

*Reckless  
Perfection*

Reckless Perfection

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**\*\*\*Chapter 1\*\*\***

*“... wake up to a blue stare.”*

***BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!***

“UGH!” Mercedes Natalia Mendoza exclaimed after hitting the off button on her alarm. Just like every weekday when she had to go to school, she didn’t want to get up. She pulled the orange bandana off her dark brownish hair and threw back the covers. Mercedes jumped out of her bed and let out a huge yawn. After taking a quick shower, she threw on a small white tee and light blue jeans. Afterwards, she slipped on a New Jersey Nets jersey and white Air Force 1 sneakers. She ran downstairs.

“Hola, le hice se desayuno,” her father, Mateo said as she approached him and gave him a hug. Her father had olive-colored skin due to his Cuban roots. Mercedes was a little lighter than him. He had black hair and a goatee and, unlike Mercedes’s light green eyes, he had brown eyes.

“Gracias. See you later,” Mercedes said after taking the egg sandwich he made for her. She jogged out the door, forgetting to lock it. Not wanting to miss the school bus, she continued to rush. She didn’t have time to admire the beauty of Roctown where she lived. Roctown was a small town in the heart of Monmouth County, New Jersey. The town was well kept and lively with most places in close proximity of each other.

Seeing that the bus was coming near the bus stop, she picked up the pace, passing the many green leafed trees and suburban houses. She ran straight all the way onto the steps of the bus.

“Right on time,” the bus driver said to her, knowing Mercedes was usually late or just on time. Mercedes caught her breath as she went to sit down.

Mercedes took a seat in her sophomore homeroom class at Roctown High School (RHS). She pulled out the geometry homework that was due later that day and began to work on it. It was the second week of school that early September.

Students began to pour in with their book bags, breakfast, new gadgets, and gossip. After their homeroom teacher called the roll, she turned on the television for the school news.

“Good morning, Roctown High, this is Gina Giordano,” Gina, the news anchor at RHS, said. Mercedes tuned out the announcements and went back to her homework. She knew they were going to say basically the same thing from the day before but worded differently and with two or more bits of information about new events that were coming up in the school.

As soon as the bell rang, the students went out the door to go to their first period class. Julio, Mercedes’s boyfriend, met her outside the door. He was half a foot taller than her. His skin was a

bit darker than hers and he had his black hair spiked up. He wore a white and burgundy Abercrombie & Fitch shirt with semi-tight black jeans and black Diesel shoes.

“Hey, mami,” he said giving her a kiss before putting his arm around her shoulder.

“Hey, Julio. How’d you sleep?” she asked as they walked over to her biology class.

“Good. Why didn’t you call me back yesterday?” They walked all the way to class and, as usual, they said didn’t have much to say to each other.

“I forgot. Sorry.”

“Oh. Well, I might paint after school, so we can’t meet up.” Julio was into artistic hobbies such as painting and drawing.

“That’s fine,” she replied, relieved that she didn’t have to spend time with him. “I’ll see you later.”

“You, too.” He kissed her cheek before he left. She went inside and sat down at her assigned seat. Mrs. Kinston, the biology teacher, came into the room with her briefcase.

“Take your homework out. We’re going to take turns going around the room to answer the questions,” she added, pulling out the homework she had assigned the night before. Mercedes took out the homework from her folder. As she listened, her mechanical pencil caught her eye. She picked up her pencil and removed the eraser. She slowly took out the two remaining leads that were inside it.. She placed the two leads on top of her desk and put the small eraser upright. She grabbed the pen next to her and dragged the pieces apart. She slid the spring off the ink container.

“Next,” Mrs. Kinston said after several students answered the questions from the homework. Mercedes picked up one of the leads and pushed it into the ink of the pen. “Next,” Mrs. Kinston repeated. Mercedes dipped the lead into the ink. “Miss Mendoza, it’s your turn,” Mrs. Kinston said, sighing. It was typical for Mercedes to be inattentive.

Mercedes pulled out the lead and used it to write on her homework sheet. “Mercedes? Mercedes!” Mrs. Kinston exclaimed. The student who sat next to Mercedes nudged her. Mercedes gazed up from her writing utensils to all the students and the teacher looking at her. Some of the students snickered at her.

“Yes?” she asked, putting the lead down. She felt her ears turning red.

“It’s your turn to go,” Mrs. Kinston replied. Mercedes looked down at the homework, not sure what problem they were on. “We’re on number 17, Mercedes,” Mrs. Kinston said, after seeing Mercedes struggling to find the number she was on. “Pay attention next time.”

“Sweetheart, I’m glad you’re here,” Barbra, her pregnant stepmother, said after Mercedes got home from school and stepped into the kitchen.

Oh no! Mercedes heard the perkiness in her voice. After a long day at school, the last thing she wanted was to deal with her upbeat stepmother.

“Hey,” Mercedes replied, trying to leave the kitchen quickly before Barbra could finish the conversation. Barbra was sitting on a stool doing work on her laptop. She was wearing a lavender button-down shirt with white Capri pants and Ked shoes. The top half of her light brunette curly hair was up and the rest was down.

“Mercedes, wait,” Barbra said. Mercedes went over to Barbra. “I want you to help me decorate the baby’s room.”

“I thought my dad was gonna help you.”

“He’s really busy with work, and men don’t like to decorate. And plus this will be a way for us to bond and get to know each other,” Barbra said with an eager smile on her face.

“Bonding. Sounds like fun,” Mercedes said with sarcasm.

"Is this Saturday good for you?"

"Sure," Mercedes said forcing a smile.

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"THANK YOU!" Juliana Adeliz Rodriguez exclaimed through the microphone. The crowd remained silent. She raised her black cherry Agile AL 2000 electric guitar in the air. This time the audience began to chat amongst themselves. Julia put her guitar down and took a bow, letting her long tightly-curved black hair fall over her face.

Whenever she wanted it straight, she had to use a flat iron that took forever to get it all straightened. Since her curls were so tight and straightening her hair took forever, she usually gelled her hair and put it into a ponytail or bun. She had light brown eyes and light caramel-colored skin. She was skinny and shorter than average.

Still, no cheers. Annette jogged on stage. She took the microphone from Julia.

"We want to thank Julia Rodriguez for that," Annette said in a loud voice even though she was speaking into a microphone. She clapped her hands in the microphone. An embarrassed Julia avoided the audience's blank stares by unplugging her guitar. The audience followed by politely clapping.

"You'd think they'd appreciate good music," Julia said as she and Annette walked off the stage.

"Julia, your performance was great."

"The audience wasn't feeling me." One of the worst things to Julia was failing, especially at doing one of the things she loved the most, playing music.

"I'm telling you, you were good, but you have to be audience-centered."

"What?" Julia followed Annette to her office.

"My speech professor says that being audience-centered is vital."

"Annette, I'm not giving a speech."

"No, but you're performing in front of an audience," Annette said, pulling the keys to her office from her pocket. She unlocked the door to her office. "And the more you know about your audience, the easier it is to adjust to what they want to hear." They both entered her office.

"Then what do they wanna hear? That was good music." Julia went over to the corner of the small office and pulled out the black bag for her guitar. She unzipped it and rested her guitar in it. Annette took a seat behind the desk and leaned back on her chair.

"It was, but senior citizens aren't that fond of Scandal, especially with you yelling in the microphone." If she couldn't even entertain a crowd of senior citizens, how could she captivate the peeps by her music? "Julia, next time try old school rock." Julia was occasionally hired to perform for the senior citizens at Eastontown Retirement Home. Julia sang "Goodbye to You."

"The eighties! That is old school!"

"I mean seventies or even sixties. There's a bunch of bands that you can do that they'll enjoy. So, I'll see you in a couple of months with a song from the seventies or sixties and the acoustic," Annette replied, handing Julia a check.

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Angela es Fresh erased the answer that she had written for the umpteenth time. Out of habit, she put the pencil between her teeth as she tried to recall what her biology teacher had said earlier that day about mitosis. She listened to the lecture. Sort of. Unable to use the book that she forgot at home, she left most of the answers blank. She had the rest of the night to finish the packet on mitosis, since it was due the next day. Angela had her longish blonde hair tied to the back. She had high cheek bones and a heart-shaped face. Her eyes were hazel. She was also slightly tall.

"Please tell me you're not doing what I think you're doing," Rachel said as she approached the counter top where Angela was doing her homework. She had straight dark brown hair with

blonde highlights that went to her shoulders. Her short bangs hung over her face right above her small black eyes. Rachel rocked a total of nine studs and hoop earrings on her right and left ears.

"Yeah, I'm doing homework. You should try it," Angela replied without looking up.

"I'm not the one who got left back last year," Rachel snapped. Angela glared at her insulting friend who was wearing the same pale pink and white dress uniform. After years of being best friends with Rachel, she was used to her attitude. "Anyways, what are you doing tonight?" Rachel asked as if she hadn't just snapped at her friend.

"Going home, doing this and other homework." Angela looked back at her packet. .

"No. Tonight you're coming with me to that party on Bordo," Rachel said, referring to Bordo Avenue, the infamous street where many parties were thrown in Roctown.

"Sorry, Rach." Angela scribbled down the answer for number four.

"Come on, Angela. You never wanna have fun anymore," Rachel pleaded as she put her hands together.

"Like you said, you're not the one who got left back last year. I did. And besides, I gotta tuck my little sisters in." After getting held back the previous year, the last thing she planned on doing was messing up and repeating history. Angela knew that meant she had to change her ill habits of the past, including, partying hard.

"Just 'cause you got left back, doesn't mean you can't have fun and still pass. And you could've come up with a better excuse. Tucking your sisters in? Ang, Christy's like thirteen—"

"But Tania's five."

"Fine, I'll come home with you and while you tuck them in, I'll get ready."

"And what about my homework?"

"Let me finish. While you get ready, I'll do your homework."

"Rachel, you barely passed bio last year."

"I got a D. And you can get Sal to come to the party. I know you like him."

