity that she'd helped to produce. However, she had faith that her big break was just around the corner.

"Replace My Face," Karina chuckled. "That's the one! Anyway, Simon told me how three female producers had just up and quit. So I mentioned Troy."

"T-Roy? You hooked him up with your dealer?" Nate queried.

"So what! Troy is the truth and you know it," Karina declared.

"I mean, sure he deals, but he's freelanced for years. So I worked my magic and hooked a brotha up—401K, PTO, the whole deal." Karina took a long swig, proud of herself. "That's what I call affirmative action."

"I wouldn't go that far, but it's cool you were able to get him in," Nate paused for a beat before continuing.

"He's lost out on permanent positions to other freelancers with half his experience on multiple occasions." Nate sighed, annoyed as she could relate to the feeling of being passed by and overlooked.

"Now, boo, you know better than anyone, skills don't matter. At least not much." Karina reached over and placed her hand atop Nate's. "It's all about who you know. That is why you asked me to link you with Simon, right?" Karina didn't stop long enough for an answer. "Simon knows Troy, and as of tomorrow, he'll know you too. Affirmative action," Karina chirped.

"Okay, Kar. I'm going to need you to make a full stop. Affirmative action corrects years of systemic racism and sexism. What you did was hook Troy up. Big difference," Nate said, throwing what was left of her cocktail back like a shot.

"Is it really that different?" Karina softened. "A hook up is a hook up. Besides, I'm color blind. Always have been, always will be."

Color blind? Was she serious? Nate's skin crawled at the audacity and utter place of privilege that Karina was coming from. Between her Aunt's diagnosis and upcoming meeting, Nate just didn't have the bandwidth to explain to Karina why being color blind was a fallacy and in fact, a smack in the face to people of color. Although her family was Eurasian Muslim, which came with a whole host of unfair stereotypes, Karina didn't necessarily look the part.

She could just as easily pass for Italian as she could Armenian. Unlike Nate, Karina had never been profiled or unjustly pulled over by the police. This was indeed a teachable moment, based on embracing diversity as opposed to disregarding our differences. Alas, Nate lacked both the energy and desire to mount her soapbox.

"For the sake of my sanity, let's table this discussion and get back to Simon." Nate sat up straight in her chair, eyeing one of her oldest and most out of touch friends.

"Affirmative," Karina replied sarcastically, which for her was a way of life.

"Kar," Nate rolled her eyes.

"I'm kidding," Karina smirked, tossing long, brunette extensions over her shoulder. Much like a cheap lace front wig, she was tough to pin down. On the one hand, Karina could be the most progressive person in the room, but in an instant, she'd change course, hurling micro-aggressions as indiscriminately as slugs from an AR-15. "So you and Simon only hung out that one time, on the ship?" Nate redirected their conversation.

"Actually I saw him a few days later. We checked out a house in the hills," Karina said, recalling the viewing: "Here's to the first of three beautiful homes we'll see today." Still curvy, but noticeably leaner, Karina raised her champagne flute and toasted Bellinis with Simon. "Follow me," she instructed.

"Anywhere," Simon smirked and followed Karina deeper into the palatial, two million dollar Hollywood Hills mansion. Rocking a tightly quaffed bun, black pencil skirt and money green blouse, Karina's look was polished, poised and professional.

"Tell me more about the wood." Simon rested his glass atop the fireplace. "You were saying it's durable and decay resistant," He asked, unbuttoning his blazer.

"Because of its rugged strength, Ipe wood is the number one choice for commercial and residential decking," Karina affirmed. "And the coloring, well, look for yourself." Karina squatted down and ran her fingers over the tight wood grain. "It's beautiful and the foundation for this incredible home."

"Breathtaking," Simon replied, standing over Karina. As she attempted to stand, he placed his hand on top of Karina's shoulder. "That's enough shop talk for one day, don't you think?" He asked, smiling perversely.

Karina was used to men coming on to her, so she typically knew how to play it, but this time was different. This was Karina's first property over one million dollars and although she was really counting on the commission, degrading herself had never been part of the plan.

"I'm flattered, but Simon, we can't." Karina tried not to handle the executive's fragile ego with care. "Let me show you the rest of the house." She stood up, smoothed her skirt and walked further into the vast home.

Unable to resist and unaccustomed to being turned down, Simon took the opportunity to grab a fistful of Karina's perky rear. And with that, she lost it along with any hope of cashing in on the biggest commission she had ever come close to making.

"Simon, stop!"

"Come on," Simon cackled, completely turned on by the perceived game of cat and mouse.