"Do not."

"You so do. He's popular, the star quarterback, and sexy. You're lucky I wouldn't be caught dead with RHS's golden boy."

"Even if I liked him, I can't be with him. Not now." She did have a crush on Sal and she was aware he liked her. Although they knew each other from the parties that the cheerleaders and

football players threw back a couple of years ago in the ninth grade, they just recently had begun to talk on a one-on-one level.

"Ladies, quit the chit chat! There are customers!" the boss of Fast Burgers barked from the back of the kitchen. Rachel and Angela both rolled their eyes. Rachel took the packet away from Angela.

"I'll start on this," Rachel said. Angela nodded as she left to take the order. Several truck drivers sat down in the booths as they laughed loudly. As they saw Angela, some of the men whistled while others hooted. Angela ignored them and put a smile on her face.

"What would you guys like to order?" Angela questioned. She pulled out her small blue notebook and a black pen from the front pocket of her uniform.

"I know what I wanna order, but it's not on the menu," one of the impudent truck drivers responded with his eyes on Angela's legs.

The whole table roared with laughter, slapping both their knees and the table as if it were a funny joke. The smile left her face. As many times as she'd heard customers talk to her like that, it still irked her.

"Okay, I'll give you guys more time," she said. She left them and went over to the counter where Rachel was working on her homework. "Starting on my homework just so you wouldn't have to take their order," Angela hissed to a grinning Rachel.

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Angela helped Rachel to her feet beside Sal's Mercedes.

"Ov-over to th-the moon! It ro-rotates synchronously. The moon does," Rachel slurred pointing to the half-moon in the night sky. It was three in the morning. Angela put one of her friend's arms over her shoulder as she held her by the waist so Rachel wouldn't fall.

"Thanks for the ride," Angela said, a couple of inches away from the open window of the passenger's seat. They were in front of where Rachel lived.

"No problem," Sal said. "Need help?"

"No. I got her," Angela replied, trying to hold up Rachel. The three of them came back from the party on Bordo.

"I wa-wanna go to sleep," Rachel slurred as she stumbled onto the floor.

"You can't sleep here," Angela replied, as Rachel brought Angela down with her. Rachel took her arms away from Angela's shoulder and lay down on the dirt pavement.



"Yes, I can." She curled up in a ball and closed her eyes.

"Rachel, come on. We're almost at your house," Angela said bending over, trying to pick up her drunken friend. It was useless. Seeing that Angela was struggling, Sal got out of the car.

"I'll get her," Sal said picking her up from the pavement, cradling her in his arms. Her head tilted back over his forearm.

"Thanks," Angela replied. They walked up to the front steps of the trailer home.

"Rach, where's your key?" Angela asked. Rachel shrugged her shoulders.

"Check her pockets," Sal said. Angela checked the right side of her black mini skirt's pocket and pulled out the black key chain with the key to the house on it. Angela opened the door. Knowing that Rachel's uncle was usually asleep on the couch in the living area where the front door opened to, she didn't turn on the lights. The glare of the TV was good enough for them to see where they were going. She and Sal walked slowly past Rachel's sleeping uncle over to her bedroom. Angela turned the lights on as Sal placed Rachel onto the bed. Angela pulled the mini trash can right next to the side of the bed where Rachel laid her head. Angela pulled the covers around the bottom half of her friend.

"Let's go," Angela told Sal. Sal followed Angela outside. "Sorry about that. Rach loves her liquor," Angela said to Sal.

"I saw you drinking, too." They walked a couple of blocks over to where Angela lived.

"I didn't drink as much as she did. And, besides, I can hold my liquor."

"Speaking of holding, can I hold your hand?" She looked up at Sal. He had soft wavy brown hair. He was tall and athletically built. His chocolate colored eyes made her feel warm.

"Okay," she softly said as she gave him her hand. Sal looked down at Angela and smiled. Angela smiled back at him. They walked to her home in silence. When they reached her front steps, they stopped. "Sal," she said, looking down at their hands together.

"Angela," he said holding their hands up. "I care about you, and I like you. A lot."

"I like you, too," she automatically replied. Sal gently pulled her face closer to him and kissed her. After a few seconds, Angela turned her head and leaned against the trailer. "We can't," she whispered, letting go of his hands.

"I know, but I want to."

"Goodnight," Angela said, crossing her arms. Looking into his eyes made her make irrational decisions. She had enough problems with guys. She didn't need one more to add to her issues.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he said before leaving. When he was out of sight, she unlocked her front door. After closing and locking the door, Angela noticed that the lamp beside the couch in the living area was on. Her mother had an old dictionary on her lap. She lifted up the dictionary and pushed her knees up and settled the dictionary on top of her knees. She opened up the book and ripped out a page from it. She tore that page in half twice. When it was the size of a gum stick wrapper, she rolled it up, leaving a small opening.

Her mother lifted herself up a little and took out a small bag from the back pocket of her faded blue jeans. She opened the bag and discharged whatever was inside the bag on top of the dictionary making sure that it landed in a pile in one place. Her mother placed one end of the rolled paper into her right nostril and the other end on top of the substance. She squeezed the left side of her nostril and inhaled the white powder. Her eyes closed as an obsessive rush took over her body. Opening her eyes, she saw her daughter staring at her.

"What the hell are you looking at?" she asked.

"Nothing," Angela replied.

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After bombing her geometry test on a Friday afternoon, Amanda Elisabeth Prescott rushed out of the classroom. She had had enough math for that day. How could the teacher actually require the students to memorize that many formulas? As if Amanda had time to think about formulas.

She looked over her shoulders to see if anybody was watching her strut on her way to the bathroom. There were a few who watched her, namely freshmen. The boys watched her because they liked what they saw and the girls watched because they wanted to be like her. Or so she thought.

"Hold this," Amanda demanded of a freshman who had a humongous book bag on.

"O-okay," the frightened but grateful girl said. The girl took the books from Amanda. Amanda glanced at her reflection in the mirror. Her beautiful blonde hair was below her shoulders. Her dark blue eyes matched her navy skirt and her pink tunic fit just right on her slim body. She was average height. Her face was thin and her smile was huge. Amanda smiled after seeing her reflection. As usual, looking at herself in the mirror lifted her spirits.

"I keep getting more beautiful every day."

"What'd you say?" the girl who held her books asked.

"Nothing," Amanda said, completely unaware that she had said that out loud. "Thanks." She took her books back. "For nothing," she added after she left the bathroom and noticed sweat on her books. She rolled her eyes. Looking stunning sure came with consequences.

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The Rodriguez attic was surrounded with boxes and other items which had never been unpacked from their move from the Bronx seven years before. The floor was dusty and dirty. Julia's mother decided to clean up the attic that Saturday.

"You can start with that window," Gloria told her daughter, Julia, handing her a rag and Windex. After taking what her mother gave her, Julia went over by the window.

"Eww!" she exclaimed, seeing a medium-sized spider crawling on the web it made by the window. "Ma, there's a spider!" Her mother took a piece of cloth off the floor, killed the spider and destroyed the web.

"Nena, it's just a spider," her mother replied, knowing that no matter what she said, spiders or any other kind of bug would always scare Julia. After Julia finished cleaning the window, she set the Windex down. Julio, Julia's twin brother, ran up the stairs to help his mother. Like his sister, he had light brown eyes and light brown skin. He had the same long nose as his mother, Gloria. He was taller than both his sister and mother. Gloria's brunette hair was naturally wavy. She had the same complexion as her children and had dark brown eyes. Although Gloria was in her mid-thirties, she already had a few wrinkles.

"Julio, stop running before you break all the stairs!" Gloria exclaimed, looking up from the broom she used to sweep the floor.

"Sorry," he said, slowly walking up the rest of the stairs. He picked up one of the rags that was on the floor, sneaked up behind Julia and slapped her across the back.

"Julio!" Julia exclaimed, kicking his leg.

"There was a bug on you."

"I'm sure there was," Julia replied, seeing the smirk on his face. "Hit me again and see what'll happen."

"What are you gonna do?" He picked her up and dropped her on the floor.

"Stop fighting!" their mother said.

"We ... we're not fighting," Julia said as she pushed Julio's hands away from her arms and muscled him. She put Julio in a headlock. Ever since they were young they loved to wrestle, especially during the Stone Cold Steve Austin and The Rock phase.

"I don't care. Juliana, let your brother go," she said, coming near them. Julia's family members were the only people who called her Juliana instead of Julia.

"Let go!" Julio yelled.

"Didn't I tell you not to try me?" Julia asked, letting him go.

"Loser," Julio replied, pushing Julia backwards into a box.

"Julio, I'm gonna—," she said, but stopped after feeling something on her bottom. She got up from the box she had fallen upon and saw that inside was a stack of records of American music from the eighties and several Spanish musicians.

All the way at the bottom was an album by Carlo Julio Rodriguez, Sr. called 'Baile Conmigo'. The album was in old color. The man was wearing a three-piece suit with a top hat. He was sitting on a chair with a cigar in his mouth and a guitar in his hand. A young lady was sitting on the floor beside him with one hand against the floor and the other hand around his leg. She was looking straight at the camera. Her hair was in huge curls and she wore an old-fashioned dress.

"That can't be—," Julio began studying the album cover, too.

"Ma!" Julia exclaimed, recognizing her mother right beside her father on the album cover.

"What?" Gloria asked as she came over to them with the rag in her hand.

"That's you," Julia said. Her mother took the album and wiped the dust off the cover.

"I haven't seen this in a while," she said, smiling at the picture of herself when she was nineteen. The picture was taken in Puerto Rico. She ran her fingers over the picture of her husband who was twenty-two at that time. Two years after that album they got married, moved to the Bronx and had Julia and Julio.

"I didn't know you were a groupie, Mama," Julio said.

"I wasn't. Your tía and I were both dancers at a couple of his earlier concerts. Speaking of which, your father said he was coming to visit in a couple months after his tour ends." Their father was still living in Puerto Rico as a musician.