"What happened to the party girl I met a couple of days ago?" Sure, Karina and Simon had done a couple of lines on the infamous party boat, but this was Los Angeles and indulging with strangers was not something Karina considered abnormal.

"It's not happening!" Karina stood her ground as Simon again invaded her personal space. His musky cologne was equally, if not more offensive than he was.

"Just let me show it to you," he moaned, grabbed his crotch and motioned for his zipper.

"What did you say?" Her face quickly grew flush, and although her tone was calm, Karina felt her blood boil. Although Karina was months removed from the encounter as she sat across from Nate in the Armenian restaurant donned in Halloween decorations, she became gripped with that same fear that she felt as Simon relentlessly propositioned her. Vacillating between fright and fury, the sound of Nate's voice diverted Karina's attention back to the moment at hand.

"Well, what did you say?" Nate rolled her eyes, convinced that Karina had zoned out and was simply too high to pay attention when in reality, she was undergoing genuine post-traumatic stress caused by Simon's assault.

"What?" Although Karina had watched Nate's lips move, she hadn't heard a word.

"I said, what did you say to Simon about me?" Nate questioned Karina, staring into her noticeably rounder face. She had no idea that the woman sitting across from her had spent the last six months emotional eating and binging cocaine in hopes of healing from the assault.

"I told him you were a talented musician with a stellar work ethic and that he'd be a fool not to put you on," Karina replied before scanning the room and pulling out her snuff bullet. Next, she inhaled two quick bumps sending a scorching plume of white-hot fire through her nasal cavity. Fast and discrete, the girl was a pro when it came to mood stabilization. "He's looking forward to meeting you. If you play it right, I'm sure he'll introduce you to the heavy hitters at Masquerade Records."

"You're the best!" Nate shrieked in excitement at the thought of getting one step closer to her goal of becoming a successful music producer.

"I know you're tired of holding that boom mic all day," Karina said, forcing a smile and trying her best to stifle memories of the horror she'd endured with Simon.

"Got the arms looking right, though." Nate flexed her right bicep, causing it to stiffen and jump on command under her button-down.

"I see you," Karina laughed and then inhaled a couple more bumps of the illegal substance. "So what you plan on wearing tomorrow? You should throw on a dress."

Nate laughed so hard it was now her turn to gain unwanted attention from neighboring tables. "Yea, not gonna happen," she sneered.

"Just asking. Because if you want, I could lend you something," Karina smirked.

"Yea, that's a hard no." Nate's smile exposed a pair of perfectly straight teeth, compliments of her well-to-do parents and the braces they insisted on.

"Halloween's your favorite holiday, not mine," she joked. "I have no need for a costume, but thanks for the laugh. I needed that." The waiter approached their table and placed two more cocktails in front of them, along with the traditional bread and hummus. Karina waited for him to be out of earshot before speaking.

"So, what else is up?" Karina asked, genuinely concerned. "You're hella tense and I know it's not just meeting Simon that's got you on edge."

"What gave it away?" Nate asked, sipping her cocktail, which after the fourth one, tasted more like limeade than premium Vodka.

"Well, for one, you're going toe-to-toe with me, not that I'm counting." Karina raised her glass and Nate conceded, knowing full well that she was drinking more than usual.

"I got a call from my Auntie Earlene this morning. She's not doing well."

"Auntie Earlene with the bomb guava tarts?" Nate sipped and nodded affirmatively. "It's cancer. She's been in the hospital for a couple of weeks now. They're running tests to see how far along it is." Karina joined Nate on her side of the booth and Nate instantly let her head fall into Karina's comforting arms. "I'm so sorry, sis."

"Thanks, Kar." Stoic, Nate fought back tears. "I'm flying back at the end of the week."

"Good," Karina replied, while she tenderly stroked Nate's back. "How she holding up?"

"Still cussing folks out, so she's good, I guess," Nate grinned. "Typical island woman, trying to treat her stomachache with herbs and bush."

"Bush?" Karina asked, unfamiliar with the term.

"Auntie basically boils whatever herbs and roots she has growing in her garden into a bomb ass medicinal tea. I grew up on the stuff and rarely got even a cold," Nate confessed. Karina nodded that she understood as Nate continued.

"She thought it was gas. Everyone did, until the day Auntie Earlene found blood in her stool. Ms. Ruth put her in the car and drove her to the hospital on the spot."

"Ms. Ruth?" Karina queried.

"She's an old friend of Auntie's." Nate took another sip and replayed the early AM wake-up call in her head. "Auntie rarely calls, so when she did this morning, I knew something was up," Nate confessed.

"That's right, the old school letter writer. Adorable," Karina smiled.

"I spoke to my father too," Nate said, pausing for a beat as she recollected the call. "Emails and the occasional awkward phone call are one thing, but now that Auntie is sick, daddy's talking about how he and my mother can't wait to see me."

"After fourteen years, they're finally ready to accept their gay kid? Oh please!" Karina shouted as the remnants of cocaine rushed down the back of her neck. "You're gonna need back up. Just say the word, and I'm there."

"I appreciate that," Nate grinned. Sure Karina was flying high, but Nate remained grateful that she always seemed to have her back. Despite her many flaws, this was the reason Nate had remained so loyal to their friendship. Warts and all, the two had been thick as thieves since high school. Little did she know, Nate would soon learn an ugly truth about her bestie—one that she would never be able to overlook.

Chapter 4

Apple Jacks

Tru Lee was a butterfly, a true chameleon and that night at the upscale seaside inn, her clients had requested that the dominatrix for hire transform into the classic schoolgirl. The curvaceous half black, half Korean woman dressed in clunky glasses, a short plaid skirt, stilettos and white button-down tied just below her full breasts, Tru was happy to oblige their fantasy. Having just concluded a heated S & M session complete with spankings, sensual massage, and lap dances, the strong-willed twenty-five-year-old was running late and needed to wrap things up.

Followed closely behind by a middle-aged white woman, Tru slipped into a black pea-coat and swung open the double doors leading to the penthouse suite. Tru smirked as the woman with the plump face and pear-like physique tried unsuccessfully to conceal a set of indisputably erect nipples that had moments prior been gripped by the ferocity of metal clamps.

"Incredible," Tru whispered in the woman's ear while giving her round rear a good squeeze.

"So next week, then, Mistress?" The woman, her face flushed and skin red hot, enveloped Tru in a long hug, allowing her hands to roam up and under the short Catholic school skirt.

"Maybe," Tru pulled away. Keep 'em guessing—whether it was personal or professional, this was her mantra and at the present moment, it was paying off big time.

"Maybe?" The woman mimicked Tru, then slid a manila envelope full of cash into her oversized purse, all while pulling her in close for a kiss. Tru was fast. With a nod of the head, she let the woman down with both style and ease as she had a strict no kissing policy.

"A lot going on next week, but I'll email you," Tru said.

"We look forward to it, Mistress!" The woman's lover exclaimed as smoke from a menthol cigarette poured from her mouth. She was around Tru's age, lying in bed and playing with a red ball gag that had minutes ago adorned her wide mouth.

Tru swept the bangs of her short, red bob out of her eyes and winked at the woman's lover. The bulk of Tru's clients were alpha males during the day, but once they left the boardroom, the beards came all the way off. And Tru never judged. How could she? Her subs were relatively easy to handle, plus their checks always cleared. But as a lesbian, Tru got a kick out of being contracted by females, especially hot chocolate femmes like the one lying in bed before her. While Tru was a consummate professional, she was unapologetic about the fact that her line of work came with some incredible perks.

"Take care. Both of you." Tru kissed the older woman on the cheek, then slunk toward the end of the corridor. She was met by a man dressed in a black, three-piece suit and eerie, half-face, skeleton style motorcycle helmet.

"Going down?" He asked, extending his arm and escorting Tru into the elevator.

Moments later, Tru was throwing a duffle bag into the trunk of her 1995 cherry red BMW 325i and making a left out of the parking lot as her bodyguard steered his motorcycle in the opposite direction. A legit professional, Tru had mastered the art of the hotel quick change.

In under seven minutes flat, she'd managed to swap out wigs and transform her sultry self into a casual cutie. As the cool ocean breeze whisked through the convertible and Tru's now eggplant colored pixie, the custom-built stereo pumped out the most recent episode of Nate's podcast—The Naked Truth with Natty One: "All night people have been hitting me up with confessions," her Jamaican accent noticeably thicker, Nate's voice poured from the speakers. "Feels good, doesn't it? Go on, let that cat out the bag. Cheating on your girl? Living on the DL? Stole a pound of crab legs?" Nate laughed. "Hit me up and let me know."

Tru laughed along with Nate's podcast then took a long swig from her bedazzled flask. Moments later, the podcast switched to the show's musical segment, an eclectic blend of EDM and island rhythms. Then she glanced down at her dashboard. It was closing in on One AM, and she had promised Nate that she'd meet her at the club by midnight.

"Damn," Tru cursed and used a Kleenex to wipe away the blood-red lipstick frantically. She then texted Nate a single letter at each red light: "L-O-V-E-R." Keep 'em guessing, Tru shrugged as the line between her professional mantra and personal life continued to blur.