"Like he's really gonna come," Julia said. Julia learned at a young age to never count on her father. Although he acknowledged her and Julio as his own, his absent presence made it seem as if he didn't claim them.

"He is," a naive Julio replied.

"Don't hold ya breath, son. Last time we saw him was three years ago."

"Maybe he'll actually come this time," their mother replied, placing the album back in the stack it was in. "Let's get back to cleaning."

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Mercedes quietly picked up her basketball by the front door. She held the ball with one hand and slowly turned the knob of the door with the other.

"Mercedes, where are you going?" Barbra questioned. After mouthing a cuss word, Mercedes turned to Barbra. Barbra walked down the stairs.

"To play basketball," she replied.

"Did you tell anybody where you're going?" she asked as she finally reached downstairs.

"I told my brother to tell you."

"Why didn't you tell me yourself? You knew that I was home." Mercedes's father wasn't home.

"I didn't wanna bother you."

"Oh." Barbra rested her hands over her medium-sized belly. We made plans to go shopping for the baby for a bonding experience, remember?"

"It must have slipped my mind," Mercedes lied, as she twirled the ball with her hands. She began to count the mini bumps on the ball. She was hoping Barbra would forget about the whole getting to know each other. She was happy that her father was blissful with his new wife, but that didn't mean she had to establish a close relationship with her.

"Mercedes," Barbra began, to get Mercedes's attention. Mercedes looked up from her basketball. "I have to wrap up a few things for work. I should be done in about ten or fifteen minutes." Barbra looked down at her white gold Seiko watch. "Is that enough time for you to get ready?"

"I already made plans to play with basketball with Keisha."

"We can go after."

"I gotta study."

"On a Saturday?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Maybe some other time." Mercedes left the house and rode her black BMX bike to the park.

"Girl, you're late," Keisha declared with both hands on her hips. Mercedes got off her bike and dropped it against the fence.

"It doesn't matter." Mercedes dribbled the ball over to her.

"It does to me. I'm trying to get all my homework done today." Keisha had light brown skin. Her black hair went down below her shoulders. She was on the slightly plus size and was tall.

"Who does homework on a Saturday?"

"I do. I hate procrastinating."

"I would'a been here sooner, but Barbra ..." Mercedes began drifting off as she saw the letters on the basketball that read Infusion. She noticed that the last three letters were starting to fade.

"What about her? Mercedes?"

"She wanted me and her to go shopping so we can bond." Mercedes began to dribble the ball around Keisha.

"Why didn't you go? I wouldn't have minded."

"I don't wanna get to know her. Yeah, she's married to my dad and about to have my little brother or sister, but ..." Mercedes sighed.

"But what?"

"She's trying too hard and I don't need that right now." At times she wished that she and Barbra got along. It would make living at home so much easier.

"She's your family."

"She ain't blood and she's mad annoying. Now can we stop talking about her?"

"Off the subject." Keisha bent over to stretch. Mercedes rolled her eyes as she put her keys inside her black shorts. She picked up the ball and went up for a lay-up. Keisha soon joined her. Keisha took a shot and made it. Mercedes grabbed the ball and threw it back to her. Keisha shot again. The ball went in, then back out. Mercedes shot and the ball went over to the other court where a game of 21 was in progress.

"I'll get it," Mercedes said. She jogged after the ball and bent over to pick it up. When she looked up, the most beautiful pair of intense blue eyes was staring at her. Both the ball and her jaw dropped. The pair of blue eyes belonged to a tall male who had to be in his late teens or early twenties. His black beater showed his toned arms. He had short curly black hair. Those five seconds staring back at him felt like five minutes to Mercedes. It didn't take her long to realize that he was fine.

"Cedez," Keisha said, snapping her friend out of her daze. "Do you want to ask them if they want to play?" she asked, not noticing that Mercedes was deep in thought. Before Mercedes could even ask, Keisha went over to him and asked the blue-eyed guy and the other guy he was with to play. Sure enough they said yeah. They played boys against girls. The blue-eyed guy hit a

couple of one pointers and blocked the girls' shots along with his buddy. However, Keisha and Mercedez made a couple of two pointers to win the game.

"Game point!" Mercedez exclaimed, after swishing a two pointer.

"YES! We won," Keisha added, jumping in the air.

"I didn't know girls could play ball," the blue-eyed guy said.

"Now you know," Mercedez replied with a smile revealing her dimples. He smirked back.

Mercedez walked away to the water fountain. She was hot from playing basketball and from being around him.

"Your friend sure is competitive," he said from behind her in his smooth voice.

"Yeah," Mercedez said as she sipped on the water. She turned to face the stranger. Sure enough, in the back Keisha was still jumping for joy. Mercedez heart began to race. He was much finer up close.

"I'll see you around," he said after Mercedez had nothing else to say.

**\*\*\*Chapter 2\*\*\***

*“ ... can I borrow a piece of paper?”*

"Why do we always have to buy used clothes?" Christy complained to Angela as they walked into Trendy Thrifts. Angela was with her thirteen-year-old sister, Christy, her six-year-old sister, Tania, and Rachel. Christy had long light brown hair and big hazel eyes. She was thin and about the same height as Angela. Tania was short for her age. She had shoulder-length blonde hair and brown eyes.

"Stop complaining. Most of the clothes don't even look used," Angela replied as she went over to a rack of girls' clothes. Trendy Thrifts was a local store that sold gently used clothes for an affordable price. "Don't move," Angela said. She let go of Tania's little hand. Christy sighed as she went over to the juniors' section. Angela pulled out a purple Dora the Explorer jumper. She held up the jumper against Tania to see if it looked like it would fit her.

"DORA THE EXPLORER!" Tania exclaimed, pointing to the front knitted design of Dora and her monkey smiling. Some of the people in the store turned around to stare at Tania. Once they realized it was a child, they went about their business. Angela and Rachel both laughed.

"Can I have it?" Tania asked, tugging on Angela's jeans.

"Sure, baby, as long as it fits you," Angela said, as she patted her sister's hair.

"Damn, you got expensive taste," Rachel said to Tania and Angela, who was gazing at the price tag. The price tag read \$35. "How much money did you bring?"

"\$45." Angela put the jumper back on the hanger.

"I'll spot you some." Rachel reached into her pocket and yanked out a ten-dollar bill.

"No. Rach, I already owe you—"

"Don't worry about it. We're friends."

"I can't."

"Then I'll buy the outfit myself," Rachel threatened, knowing that Angela would rather get a little help instead of having somebody else spend that much money on her or her sister's behalf.

"Fine. Thanks. I swear, I'll pay you back."

"Don't worry about it, Ang." Angela placed the bill in her back pocket. "Come on," Angela said, taking Tania's hand with the jumper. They all went over to the junior racks.



"You found anything yet?" Angela asked Christy. Christy nodded with clothes in hand.

"Christy, you don't need more basketball shorts and you can leave the white T," Angela said, knowing that the clothes she had in her hands surpassed the \$20 she could spend for her.

"First you take me to a stupid thrift store, and now you're telling me that I can't even buy what I want?" Christy pouted, throwing the clothes she had in her hand on the floor.

"Stop making a scene," Angela said. Rachel and Tania bent over to pick up the clothes.

"I'm not making a scene," Christy responded loudly.

"Yes, you are," Angela said, on the verge of yelling. She was over having to deal with her sister's bratty behavior.

"No, I'm not!" Christy pulled a couple of clothes with hangers off of the rack. Once again, several people turned their attention to the commotion. The manager raced over to where the clothes were thrown. "Now I made a scene," Christy replied, glancing around to see that almost everybody in the store was staring at them. Christy stuck both her middle fingers in the air before storming out of the store. Angela's face turned red with embarrassment.

"Teens these days," Rachel said, breaking the ice as she bent over to pick up the clothes.

"I can't have that kind of behavior in this store," the manager stated, glaring at them instead of helping.

"Sorry," Angela said as she helped to finish collecting the fallen clothes. "I'm gonna pay for these so we can get out of here," Angela mumbled to Rachel. Angela took Tania over to a seat, then went over to the clothes Christy had before. Angela took the Fubu shorts and mini-skirt.

"You're really gonna buy clothes for her after what she just did?" Rachel questioned.

"She'll wear them eventually."

"Aren't you gonna buy anything for you?"

"Some other time."

"That's what you said last time," Rachel said. "You don't wanna miss the sale today anyways," Rachel said in a low voice to Angela.

"What sale?"

"The five finger discount," Rachel whispered in her ear. Angela pulled Rachel to the corner of the store where they sold old men's clothes.

"I'm not gonna steal. I got money," Angela hissed in a low voice as a man passed them by.

"So what? You want more things, take them," Rachel stated pointing her head towards the junior section.

"I never said I wanted more things, Rachel."

"What's wrong with you? We used to do this all the time, and this used to be one of the stores we'd hit to use our discount."

"That was then. I'm not like that anymore." Why couldn't Rachel see that she was desperately trying to run away from being the girl who did whatever she wanted, no matter what the consequences were? "Besides, my sister is here."

"She's over they're minding her business." They both looked at Tania who was sitting on the chair and playing with her Bratz doll.

"I'm not gonna do it."

"Whatever, I'll do it with or without your help," Rachel responded in her normal voice. Angela knew she meant business. Rachel made her way to the junior section.

"Rachel, wait." Angela grabbed her friend's arm.

"Ang, I'm not asking you to take anything. Just distract the cashier by buying the clothes and I'll do the rest."

"Fine," Angela reluctantly agreed as she went over to the cashier. She glanced to see Rachel looking through the junior section of clothes while looking at Angela from the corner of her eyes to seize her opportunity. Angela placed the clothes on the counter.

"Hi. How are you today?" the cashier asked although she could care less how Angela was doing that day.

"Fine. You?"

"Good." The cashier started to ring up the clothes. Angela took a peek behind her and saw Rachel using her discount. The cashier ran the price tag of the skirt about six times. "This won't ring. I'll go get the manager," the cashier said, about to leave to go look for the manager.