Several miles away, Karina, forever the wildest of the crew danced for her life at the infamous West Hollywood club. Across the dance floor, a group of women eyeballed her seductively. "Karina, you need to stop!" Their butch and bubbly friend, Royce, laughed nervously, as Karina delighted in the attention.

"I'm thirsty," Karina smirked.

"Clearly," Royce joked. "So after what, a year of dating, we finally get to meet this mystery chick?"

"We've met," Karina said, sucking her teeth. "Tru ain't all that. Besides, I wouldn't exactly call bumping uglies under the cloak of darkness, dating."

"You have no chill," Nate huffed.

"Well, it isn't," Karina replied.

"For the millionth time Kar, just because Nate has a girl, doesn't mean she loves us any less," Royce spoke to Karina the way a mother explains to her toddler that she's about to be a big sister. "Tru is not Nate's girlfriend," Karina countered, completely missing the point. Next she directed her attention back at the group of admirers. Using one finger, she beckoned them over. One brave soul, statuesque and dressed in a snapback and designer glasses, actually took the bait. Nate made a spin move so that she could get a better view as the lone lesbian in clunky frames drew near.

"Incoming," Nate giggled, satisfied to at least temporarily be off Karina's radar.

"Three, two, one," with the tall woman rapidly approaching, Karina counted down, then spun around to greet the stranger. "Hey," Karina spoke first. She figured it was the least she could do since the young lady had walked the length of the club to get a closer look.

"You wearing those shorts, ma," the stranger in glasses said, smiling at Karina.

"Thanks, ma!" Karina cooed as she stepped in closer to greet the woman. Taking this as their cue, Nate and Royce worked their way through the dance floor, leaving Karina to chat it up with the woman. Although Karina swore she was straight, male or female, she was here for every ounce of adoration.

It was near closing time at the landmark West Hollywood hot spot. In fact, you could practically smell the mix of desperation and bad decisions in the dense, club air. However, Nate and her crew had it all mapped out. The Club. Get in and get out before those dreadful house lights were brought up and that cutie you had been dancing with all night, the one you swore was a dime piece turned suddenly into a dud.

Once she and Royce reached the bar, Nate checked her phone and immediately assumed the goofiest grin imaginable. "I know that face," Royce laughed as Nate's fingers danced across her smartphone. "Yours Truly, right?"

Nate showed off the text that simply read, "L-O-V-E-R."

"No judgment, but I can't believe you've spent the last year getting done by a dominatrix. Who does that?" Royce asked playfully, socking Nate in the arm.

"So I'm emotionally unavailable and tend to date the like," Nate laughed. "But the more I think about it," she beamed, "the more I know Tru and I would make a dope couple."

"You're gonna make your booty call your boo," Royce teased, then directed her attention toward the bar. "Two shots of Patron and a Heineken."

She nodded at the bartender and leaned back, resting her elbows on the bar to further enjoy the view as Nate returned the text message: "Better had brought me a gift lol. That's the ONLY reason to be late! Matter fact, I just left." Moments later, a tap on the shoulder made it abundantly clear that the jig was up. Nate turned around to see Tru, dressed in a pair of pale purple skinny jeans and a belly-baring crop top. She was casually fine and Nate was thoroughly impressed. "So what'd you bring me?" Nate tossed back her shot of Patron, beaming as she greeted Tru.

"Some sugar," Tru replied, her once ruby red lips, now lubed solely by gloss.

"Word? Well, let me have it!" Nate shut her eyes and puckered up, only to be socked in the stomach with a box of Raisinets. "Real funny," Nate chuckled, pulling Tru in for a tight hug. "Oh, you got that."

"No, you got that," Tru whispered seductively, gripping Nate's ample bottom with a smirk. "I'm saying, Natty, you gotta fatty." Tru's attempt at an island accent was dreadful, but her words had been just enough to stir up the butterflies in Nate's stomach. The two women remained lost in each other's eyes and embraced until Nate noticed Royce gawking, her eyebrows raised unapologetically in their direction.

"This is Royce," Nate said, playing it cool as Royce sipped the cold brew.

"Of course." Tru extended her hand. "I'm Tru."

"And I'm a hugger." Royce rejected Tru's handshake, electing instead for an affectionate bear hug. Tru stiffened at the invasion of personal space.

"Yours Truly in the flesh—it's nice to finally meet you."

"It's been hectic. I work a lot," Tru said, pulling away from the unexpected embrace.

"I've heard," Royce laughed knowingly, then redirected her gaze toward Karina. "Bumping and grinding for Grey Goose. Help her, Lord," Royce said, grimacing as Karina downed shots and danced on a mosaic tabletop. "I'm going in," she sighed, then made her way to the opposite end of the club.

"Have fun with that," Tru joked. Utterly uninterested in playing captain save-a-hoe, she grabbed Nate's arm and ventured onto the crowded dance floor, where the two women grooved along to a reimagined seventies soul classic.

"It's about that time, princess!" Royce tried not to make a scene as she screamed over the music and extended her hand toward Karina. Without so much as a "thanks for the drinks," Karina leaped from the mosaic tabletop, all smiles.

Meanwhile, Nate kissed Tru lustfully on the dance floor. "Someone's excited," Tru said, pulling away confused, as Nate—in a year of casual dating, had never been the type to display PDA. Emboldened by happy hour with Karina, followed by multiple cocktails at the club, Nate found it hard to focus. In fact, since learning of Auntie Earlene's life-threatening diagnosis early that morning, thoughts of a return trip home had left her ravaged by anxiety. Thankfully, the sight of Tru paired with an abundance of well-aged Tequila, were temporary, albeit welcomed distractions.

"Didn't think you'd show," Nate slurred and again dove tongue first into Tru's mouth. Pawing at Tru like an enamored newlywed, Nate remained oblivious to onlookers. Embarrassed, Tru pulled away again, but this time she maintained her distance.

"What's wrong? My breath stink?" Her almond-shaped eyes now nearly shut, Nate laughed and swayed from side to side.

"Let me grab you a bottled water," Tru softened. Across the club, things with Karina and Royce were on the verge of becoming downright dangerous. "I got this!" The tomboy, who Karina had sidelined, hopped down from the tabletop and into Royce's face.

"It's all good. She's my sister," Royce said laughing, and dangling an empty beer bottle lowly by her side as a couple of party people snickered at the thought of the bump and grinding, interracial duo being related. Convinced that she was being played, the lanky tomboy in the fitted snapback pushed Royce hard in the chest. Caught off guard, the typically peaceful woman's knee jerk reaction was not to turn the other cheek, but in fact, an eye for an eye. With no hesitation, Royce shoved the tomboy back and shattered her empty beer bottle on a nearby table, all in one fluid motion. "Back! Up!" Royce exclaimed, pointing the fractured glass in the direction of the tomboy and her squad.

The crowd quickly growing around them gained the attention of Nate and Tru. Immediately, the women sprinted in the direction of the chaos. Fortunately, by the time Nate and Tru waded through the mess, someone had already broken up what had the potential to become a brawl.

"Let's go!" Karina screamed, grabbed Royce by her hand and led her out of the club. As the crowd slipped quickly back into party mode, Nate and Tru hung back for a beat to assure that the lesbian terror squad didn't try a sneak attack. Her adrenaline pumping, Nate was lost in the moment and had almost forgotten that Tru was by her side.

"Your girl really knows how to ruin a good time," Tru said, tossing aubergine bangs out of her eyes, as Nate snapped out of her adrenaline-fueled haze. Moments later, Karina decompressed with a hand-rolled clove at a park behind the club while Royce, visibly shaken, prayed aloud to be exonerated, "I completely blacked out. Lord, forgive me."

"You should've cut her!" Karina chuckled. Mercy was not her strong suit.

"That's not even funny!" Nate screeched.

"Keep running all that game and somebody will get hurt," Tru piped in as Nate braced for the exchange. Ever since Nate divulged the details of their steamy, first-time encounter, Karina had made it clear that she did not like Tru. Their late-night hookup had occurred just days after Nate shot down Karina's hot tub advances and had been a real blow to Karina's ego. Karina was good and plastered, but even when sober the girl had absolutely no filter. Her friends could sense it. She was about to blow. "Nate, check your girl with her cheap wig-wearing ass!" Her statement punctuated by the roar of nearby thunder, Karina took a long drag from her clove and then exhaled in Tru's direction.

"All that's not even necessary," Nate said, rolling her eyes in Karina's direction.

"Damn Kar, chill," Royce replied, raising a disapproving eyebrow.

"What? She don't know me," Karina responded roughly. She had this funny habit of getting all Crenshaw and Pico, even though she was reared in the country clubs of Brentwood. Her friends couldn't help but laugh.

"Easy, killer," Tru smirked, unbothered by Karina's crudeness or the rain clouds in the night sky.

"We're out." Nate hugged her crew and then she and Tru made their departure.

"Good luck on that meeting with Simon tomorrow, love," Karina couldn't resist reminding Nate about the potentially game-changing encounter she'd orchestrated.

"Sleep it off, beautiful!" Nate yelled and waved goodbye without looking back.

"She so wants you," Tru spoke lowly while leaning into Nate as they strolled down the boutique-lined boulevard. "You sure y'all never dated?"