"NO!" Angela exclaimed as she noticed Rachel slipping a tank top into her purse. "Leave it," Angela added with a calmer voice.

"Are you sure?" Angela nodded. "Well, if you say so," the cashier mumbled. She rang up the rest of the clothes. "That'd be forty-four dollars."

"How much?"

"Forty-four."

"What?"

"Forty-four dollars!" the cashier repeated as Rachel left the store.

"Okay." Angela gave him the exact amount. After the cashier placed the clothes in the store's bag and handed her the receipt, Angela went over to Tania before walking outside.

"That was rad," Rachel said, patting her inflated purse as soon as she saw Angela.

"Yeah," Angela replied, feeling sick to her stomach.

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Keisha pressed the eject button on the DVD player and took out Mean Girls. She went to turn on the lights. She made sure to not step on all the stuff that was littered all over Mercedes's bedroom. Besides the clothes t on her floor, she also had a bunch of papers from this year and last year scattered throughout her room. Keisha placed the DVD on the disorganized mound of DVDs Mercedes had sloppily piled by her television. Mercedes's bed was in the middle of the bedroom. In front of her bed was her TV and in the corner of the room by her window was a mini-desk.

During the movie, Mercedes imagined that she was Cady and the soccer player was Julio. In her head, Amanda was Regina and wanted to be with Julio. At the beginning of her fantasy, Mercedes sabotaged Amanda after realizing that she wanted to be with the same guy. However, she let Julio go. At the end of her fantasy, she and the blue-eyed guy locked eyes. Not quite the way "Mean Girls" was...

"That movie was tight," Julia said. Julia was lying underneath the covers stomach-down. Mercedes rested between her two best friends.

"I like that movie. Regina reminds me of someone we know," Keisha said.

"Amanda," Mercedes said, as both Keisha and Mercedes laughed.

"Who's Amanda?" Julia asked.

"This stupid chick who's in me and Keisha's gym class."

"Why's she stupid?"

" 'Cause she swears she's better than everybody," Keisha responded. "And she's been eyeballing Julio."

"She's been checking on my brother?" Julia asked. Mercedes threw her hoodie on and rolled over to her back and gazed at the ceiling.

"It doesn't bother you that she likes Julio?" Keisha asked. Mercedes shook her head. Knowing that Amanda liked Julio didn't affect her. She and Julio had gone out for too long for her to be jealous or for her to even care.

"I'm not sweating it," Mercedes replied as she looked at the details on the white ceiling fan.

"Keep it funky, Cede. You still feeling Julio?" Julia asked. Although Julia was Julio's brother, she didn't hesitate to answer her. Mercedes's going out with her brother never got in the way of their friendship.

"I don't know. I love him, but I'm bored." Julio wasn't exciting her anymore. She loved him, but it was hard to say if she was still in love. She would dump him in a second if she didn't have to concern herself about him getting hurt.

"Going out with the same guy nonstop since eighth grade will get you bored, especially since you're only fifteen," Keisha said.

"I know. I can't imagine getting married and having to spend the rest of my life with just one guy," Julia said.

"It's called being in love. You used to know the feeling when you was still with Eddie," Mercedes said.

"Love. Schmu. "

"I met this guy at the park."

"You cheated on Julio?" Keisha questioned.

"No. Anyways, there's something about him that's got me thinking about him."

"Is he cute?" Keisha asked.

"Hell, yeah. He's tall, tan, and he's got curly black hair. And he's got beautiful blue eyes," Mercedes said as she pointed to the ceiling fan and counted how many flaps there were in her head even though she knew how many there were.

"You've been studying him," Keisha said. Mercedes chuckled. Just thinking about him made her get butterflies in her stomach.

"You better not act on those feelings," Julia said.

"Of course not," Mercedes quickly said. At times she forgot that Julia and Julio were related.

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“How could you get a B in geometry and biology?” Charles, Amanda’s father, questioned as he looked at her progress report. Roctown High School mailed progress reports and report cards to the student’s homes. Amanda sat across from her father’s desk in the den. Charles had the same dark blue eyes as his daughter. His black hair was combed and gelled to the back. He had on the usual three-piece suit that he wore at his job as a lawyer at the firm his grandfather had established decades ago, The Prescott Law Firm.

“They expect us to have all the formulas memorized in our heads,” she replied. She ran her fingers through her blonde hair. She knew where this conversation was going. All of the lectures her father had were all about doing the best to live up to the Prescott name..

“So what? Amanda, if you spent as much time as you do shopping and with boys on studying, you wouldn’t have gotten any B’s at all!” Charles continued. Amanda unfolded her arms and adjusted herself on the black leather seat.

“Sorry,” Amanda said, hoping the lecture would end soon.

“You should be like your brother and strive to get the best grades. I’m going to hire a tutor for you so your grades can improve.”

“But Daddy–,”

“No, buts. You’ve already screwed up your chances at St. Rose, so don’t mess it up at this public school!” Amanda rolled her eyes. She was over hearing how bad it was that she had got kicked out of her previous private school. Had she not have all of the pressures of being perfect, maybe she wouldn’t have done what she done. “I swear at times it feels like you try your hardest to disgrace the family’s name.”

“Well, don’t worry, father, I won’t disgrace the family’s name,” she sarcastically replied.

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“Ya’ll heard that new song from Ludacris?” Keisha asked Mercedes and Julia. The three best friends met at the Coca-Cola vending machine next to the cafeteria every morning before school started. They all dropped their book bags on the floor.

“Sí. Bailaba a esa canción anoche,” Julia responded doing a little dance for demonstration. She was the shortest of them all.

“Your Puerto Rican behind knows I don’t speak that Spanish,” Keisha replied.

“I said I was dancing to that song last night.”

“What about you, Cedez? You heard it?”

“It was good,” Mercedes replied, obviously distracted. Mercedes dug into her book bag and grabbed her usual breakfast, Lucky Charms in a Ziploc bag.

“Oh, Cedez, I forgot. You got a chance to see your mom yesterday?” Julia asked. Mercedes nodded her head. The same depressing and painful expression she got whenever her mom was mentioned resurfaced. Mercedes glanced away from her friends to the vending machine as if she was all of a sudden interested in buying a Coke.

“My fam and I have been praying for her,” Keisha said as she reached over and touched Mercedes’s arm.

“Ya’ll went to Eddie’s party?” Mercedes asked, purposefully changing the conversation as she began to eat the oat parts of the cereal before the marshmallows. She didn’t like talking about her mother’s condition. She didn’t think she’d ever be able to open up about her, not even to her best friends.

“Nah, but I heard it was bumping,” Keisha replied, playing along, knowing that her friend didn’t want to talk about her mother.

“Girl, you know I didn’t go ‘cause I wasn’t about to go to no party Eddie was throwing,” Julia said. The bell rang, signaling that the students had five minutes to get to class.

“Is sophomore class meeting today after school?” Keisha asked Julia.

“It’s tomorrow. Today’s Beta Club meeting,” Julia replied. Julia was very much involved in extracurricular activities such as Beta Club, Sophomore Class, and Tutoring Teens, a group of high school students who tutored students after school.

“Is it too late to join Beta? I need to do more than play basketball,” Keisha replied, knowing that colleges wanted a well-rounded student. Mercedes kept quiet. She knew she needed to join some clubs, but she decided to worry about joining clubs next year as a junior.

“I don’t think so.”

“I’ll see ya’ll at lunch. I’m out,” Keisha said, grabbing her book bag. Unlike Keisha’s far away homeroom, Julia and Mercedes’s homerooms were close to each other. . They both took their belongings and headed towards homeroom.

“So, I was playing the guitar and BAM it hit me,” Julia said to Mercedes as they walked in the hallways of Roctown High School. Mercedes continued to eat her breakfast.

“What hit you?”

“I was ...” Julia began. Mercedes stopped walking. There was the guy from the park leaning against the wall with a black T-shirt and dark denim jeans on. He had a pencil behind his ear and

a red notebook in one hand. He was casually looking around the hallway. Mercedes blushed when he caught her checking him out. He smiled, got off the wall and walked to her. Her heart began to race. She had no idea what to say to him.

“I didn’t know you go to this school,” he said in that deep smooth voice of his.

“I do. You from here?”

“I’m from Philly.”

“Really.”

“Yeah. You know where room 538 is?”

“Uh huh. It’s upstairs by the history and English classes. I’m Mercedes.” They continued to talk. She stuck out her hand, but pulled it back after realizing she had small crumbs over it. “Lucky Charms,” she mumbled. She wiped her left hand before shaking his hand.

“Mercedes, that’s a pretty name.” He extended his left hand instead of his right. She smiled. She liked the way her name sounded coming out of his mouth. She let go. “Your name isn’t as pretty as you are,” he whispered in her ear before he left.

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“You dropped your pen,” a guy said to Mercedes. Mercedes glanced up from her biology book to see who it was. It was the guy from the park wearing a black hoodie. Her heart jumped. She half smiled at him and stopped. She looked down on the floor of the library to where her pen rolled. “It’s over there,” he said pointing towards the floor.

“Where?” she asked frustrated that she couldn’t find it. He began to laugh.

“Here.” Mercedes's body tingled as he gently touched the side of her face. He softly maneuvered his hand to the back of her left ear and took the pen from behind it. He held the pen out to her. Mercedes gazed into his blue eyes as he got close. He looked back at her.

“This your study hall?” she asked, breaking away from his beauty. She took the pen from him. The stranger pulled out a seat beside her and sat down.

“No. I just got a pass from American Government to catch up on some work.”

“I didn't get your name," Mercedes said as she closed her biology book.

"Robbie Nease.”

“So, what grade you in?”

“Senior. You?” Robbie opened his American Government workbook. Mercedes opened her biology book once again and pulled her right leg up to sit on it.

“I’m a sophomore. I’m fifteen, but I’ll be sixteen in December.”

"December's okay, but July is where it's at."