"Hell no!" Nate didn't want to lie but felt as though the omission was necessary. In their fourteen-year friendship, Nate and Karina had shared one drunken kiss in a Jacuzzi. And because they'd agreed never to mention it, Nate felt it was only right she keep her word. "I'd be surprised if she even remembers you were here tonight," Nate said shaking her head somberly.

"She's been partying a lot lately.

"You mean more than you?" Tru asked, eyeing Nate. While the near brawl was sobering, Nate, the light-weight, remained blatantly buzzed.

"Seriously, something's up with her," Nate protested.

"Nothing, a stint at rehab, won't cure," Tru shrugged. "Probably needs a hug and a good shrink wouldn't hurt," Tru smirked, unaware of how true her statement was.

"And what do you need?" Before Tru could answer Nate's question, the skies opened up and began to douse the city of angels in a wicked downpour. Nate grabbed her hand and they quickly ducked under a nearby awning for shelter.

"I'll get the car," Tru said, motioning for her keys.

"No." Nate grabbed Tru's arm. "It'll pass. Let's give it a minute."

"Okay," Tru said, closing her eyes and melting into Nate's chest. "You smell good."

"Don't change the subject," Nate replied with a grin. Lately, Nate talked more and more about becoming an official couple, which was clearly where this line of questioning was heading. "Seriously, what do you need for us to make this work?" Nate queried, her almond-shaped eyes now little more than two narrow slits. "I think I'm gonna need you to sober up," Tru responded with a playful eye roll. A full four inches taller, Tru looked up to Nate, who, to her surprise, was coming in top speed and tongue first. Even though public displays of affection were entirely out of character for them, the chemistry between the two women was undisputable. Tru allowed herself to go with it and for a beat, they faded entirely into the moment. Oblivious of spectators in honking cars, Tru and Nate kissed feverishly, fondling each other with vigor, as rain poured down from above.

Nate was insatiable. She nibbled at Tru's neck, then spun her around with ease, pressing Tru's chest firmly against the brick, storefront wall.

"It's like that?" Tru smiled, looked over her shoulder and submitted to another wet kiss. Nate was in heaven. Tru tasted like the milk left over after a heaping bowl of Apple Jacks on a Saturday morning and her backside was just as sweet. Standing behind her, Nate pulled Tru in even closer. Nate then allowed her fingers to float from Tru's hips as her hands slipped up and under Tru's shirt, clutching a perky set of C-cups. The cool, damp air on Tru's warm skin was enough to smack her quickly back to reality.

"I have something for you," Tru moaned lowly and spun around so that she and Nate were face to face. The two then took off running hand-in-hand into the rain.

Chapter 5

White Girl Wasted

Outside, a torrential storm rained down hard and boomed with thunder. And although the inside of Karina's industrial home was dry, the vibe was just as bleak. She'd drawn the shades in the tenth-floor loft apartment, making the swanky 2,000 square foot space dank and cold. And lining the concrete floors were the remnants of tonight's look. A pair of solid gold, sequenced booty shorts, black lace undies and a single high-heeled shoe led to the downstairs bathroom doorframe. While in the air, her disappointed Armenian mother's distinct inflection rang like cowbells through Karina's speakerphone.

"I'm beginning to see a pattern, Karina. You can't just miss work once a week," Karina's mother reprimanded her via voicemail as Karina clumsily searched the fully stocked medicine cabinet. Advil, Adderall, Tylenol, Zanax, the party girl was locked and still pretty loaded. "Did you think the studio wouldn't call when you missed today's viewing? My clueless child," she groaned. "You begged us to do business with the studios—cried to your father to be lead on this contract. If you won't do the work, your brother is more than willing to take the Herbst account off your hands."

Karina groaned and contemplated who was more annoying, the mother who loved to point out her shortcomings or Tru who had been a pain in her ass ever since she'd come into Nate's life. With a sigh, Karina reached for the extra strength Excedrin, popped the top and shook several into her open mouth, as her mother continued to ride her.

"Yes patrast yem ognel dzez?" Loosely translated, Karina's mother was willing to help her, but wondered when Karina would be willing to help herself." As the voicemail concluded, Karina pressed delete on the message left earlier that day. Like most moms, Karina's had mastered the art of the guilt trip and slipping into Armenian was her signature chokehold.

Karina slammed the cabinet door shut, causing glass to splinter and rain down into the bathroom sink. Unphased by the "sleep it off, beautiful" post it clinging faintly to the top left corner of the mangled mirror, Karina reached for the biggest shard and deliberately sliced a thin layer into her forearm. The fresh wound lay right beside a scar of identical proportion and had punctured the skin just enough to draw blood. Suddenly soothed, Karina took a good look at herself in the cracked glass. Hair matted, makeup smeared and rocking an apropos "White Girl Wasted" tank, Karina Zakaryan was a bonafide hot mess.

"Sleep it off, beautiful," she scoffed after reading the light-hearted, yet inspirational post-it aloud. Nate had left it there the night she denied Karina's drunken Jacuzzi advances. A disheveled heap and unable to sleep, Karina ripped the post it down and stumbled past the massive soaking tub.

She'd converted it into a makeshift bed by fitting it with a blanket and pillows. Karina figured if she had to yack, sleeping as close as possible to the toilet was a safe bet. Next, she stepped over the remnants of discarded fast food leading to the living room, its only source of light—two eerie Jack-O-Lanterns resting on the marble mantel.

Karina, flopped onto the leather sectional and leaned toward the mirrored coffee table. Then she inhaled two fat lines and threw her head back onto the couch as the cocaine went to work. Karina focused on the ceiling fan above her. Its slow, melodic drone was so mesmerizing that she shut her eyes and began to drift. Entranced by their dull hum, the blades of the fan fused impeccably with the melodic beats that Karina recalled Nate laying down just last month at Herbst Studios:

Karina remembered Nate seated behind the audio console, pressing buttons. "I started with this," Nate said, hammering out a spastic melody. She then reached over to the mixer and added a beat, which only seemed to complicate things, but by massaging the tempo, the sound gradually morphed into an edgy aria.

"O.k." Karina began to nod her head to the beat, unaware that Tru was its inspiration.

"Then I went here," Nate replied, adding another layer, this time an EDM and piano mashup.

"Nice! Karina squealed. "You're all boom by day—beats by night." She said, gesturing to Nate's boom microphone nestled in the corner.

"Speaking of beating it up at night," Nate laughed. She had melded two completely different flows into one cohesive vibe in a matter of minutes.

"I'm falling, Kar," Nate gushed, biting at her bottom lip seductively.

"I just hope you're able to get up because I'm not convinced," Karina spoke candidly about Nate's relationship with Tru.

"You will be," Nate countered.

"You should go for that intern. You said she's been throwing it at you," Karina pushed knowing full well that hooking up with coworkers had never been Nate's style.

"I'm telling you, Tru could be wifey," Nate said, pausing her handiwork to let a timeless un-manipulated rock steady track play. "Now, this I haven't placed yet, but I know it'll work." Karina took Nate's cue and shifted the conversation from Tru back to the music. "To think, you've wasted all that time and talent on reality shows." The combination of Karina's backhanded compliment and a producer entering the audio suite without knocking brought the session to a roaring halt.

"Big up! Big up!" The producer entered the cramped audio bay like a tourist, tipsy on Bourbon Street. "Dope beats, Nate," he admitted, "but that sounds nothing like the mixes for Replace My Face." This particular producer got on Nate's last nerve as he insisted on slipping into Ebonics whenever he spoke to her. "Where my mixes at?" He queried. Nate refused to reciprocate his foolishness. Instead, she pressed stop on the rock steady track and kept her tone professional. "Hey Bruce, I posted them to the server an hour ago. Guess you missed my email." "If I don't respond to your emails, shoot a brotha a text," he commanded. "It's that simple."

"I'm just saying the mixes are posted every morning at the same time," Nate said, standing her ground.

"So angry," replied Bruce, softening as he looked over at Karina. "Who's she?"

"This is my friend, Karina," Nate replied as she began to talk up her best friend. "She's with Zakaryan Realtors. I know we're looking for some new places to shoot and thought Karina could help. We discussed this last week. You told me to bring her by for coffee." Nate laughed, making herself appear less combative as she walked the fine line of handling both the producer's ego and tenure with care. "You accepted the calendar invite," she tried to jog his memory.

"An email reminder would've been nice," he responded while walking over to greet Karina.

"You just said to text," Nate responded matter-of-factly.

"So sassy," the producer laughed. "How do you deal with this one?"

"I'm always telling her that—you know how it is with some people," Karina replied with evidently no qualms about throwing Nate under the bus.

"Pleasure to meet you, Karina."

"The pleasure's all mine," she smiled.

"Bruce," the smitten producer declared, beaming in Karina's face. "I've already had my coffee, but I'd love to look at some of the properties. Come back tomorrow if you can swing it. I'll connect you and my location team."

"Fantastic! Thank you, Bruce," Karina said, shaking the producer's hand. Unbeknownst to Nate, Karina's plan to infiltrate Herbst Studios was in full swing. Her next order of business would be taking down Simon.