"You were born in July?"

"They don't say I'm hot for no reason," he said with a cocky smile. Mercedes leaned her head on her arm that was resting on the table and grinned back at him.

"So, what's your hobbies and all that?" she asked as her hands flipped through the biology book, not really paying attention to the book.

"Basketball and more basketball, but you wouldn't understand since you're a girl," he said, snickering.

"I probably watch more NBA than you. When the finals and championship games are on, my eyes are glued to the TV and everybody knows not to change the channel," she responded as her hands stopped going through her book. She closed the book. This was so much better. It was good that they were actually having a conversation without her choking. Thank goodness for basketball.

"Okay. Who won the championships from ... 1999 'til now?" he fired.

"Spurs, Lakers three years in a row, and Spurs again," she replied just as quickly as he asked. She pulled her right leg from underneath her and sat up straight.

"Favorite player and why."

"Steve Nash 'cause the kid got the ill three pointer and he be getting them cookies during the whole game."

"Steve Nash? Nah, Mercedes. My man Kobe is way better than him."

"Yeah, right. Nash is way nicer than him."

"In your dreams. Kobe, straight out of high school, 80 points in one game. Nash did what? Make a couple of three pointers."

"I'm not gonna sit here and tell you why Nash is the best."

"He's not. I'd probably whoop him on the court."

"Boy, don't play yourself." They both laughed.

"You're right," he said revealing his white teeth in a smile.



"I love basketball and the NBA. I really do. I even got NBA posters all over my walls in my room."

"Maybe you could show me those posters on your wall someday," he replied.

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"Miss. es Fresh, do you ever mind joining us on time?" Mr. Everson, the American history teacher asked sarcastically as she joined the class after the late bell.

"Sorry," Angela apologized, sitting down.

"This is the fifth time you've been late to my class," Mr. Everson stated.

"Thanks for counting," she replied under her breath.

"Okay, pass your homework assignments up. After the assignments are handed in, we're going to start presenting our projects." Angela rolled her eyes. Yet another thing she didn't have. She looked up at the marker board that was filled with notes and assignments.

Right by the door stood a tall gorgeous looking guy with the most appealing blue eyes that she had ever seen. She realized that he was the new student all the girls were gossiping about. "Class, this is Robert Nease," Mr. Everson announced to the class after he had collected the homework. Mr. Everson pointed to an empty desk near Angela. Angela straightened her back and sat up. She ran her fingers through her blonde hair quickly to make sure it looked nice. Robbie took a seat next to her. .

"Hey." Robbie said. "You know my name. Your name?"

"Angela," Angela said acting like she hadn't noticed he just sat down.

"Who wants to go first?" Mr. Everson asked. "Okay, no volunteers. Then I'll pick somebody to go. Angela, why don't you go first?" Angela got up with a blank piece of paper in her hand, as if it was her report. "Um .... my project's on um . . . Betsy Ross," she started. "When she died everybody . . . well maybe not everybody, but a lot of people were sad."

"It'd be nice to know when she was born and about her life before she died," Mr. Everson said.

"She was born on . . . um, that day of the week," Angela said. All the students started to laugh, realizing that she didn't have a clue of what she was talking about.

"Angela, obviously you didn't bother to do your report, so take a seat," Mr. Everson began sighing. "Also, Angela, see me after class."

"You put a lot of effort in that," Robbie said after she sat down.

“Shut up,” she snapped. She didn’t need his sarcasm. She was already aware of the lack of effort she put in working on the project. Robbie nodded his head and kept quiet until the end of class.

“Can I borrow a piece of paper?” Robbie asked Angela before the bell rang.

“Have, you mean?” Angela ripped out a piece of paper out of her notebook.

“I meant borrow.” He accepted the paper. Angela waited for the other students to finish presenting their reports. . When the bell rang, Robbie got up and grabbed her belongings. . “It was nice to meet you,” he said, holding out his hand. Although it was cheesy, she extended her hand and shook his. Robbie slipped something into her hand as they shook hands. He let go and left.

Angela waited for him to walk out the door before she unfolded the same piece of paper she gave him earlier. Inside was his name and number. Unlike any average girlfriend, she unzipped her purse and slipped that paper inside. Everybody left, but her.

“Angela, you’re going to repeat the tenth grade again if you don’t pick up your grades, and if you don’t change your effortless work habits,” Mr. Everson started.

“Sorry.”

“Your average in my class is a 39%. You would have a D or even a C average if you’d actually hand your homework in, study, and do your reports,” he kept going. “You can pass this class. It’s up to you.” Angela nodded her head. She knew what she had to do to pass her classes. It was the actual doing her work part that tripped her up.

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Julia, Keisha, and Mercedes placed their trays of breakfast for lunch down at their usual table. Julia slowly took her seat. Right in the corner by the snack vending machine, was her ex-boyfriend, Eddie, making out with another girl. Eddie didn’t even have that lunch period.

“Girl, sit down,” Keisha told Julia.

“Yeah, Julia. You look mad obvious.” Mercedes and Keisha could also see Eddie making out with another girl.

“He probably still sees you staring at him even though he’s got his tongue down that girl’s throat,” Keisha said.

“Whatever,” she said, finally sitting down. It was only about a month and a half since they broke up and there he was with someone else.

“Ladies,” Dev said, sitting down next to Julia. He had curly black hair. His Indian roots showed through his light brown skin tone and his large dark brown eyes. He placed a bag of Doritos, a Snapple and two large cookies on the table. Mercedes and Keisha gave him a nod.

“Hey, Dev,” Julia said. Dev was more Julio’s friend, but since Julio and he didn’t have the same lunch, Dev ate lunch with Julia and her friends.

“Dev, I heard you and your girl broke up,” Keisha said, opening her carton of chocolate milk.

“It’s true,” he said giving them a sad face. “She broke my heart,” he said, putting his hand over his heart as he took a huge bite of his cookie. They laughed.

“Something you and Julz got in common,” Mercedes said.

“Except Julia’s on that stalking mess,” Keisha said.

“I don’t be stalking Eddie,” Julia replied, defending herself.

“Your eyes, girl. They be following him,” Mercedes said, laughing with Keisha.

“I know, right. Every time Eddie turns around, there goes Julia’s eyes. Her eyes pop out of her body to follow him,” Keisha said, pretending to pull out her eyes. She closed her eyes. “Eddie, where you at? Where you at, Eddie?” Keisha joked as she waved her hands with the two eyes she pulled out. By now, Mercedes’s face turned red from all the laughing. Dev spit out his cookie at the nearest garbage can, cracking up. .

“Ya’ll are messed up.”

“What’s so hilarious?” Eddie asked as he approached the table hand in hand with his new girl. Eddie was tall and athletically built, but somewhat thin. He had light brown skin and lengthy eye lashes with black eyes. His hair was low cut at the moment. He was wearing his football varsity jacket with jeans and tan Timberlands.

“Nothing,” Julia replied, annoyed that the first time he decided to talk to her after their breakup was when he was with another girl. Mercedes and Keisha tried to stop laughing, however, having Eddie there added to their amusement. Julia angrily picked up a French toast and shoved half of it in her mouth. He always seemed to look better every time she saw him.

“Yo, Julia, this is my new girl, Silesia,” Eddie said. Julia looked up at Silesia. “And, Silesia, this is my buddy, Julia,” Eddie told her. His buddy? Was that what they had going for six months?

“Hey,” Silesia said, both sounding and looking bored. Silesia knew that Eddie and Julia was once a couple.

“Sup,” Julia replied with as much enthusiasm as Silesia. She refused to acknowledge the fact that there was a pretty girl on Eddie’s arm. That should have been her. She pushed three tater tots into her mouth, hoping that Eddie and his girlfriend would take the hint and leave.

“Julia, you didn’t tell Eddie the news?” Dev asked, moving a bit closer to Julia.

“What news?” Julia asked, mumbling.

“That we’re together,” he replied. He placed his arm around her shoulder and kissing her cheek. Julia turned to Dev in slight surprise. Seeing that Eddie had a smirk on his face, obviously not believing him, Julia moved closer to Dev.

“He’s right,” she said, making her face look more convincing as she gave Dev a peck on the lips. Now it was Dev who was surprised. Thankfully, he played it off by giving her a huge grin.

“You make me so happy,” he told her. Julia winked at Dev, thanking him, before she looked over to Eddie.

“I guess you breaking up with me was the best for the both of us after all. I mean, now I have Dev.” She turned to Dev, and beamed at him. She ignored Eddie for the rest of the couple of seconds he was standing by the table. Dev and Julia laughed after they left.

“Did you see his face?” Dev asked.

“I know! Like I can’t move on from him,” Julia added. “What?” she asked Mercedes and Keisha, noticing that they were both grinning.

“Nothing. Just you two seemed to enjoy that kiss,” Keisha said, taking note of Dev’s arm still around Julia’s shoulder.

“Nah, we was just acting,” Julia said.

“Whatever. Ya’ll would really make a cute couple,” Mercedes said.

“I agree,” Keisha said.

“Me, too. Hey, we can be each other’s rebounds,” Dev said with a hint of playfulness in his voice.

“We’re just friends,” Julia said to everybody at the table. She gently removed Dev’s arm away from her. She thought that Dev was cute and she liked his personality, but she didn’t want to get into a new relationship at the moment.

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Angela held a small bag up to Rachel.

"Dude, that's a reefer. We'll get expelled if we get caught with that," Rachel said, looking around the girl's bathroom at RHS to make sure that no other girl was in the bathroom.

"It's not mine. You know I don't smoke weed anymore," Angela replied. She placed the bag of weed into her back pocket. Rachel opened the door that led to outside. Outside by the bathroom was the back of the school. A mile away from there was the woods. Rachel kept that door open by leaning her back against it.

She pulled out a cigarette and lit it up with her lighter. Angela stood a few steps away from Rachel to keep a lookout at the front door of the bathroom just in case a teacher or dean decided to do a random check on the bathrooms.

"Are you selling?" Rachel blew a smoke outside.

"I found it in Christy's stuff."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Angela took the half-smoked cigarette Rachel had and switched places with her.

"Did you ask her about it?"

"No. I don't know what to say to her."

"Hey, we were around her age when we started to smoke weed," Rachel said as she went over by the mirror.

"I know. If I tell her not to smoke I'll be a hypocrite." She wanted to make sure her younger sisters didn't make the same reckless mistakes she did before. Christy's choices scared Angela at times. It reminded her of the wild path she chose around the same age as her.

"Don't worry, Ang, you'll think of something. I gotta stupid zit," Rachel said, gazing at the zit on her lower chin. She pressed both her fingers against the zit to get rid of it. Angela threw the small cigarette outside and stomped on it.

The well-known varsity cheerleaders of RHS, Gina and Jackie, came into the bathroom. They went straight to the mirror to fix their makeup. Jackie gave Rachel and Angela a dirty look before she began to put more foundation on.

"Angela, cheerleading practice is today at four," Jackie began as she put on more lip gloss. "Oh, that's right, you got kicked off the team for being so retarded."

"Funny," Angela replied.

“Where do you guys shop at? Sluts R Us?” Gina asked. They snickered as they looked down at Angela and Rachel’s slightly promiscuous wardrobe.

“Let’s go,” Angela said to Rachel, ignoring them. It wasn’t the first time the popular cheerleaders were rude to them.

“How’s Adam doing?” Rachel asked Gina.

“Why does it matter to you?” Gina responded.

“I was just wondering if you saw him last night.”

“Yeah.”

“Something we have in common,” Rachel replied in a smirk while Gina frowned. “Now the burning question is, did I bang your boyfriend before or after he saw you?”

“You–,” Gina began taking a couple of steps towards Rachel.

“We’d love to stay and chat, but we gotta go,” Rachel said, putting her arm around Angela’s arm. They laughed after leaving the bathroom.

“You sure told Gina.” They walked over to the cafeteria.

“It’s not like I completely lied to her.”

“You really slept with Adam yesterday?” Angela asked.

“It happened a couple of months ago.”

“Gina and Adam were still together a couple of months ago.”

“You should look in the mirror before you pass judgment on me,” Rachel snapped.

**\*\*\*Chapter 3\*\*\***

*“... rain check the parents, reservation for the boys.”*

Mercedes smiled at Robbie. They were both at his house sitting on a couch that Friday watching 106 & Park, a show on BET. He had invited her over to his house a couple of days before. Mercedes dressed up a bit for the occasion. She put on lip gloss, eye shadow and some blush. She wore a light-green tunic that brought out her eyes.

“You want something to drink?” he asked.

“Yeah.” When he left, Mercedes got up from the couch. She went over to the nearby coffee table and picked up the New York Times newspaper that rested on top of it. It was opened to the sports section. She put down the newspaper and explored the living area. The whole place was clean and plain. Besides the couch, TV and computer in the corner of the room, there wasn’t much going on in the room. The walls weren’t even painted. She wondered why he didn’t have any pictures of his family. She was sure that he had to live with his family since the house was a decent size.

Robbie came back with two cans of Sprite and two cups. “Found something interesting?” he asked as he saw Mercedes staring at the wall.

“Did you hang a picture frame up here?” Mercedes asked, disregarding his question.

“How’d you know?”

“The wall’s painted white, but there’s a streak of off-white across here. It could’ve been just hitting something against a wall, but the slight gold color and small hole give it away,” Mercedes replied. After realizing that she was engaged in a wall, she backed away from it and went over to the couch and sat down. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he responded, not quite sure of what to make of her little discovery. Robbie opened both cans and poured the Sprite into the two cups. “You look mad good.” He sat down on the couch.

“So do you!” She took a sip from her Sprite. She drummed her fingers against the cup. After nobody said anything, Robbie put one of his knees on the couch and had the other leg out on the floor. Mercedes looked straight past the TV. Her legs and arms were both crossed.

It was okay for her to be at a boy’s house alone when it wasn’t her boyfriend. Right? It wasn’t like she was on a date with him. She told her father she was at Keisha’s house. Robbie moved a bit closer and began to gaze at her. Robbie touched her hair and moved it from her face.

Mercedes turned to face him. They had never been this close.

“I’m feeling you.” He took her free right hand and kissed her.

“What about your boyfriend?” a voice in her head said. Mercedes pulled back. She kissed him back. Thoughts raced through her head during the kiss. Julio loved her so much. She stopped. Robbie let go of her hand and leaned back on his couch.

“My bad,” she said.

“You’re not feeling me.”

“It’s not that...I gotta boyfriend.”

“Oh.”

“I shouldn’t have led you on,” she said, placing the cup of Sprite down.

“Okay. If you and your boyfriend ever break up, you know my number.”

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“The food is really good here,” Mercedes said after Julio pushed her chair in for her. They were in Red Lobster for their anniversary that Wednesday. Julio was wearing a V-neck sweater with dark denim jeans. His hair was spiked up and he had on shades. Mercedes wore a slip-on baby blue dress. Her hair was down and curled. They both ordered food. They chatted as they waited for their food.

“We’ve been kind of distant lately,” Julio said as he put his hand over hers. That touch brought thoughts of when Robbie touched her Friday. She pulled her hand away.

“I gotta tell you the truth.” She unfolded the napkin in front of her.

“About what?” He crossed his arms.

“Friday, I was at a boy’s house,” she said as she pulled out the fork and knife.

“That’s okay ... as long as nothing happened.”

“Something did happen. He kissed me ... and I kissed him back,” she confessed without looking at him while she clicked the fork and knife together.

“Did you enjoy it?” Julio asked. Mercedes put her fork and knife down.

“I couldn’t ‘cause all I could think about was you. I don’t even remember what the kiss felt like. I’m so sorry. You don’t deserve that.”

“I haven’t been faithful either. You remember last summer when you were on vacation with your family? Well, that weekend, I went to a party and I drank alcohol.”

“Okay.”



“I started to feel lonely after every sip, and I made out with a girl.”

“You’re joking, right?” she asked not believing what he just said. She felt both hurt and relieved at the same time. Julio coming clean definitely took away most of the guilt she felt for cheating.

“I wish I was.” Julio reached over and took a sip from his Coke.

“Did you enjoy it?” she asked as she took a sip out of her Sprite.

“I was drunk, babe, come on, I don’t remember.”

“So what do we do now?” she asked as the food came.

“Eat!” Julio popped one of the mozzarella sticks that Mercedes ordered into his mouth.

“Seriously,” she said as she playfully slapped his arm. They both laughed. “Were you thinking about me when you kissed her?”

“I don’t remember, but I promise I’ll never drink that much again ‘cause I don’t wanna hurt you,” he said as he reached over the table to hold her hand. This time, she didn’t let go. Maybe this time would be different between them. Hopefully the excitement could increase in their relationship.

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"Mom, this is like the fourth time I'm calling you. Pick up the phone," Amanda demanded on her mother's voicemail. Amanda threw her Sidekick II cell phone to the opposite side of the sectional couch in the entertainment room. Amanda and her mother were supposed to go to the spa and go on a shopping spree together; however, it was already eleven in the morning and she hadn't heard from her mother.

She grabbed the remote and turned on the television and angrily flipped through the channels. Where was she? Amanda needed a massage. Her math tutor had been drilling her hard. One of Kelly Clarkson's hit songs began to play on her cell phone. She got up to retrieve her phone. "Mother, where are you?" Amanda asked, answering her phone.

"Amanda, you called me several times today," her mother, Mary Anne, replied sounding distracted.

"Ma'am, would you like that in a size six?" somebody in the background asked.

"Are you in Saks Fifth Avenue?" Amanda questioned after recognizing the voice of the sales clerk at Saks Fifth Avenue.

"Yes, I am. I'm looking for a dress."

"A dress? For what?"

"I'm going to Manhattan later today with a couple of my girlfriends."

"Manhattan! Mom, today was—"

"I know, you and I were supposed to do something," Mary Anne said casually as if it was okay for her to do a rain check without notifying a person.

"We were." Amanda thought for a while. She surely wouldn't mind going to New York. Last time she was there was over the summer. "How about I go to Manhattan with you?" Amanda suggested, already thinking about what she was going to wear. She knew! She could buy a dress at Saks and Fifth and she'd be able to shop with her mom after all in a city filled with fashion stores to shop in. "I'll go get ready and meet you right now to buy a dress!" Amanda said jumping up from the couch.

"No!" Mary Anne exclaimed, just as Amanda was about to run up the stairs.

"No? But—"

"Amanda I want to spend time with my friends." Amanda kept quiet. "Amanda, we can go some other time."

"Sure," Amanda responded before hanging up the phone. "Have fun in New York."

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Julio grinned when he saw Mercedes walk up to him. However, the closer she got, the angrier she looked. Mercedes had a frown on her face and her eyes were squinted and focused on him. She had her book bag over her shoulders and her left fist clenched.

"Hey, babe," Julio said nervously.

"Don't hey babe me!" Mercedes replied. "Did you bang that ho you cheated on me with at that party?" The night before, Keisha told Mercedes that Julio went further than he admitted to at the party with the other female. She couldn't believe how he could lie right to her face. What made it worst was how he wouldn't have said anything about his infidelity had she not confessed about her unfaithfulness.

"Mercedes, I—" Her nostrils flared.

"You what?" she asked, her voice getting louder.

"Did Keisha say something?"

“It doesn’t matter who did. Just answer the question,” Mercedes demanded, breathing hard, her heart pounding.

“Mercedes, I’m sorry—”

Mercedes socked him across his nose. She could tell when he wasn’t being truthful. Julio grabbed his nose. A little bit of blood came out of his nose. “You whore! We’re through!” she added loud enough for the whole hallway to hear. Several people ooh’d and quickly left.