"Perfect! Nate, do me a favor. Text me Karina's contact info and make sure she has the show synopsis," the producer concluded. "

"That went great!" Karina howled as soon as the lanky producer was on the other side of the door.

"Some people?" Nate cringed, recalling the loaded phrase.

"You know how it is with these dorky producers, just stroking his ego," Karina maintained.

"You sold the man his house. Just pitch Simon directly," Nate pressed. "Why are you going through Bruce?"

"I don't want to put Simon on the spot," Karina lied effortlessly. "Besides, he's trying to do the job that his dead daddy took decades to master. I'm sure locations is not a priority." Karina approached Nate from behind and began to massage her best friend's neck and shoulders. "I need this. You don't understand what I'm going through," she paused for a beat before continuing. "My parents are constantly on my case, especially my mother—if she doesn't get off my brother's cock, I'm gonna report the both of them to CPS," Karina chuckled.

Nate spun around in her chair to face Karina, unamused. "Do you realize it took me several rounds of interviews in a span of three months to sit in this chair?" Nate quizzed. "You waltz in and get a meeting the very next day."

"When you got it, you got it," Karina said, primping in front of the narrow edit suite mirror.

"Forget it," Nate said, throwing her hands up in defeat.

"I'm joking." Karina spun Nate's chair back around to face her. "You got mad skills! Honestly, that pencil dick producer doesn't deserve you."

"I'll text him your info and I'll email you the show synopsis," Nate said.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you." Karina said, covering Nate's face in kisses. "Once my parents see how much money we can make with these production contracts they'll finally give me a little respect."

"The synopsis, Karina. Read it."

#

That night Karina did everything but read the show synopsis. She treated herself to a manicure, pedicure and facial. She even binged-watched her favorite show. And while her outward appearance was put together, Karina arrived at Nate's edit bay the next day, completely flustered.

"Dude, your meeting is on the eighth floor in like ten minutes. What are you doing here?" Nate asked while uploading show mixes to the company server. She was just about to text the producer that they were posted for his approval.

"I need your help," Karina said, shutting the door behind her. "I was totally gonna read the synopsis, but I fell asleep. I have hundreds of properties that I can show, but no idea where to start!"

"So now I'm supposed to do your homework?" Nate pressed send on the text message.

"Exactly!" Karina exclaimed with zero shame.

"Last week I pitched the idea of shooting in a Venice Beach bungalow, but pencil dick shot me down. Bruce and the location team said they want really modern, like Bel Air chic," Nate groaned and rolled her eyes at the notion. "Personally, I think it should be less chic and more street. You know folks love flavor."

"That's no help if they hated it. Give me something I can use," Karina insisted.

"Guess you should've read the synopsis," Nate shrugged.

"Too soon." Karina paced the room for a beat, then looked up at the clock and sprinted out the door. "I'll wing it." An hour later, the producer, location director, and Karina entered Nate's audio bay unannounced and laughing hysterically.

"Right in the middle of something here, guys. Deadline," Nate told them.

Karina slipped behind Nate and removed her headphones. "Sorry, I know you're crashing, but I just wanted to tell you the team loved my idea!"

"Brilliant," the location director chimed in. "Really edgy. I can't wait to check out the Venice Beach properties in person." Typically, a ball of anxiety, Nate hadn't seen the location director this light-hearted in weeks.

"Venice?" Nate probed.

"Very funny. Acting like I didn't run this idea by you," Karina said, standing in front of Nate, commanding the spotlight. "An idea she hated by the way."

She knew that Nate wouldn't say anything that would risk her coming off as the angry black woman, so Karina ran with the pitch completely worry-free.

"Folks love flavor and Venice Beach is full of it. I'm telling you, the fact that your Bel Air property dropped out will be a blessing in disguise."

"I'll run it by the E.P., but this could be good," said the producer to the location director, folding his arms.

"When I read the synopsis, it just jumped out at me. Less chic. More street," Karina smiled proudly.

"I love it," the location director nodded his head in agreement. "The location becomes a character."

"Fantastic, you guys go scout and please don't forget to send me pics," the location director ordered.

"On it," the producer agreed.

Although it had been a month since Karina secured the Herbst Studio contract, as she sat in her apartment recollecting—all of her senses activated at once. The location director's arrogant tone echoed in her eardrums like the thunder outside her lavish downtown loft. While the funk of Bruce's cheap cologne incited nausea. But it was the series of snapshots stitched together featuring Nate, trying to keep it together that truly put things into perspective. And as Karina watched herself claim credit for Nate's idea, it wasn't the taste of privilege that unsettled her, so—it was the fact that she wasn't strong enough to rebuke it.

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