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“You remember when you told me to holla at you after me and my boyfriend broke up?” Mercedes asked Robbie over the phone. She waited a couple of weeks before she calling Robbie. Although she wasn’t heartbroken over the breakup with Julio, she still felt hurt that he slept with another female.

“Yeah.”

“Well, I broke up with Julio. He had sex with some ho while we was together.”

“His loss is my treasure,” he replied. “We can take it as slow as you like. I don’t wanna be the rebound guy.” Mercedes got up from the floor where she was working on her geometry homework. She walked over by her window and sat down on the seat that was right next to it.

“That sounds good,” she replied, knowing she didn’t want him to be her rebound guy neither.

“Do you like breakfast?”

“Um . . . yeah?”

“So meet me tomorrow at the Café Lounge at 7:45.”

“In the morning? Robbie, that’s when school starts.” Mercedes pulled her long red and white striped socks off and threw them on the floor by her geometry book and homework.

“Exactly. We can do whatever you want after breakfast.”

“I could use a day off from school,” she impulsively said. An uninterrupted day with Robbie sounded great. Hopefully it wouldn’t be as awkward as it was last time they were completely alone.

“It’s getting late.”

“Yeah, I’ll see you at 7:45. Goodnight, Robbie.”

“Yup. Goodnight, Mercedes,” he said before hanging up.

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As Angela smoked, lying on Sal's bed, she reached to the floor for her purse and dug for her old Nokia phone. After spending yet another night with Sal, she checked to see her missed calls and texts. She was ready for Sal to finish taking his shower so they could go to school that morning. She looked at the missed calls and listened to Christy's voice message, even though Angela told her that she wasn't going to come home last night. She also saw that her boyfriend, Travis, called her three times, left one message and two text messages last night.

Angela knew she was leading Travis on to believe that she shared feelings for him when the feelings were all on his side. If Travis was giving her what Sal was, she might never have cheated on him. Travis told Angela from the beginning of their relationship that he didn't want to have sex until after he was married. She wished she could go back and say no to Travis when he asked her out. She thought going out with a virgin would help her slow down and stop having as much sex as she was used to. Her plan worked for the first month; however, a couple of weeks before, she disregarded her celibate plan.

Angela put the phone back in her purse and dropped the purse on the floor. Although she was dressed for school, she put her head against his soft white pillows and closed her eyes. His bed was so comfortable and soft. She wanted to lie there all day, but she couldn't. She began to doze off, when Sal's cell phone rang.

"Hello," Angela purred as she picked up the phone without looking at the caller id. Angela felt rich whenever she was in his bed. She pulled out a cigarette and lit it.

"Hi. Can I speak to Sal?" a girl said on the other line.

"He's taking a shower," Angela said. She blew a ring of smoke.

"How do you know he's in the shower? Are you his mother?" Angela sat up after she heard the nosiness from her voice.

"Marcela?" Angela asked, recognizing her voice.

"Angela? Oh my gosh! It is Angela," Marcela, the infamous gossip at RHS replied. Angela closed the flip phone. After realizing what could happen, she put his phone back on his bed stand. Afterwards, she put the cigarette out, knowing that Sal would be done any minute and he didn't like smoking. She got up from the bed. Sal came out with a button-down white shirt tucked into black slacks. He was dressed for the football game that was away.

"You got all your stuff?" He dried his hair with a towel. Angela nodded her head as she stood next to him by his Italian flag he had by his bed on the wall. She grabbed her purse and her pocket knife fell out. She quickly picked it up before Sal saw it. After getting everything they

needed, they hopped into his Mercedes Benz. In the car, Angela's phone vibrated. She looked at her text. Sal's cell phone rang, too. He got the same text from Travis.

"I guess I got shotgun all the way to school," she said putting her hand on his lap as he drove. Sal looked at her hand there. He took it off his lap. "What's wrong?"

"We gotta talk. When are you gonna break it off with Travis?"

"Sal, I can't," Angela automatically said.

"What do you mean, you can't? We can't keep this going."

"We have for about a month," she replied, crossing her arms.

"Angela, you gotta make a choice. Me or him 'cause you can't have us both." They said nothing to each other during the whole drive to school. Sal arrived at the school and parked in his assigned parking space. "I'm done with whatever we had going on between us." He grabbed his Adidas duffel bag for football and his actual book bag. He got out of the car. Angela took her purse and book bag and slammed the door.

"Sal, don't do this." She leaned over on top of the car.

"Then make up your mind," he said, getting close to her. Angela looked away and didn't say a thing. She enjoyed being around Sal and the excitement of seeing two guys at once, but she didn't want to get serious with Sal. "Looks like you already made your choice," he said, backing up from her. "Don't bother calling me anymore."

\*\*\*

Mercedez pulled out the compact mirror from her book bag. She was by the side of Café Lounge's door at 7:30 am. She did a quick booger check making sure there was nothing inside her nose. She quickly applied clear lip gloss. Robbie came up to Mercedez and put his arm around her shoulders.

"Did the mirror confirm what I already know?" Robbie asked, placing his hand on top of the compact mirror. Mercedez's heart skipped a beat. His hands were touching hers.

"What do you already know?"

"How gorgeous you are," he said giving her a kiss right on top of her right dimple. Mercedez blushed as she gave him a cheesy smile.

After breakfast, Mercedez pushed the door open from the Café Lounge to go outside. She stalled by the door when her favorite Jay-Z song came on. She stopped to dance in the middle of the doorway. Robbie came closer behind her to dance with her. She laughed and stopped dancing.

“Sorry, I couldn’t help it,” he said, backing away from her with a grin.

“It’s okay.” She continued to walk out the door with him. “So, what now?”

“I’ll take this.” He took her book bag off and placed it on his back. “And, like I said over the phone, whatever you wanna do.”

“Thanks. Let’s go play basketball,” she suggested, walking in the direction where the park was.

“You gonna ball like that?”

“What’s wrong with it?” Mercedes looked down at what she was wearing. She had on a feminine red and white long sleeve shirt with dark denim jeans and white and red Timberland boots on.

“You can play with Timbs?” he asked as they walked past the parking lot of Café Lounge.

“Yeah. Real ballers have no excuse to not play. If you’re not up for an ass whooping then we can do something else,” she teased.

“So you think you can beat me,” he said in a smirk as he put his arm over her shoulders. She looked at his beautiful blue eyes rather than answering him.

“Why Roctown?” she asked instead of answering his question.

“What?”

“Why’d you move here?”

“I dunno. Philly wasn’t doing it for me. I guess fate brought me here. You lived here all your life?”

“Nah. I was born in Newark, lived in Brooklyn until I was maybe three or four, then I moved to Roctown, New Jersey.”

“You a Jersey chick? Or are you repping that New York?”

“Jersey all the way,” she said putting her arm around his waist.

“What are you? I mean, you look real exotic.”

“People always ask me that question. What do you think I am?”

“Some type of Spanish. Brazilian or Venezuelan, maybe? ”

“I’m Spanish, but only half. I’m half Cuban from my dad’s side and my mom’s mom was German and her dad was black,” she replied.

“You speak any of those languages?”

“Spanish only. I grew up speaking both English and Spanish. I don’t speak German or whatever the language over there is called. What are you?”

“I’m mix, too. My mom’s Russian and my father’s half white and half African.”

“Seriously?” Robbie looked as if he was a fully Caucasian guy with an all year round tan. His skin however would pale up in the winter. “I couldn’t tell you had black in you.”

“People get surprised whenever I tell them that. If you saw the afro I had when I was younger, you’d be able to see some of the African in me.”

“You had an afro? I gotta see some of those pics!”

“I wasn’t as fly as I am now when I had the ’fro.”

“I see. We got that black and white thing in common,” Mercedes said.

“True. So ... last one to the—,” Robbie began. Mercedes pulled away from him and ran over towards the court. He followed her. With his longer legs, he passed her. He ran down the mini-hill that led to Hallcott Park. The park had four different basketball courts. It also had a baseball and softball field. There were tennis courts there along with a huge wall for wall ball or tennis players. Next to the tennis courts was the playground with swings and a jungle gym. The park also had a broad walkway that people used to walk or rollerblade or bike. There was even enough of a field for people to play a game of football.

Noticing that Mercedes was catching up, he ran in front of her. He stopped as soon as he reached the empty basketball court.

“You cheated!” she exclaimed and playfully pushed him as she caught her breath.

“Did not.” Mercedes went over by the fence that surrounded the outside of the park and picked up an abandoned basketball. She pulled up her sleeves and dribbled the ball up in front of the three-point line. She took a shot there, jumping in the air. The Timberlands boots hindered her from jumping as high as she would have liked. The ball hit the rim and dropped. Both Mercedes and Robbie ran after the ball. Mercedes grabbed the ball first, but Robbie stole the ball from her and dribbled over to the foul line.

“Come get it. First one to make a shot wins,” he said, still wearing Mercedes’s book bag, as he put the ball through his legs. She approached him and bent her knees to guard him. He

went as low as she was and kept the ball away from her reach. “Is that your dad?” he asked, looking above her head.

“What?” She looked behind her in fear that her father was there. She knew she would be dead if her dad not only caught her playing hooky, but also with a boy.

“Sike!” he exclaimed. He went to the hoop and jumped while he gripped the ball. He tried to dunk, but the ball flew out of his hand. Robbie still grabbed rim, but dropped to the floor of the court with his knees bent and hands on the ground. Mercedes laughed at his failed attempt to dunk and the remembrance that Robbie had never seen her father.

“Real nice,” she said clapping her hands as she approached him. Robbie got up and brushed the dirt and small pebbles from his hands. “I believe it’s my ball.” Robbie handed her the basketball. Mercedes checked the ball at the top of the key. After Robbie passed the ball back to her, she wasted no time to run towards the hoop. She jumped near the side of the foul line and made it. “Game, baby!” she said in excitement, glancing at Robbie.

“What do you want for winning?” he asked in a defeated grin.

“A hug.” She went over to him. She put her arms around his shoulders as he put his hand around her waist. She gently pulled his head down and kissed him. This time she was able to enjoy the kiss with him.

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Amanda gazed at her crush Julio as he walked into her geometry class. He was one of the reasons why her grade wasn’t an A in that class. He was such a distraction, especially since he sat in front of her. He sat down. She noticed something different about him.

“You waxed your eyebrows,” Amanda stated. Julio turned around in his chair to face Amanda.

“You like it?” he asked.

“Yeah. You look hotter ... in a feminine way,” she replied. She played with her hair as she subtly checked Julio out.

“Gee, thanks,” he said, turning around.

“You know, now we can both go together to get our eyebrows waxed,” Amanda said she caressed his back. “And maybe afterwards, I’ll let you draw a picture of me.” She had heard about how talented he was as an artist. She wouldn’t have minded posing for him while he studied her and drew her. It was game on now that he was now single. Julio smiled.

“Flirting with me, Miss Prescott?”



"Perhaps," she whispered into his ear. She enjoyed being close to him and smelling his sweet cologne. Amanda stopped caressing him as she saw the teacher walk in.

"All right class, let's begin," Ms. West, the geometry teacher, said. Amanda sighed as she pulled out her Five Star Notebook and her Caran d'Ache Lemman Roller Ball Pen. She would rather use her laptop but, unlike St. Rose, Ms. West and the other teachers at RHS wouldn't allow it. Ms. West turned on the overhead and used a brown paper towel to erase what was on it before. During this time, Amanda dug into her Marc Jacobs tote mint green bag. As soon as she felt her Sony digital recorder, she pressed record. Amanda rested her head on her bag, ready for Ms. West's monotone voice to put her to sleep. She would listen to the lesson when she got home. Maybe.

"Today we're going to learn about proofs," Ms. West began in her monotone voice.

"Okay, class, that's the end of the lesson, so go get a book and start on your homework," Ms. West announced about thirty minutes after she began. The few students who weren't sleeping got up to get a book from the class set. "And I will give you guys zero if you're not working on the homework because we still have fifteen minutes of class left."

"Wake up. West is threatening us with zeros," Julio said to Amanda. He handed her a book. Amanda opened her eyes and yawned. She patted her hair down in hopes that she still appeared attractive enough for Julio.

"Thanks," she said, taking the book. Instead of opening her book, she opened her compact mirror to check if she had any lines on her forehead from sleeping on her tote bag and to see if her makeup was okay.

"Amanda, I will give you a zero if you don't close that mirror and open that textbook," Ms. West said. Amanda looked away from the mirror and glared at her teacher. She closed the mirror and opened the book.

"She'd want to look in the mirror, too, if she was pretty like I am," Amanda mumbled.

"What'd you say?" Julio asked her.

"Nothing," she puffed.

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"Where's your hermano?" Gloria asked Julia in a whisper. They were at their church Christian Water's Life on a Wednesday around 7 p.m. A guest speaker who traveled the world was there to preach. The guest preacher was almost done with his sermon

“We can’t go around only loving those who show us love. Luke 6:32 says, ‘But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them,’” the guest pastor said.

“In the bathroom,” Julia replied.

“Even though somebody sinned against us, we should still love them. ‘Cause I know all ya’ll sinned against people in ya’ll’s lifetimes. Can I get an amen?” the guest preacher asked, jumping up.

Amen,” the congregation said with enthusiasm.

“Now turn to your neighbor and say ‘you may have sinned against me, but I still love you,’” the pastor added. After the pastor finished preaching, the congregation got up to chat a bit before going home.

“Go ahead, Ma,” Julia said waiting for her mother to leave her seat so she could leave, too.

“Wait.” Julia sighed. She had a chemistry test the next day that she wanted to review before going to bed. As soon as the area cleared, Gloria went over to the music pastor.

“Hello, Ebony,” Gloria said to the twenty-one-year-old musician.

“Gloria, how are you?” Ebony asked. Ebony studied music at the local community college while working as a music director at the church.

“Good. I just wanted to introduce you to my daughter, Juliana.” Julia turned to her mother after hearing her name.

“Julia,” Julia corrected. She preferred that only her family call her by her full first name.

“Hi, Julia,” Ebony said extending her hand. Julia gave her a nod while shaking her hand.

“Do you know that Juliana’s a musician?” Gloria asked. Julia nodded her head once again in agreement with her mother.

“Really?” Ebony asked.

“Yes. She plays the guitar. She was telling me the other day she wanted to play for the church.” Julia’s head snapped at her mother’s statement. Julia might have mentioned wanting to get involved in the church, but she didn’t mean she wanted to commit to something twice a week. “And since you guys are looking for some musicians ...,” Gloria drifted off.

“Mama, I’m sure they’ve got enough guitarists,” Julia said, hoping Ebony would get the hint.

“Actually, our lead guitarist is leaving the church,” Ebony replied.

“I’m not that good,” Julia said with a fake laugh.

“Nonsense Juliana plays at the retirement home every six months by herself. She doesn’t take lessons now, pero her father and I put her in lessons when she was just eight years old. I’m telling you she can play anything you throw at her,” Gloria added.

“This is a perfect opportunity to do something for God and the church,” Ebony persuaded.

“God ... he’s done so much for me,” Julia said.

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Mercedes opened the fridge and pulled out a blueberry ice pop. She put it down on the counter. She opened one of the drawers in the kitchen and took out a faded purple scrunchie. It didn’t match the grey Fubu hoodie or red Nike shorts she had on, but she didn’t feel like going all the way upstairs to get one that matched. She pulled up her hair and put it into a sloppy bun.

“DAD! I’m going to the park to play ball!” Mercedes called out to her father who was upstairs. Mercedes grabbed her keys and ice pop and headed out the door. She picked up her Infusion basketball that was by the fake plant near the door.

“Esperas!” Mateo replied. Mercedes rolled her eyes. After five minutes, her father came downstairs in black sweats as if he was invited to come too. “Vamos,” he said as he put on his old Reeboks.

“You’re coming, too?”

“Is that a problem?” Mateo asked, looking up from tying his shoe lace. Mercedes shook her head no. Mateo got up. He took the ice pop away from her and put in the fridge. “It’s too cold for you to be eating that.”

Mercedes sighed as they both walked out the back door and out to the street on their way to the park. “What’s with the attitude? You don’t want to hang out with your own dad?” Mercedes knew his feelings weren’t hurt since he put his arm around her shoulders.

“It’s not that. I just don’t wanna school you delante de todas las personas en el parque!” she said, smiling. Mercedes pulled her scrunchie off and began to stretch and retract it as they walked to the park.

“We’ll see about that,” he said, letting her go and giving her a smile. “I also wanted to talk to you about something. You’ve been out of it lately,” her father began in a more serious voice. Mercedes rolled her eyes, knowing where this conversation was going. She took her scrunchie and tied her hair with it again.

“Your biology and geometry teacher called and they’ve said that you seem to have trouble concentrating and completing class assignments,” he began. Mercedes saw a navy blue 1999 Buick next to the park. There was a red cloth on top of the leather dashboard inside the car. “... your grades are slipping because of this, Mercedes. I got your report card earlier today and you ...” Mateo continued.

She saw how the passenger’s seat was pushed back far. “Mercedes? Mercedes?” her father called out as he put one hand on her shoulder.

“Huh?” she asked. She, looked away from the car.

“Mercedes, I’m giving you a choice. I can ground you for your grades.”

“Or?”

“Or, if I let this slide, you have to start taking your meds for ADHD again,” he said, taking his hand away from her shoulder.

“Aw, come on, Dad. I’m taking my meds.”

“No you’re not. You haven’t asked me to refill it for you in couple of months. Mercedes, you have to take this seriously. You’re getting easily distracted and that’s affecting your school grades. And I have to call your name a couple of times just to get your attention.”

“Fine, I’ll start taking it again,” Mercedes reluctantly replied. She had a love-hate relationship with her meds. It did help her focus more when it came to school, and people didn’t have to call her name to get her attention in conversations. It also kept her calmer and less fidgety. However she hated taking meds that made her feel way too mellow. At times when she took her meds, she felt as if somebody was taking over her body since she lacked the energy she usually had.

“Good. Now, let’s go play.” He took the basketball from her. They were at the park. They shot the ball a few times before they played one time against each other.

“You guys wanna play with us?” a guy said, coming up to them. Her father got the rebound and came up to the boy. He looked so familiar to Mercedes.

“Who’s your other man?” Mateo asked. The teenage pointed his head towards another guy who was shooting the ball on the other court beside them. It didn’t take too long for Mercedes to figure out that his other man was Robbie. They began a two-on-two game. Mercedes and Mateo had the ball first. Mercedes had the ball and pivoted her foot as she protected the ball. Robbie came up to her and guarded her. They quickly grinned at each other, but didn’t say much after that. Robbie clued into the fact that she hadn’t told her father about them. After a couple of jump shots and lay ups, Mercedes and her father won. She knew he let her and her father win. Last time when she and Keisha beat them, the girls had to sweat to win, but Robbie missed easy shots and let her father take easy shots.

“I’m gonna go get something to drink,” Robbie said, looking at Mercedes and giving her a look so she could go to the water fountain, too.

“Me, too,” Mercedes said jogging after him before her father went with her. “You let us win,” she said smiling at him showing him her dimples. She rolled up the sleeves of her hoodie.

“Guilty,” he said putting his arms around her shoulders as they walked over to the water fountain.

“Not now. My dad’s probably watching.” They waited for a kid who was on roller blades to finish drinking the water from the coldest water fountain.

“I don’t care. I want the world to see I’m with the flyest girl,” he said smiling down at her. Robbie was about a foot taller than her. She looked back at where her father was to see if he was looking. He was playing a one-on-one game with Robbie’s friend, so Mercedes kissed him.

Mateo knocked on Mercedes’s bedroom door after he took a shower from playing basketball. Around her red walls were a couple of NBA posters. She had one of Allen Iverson, one of the logo of all of the NBA teams, and the last poster had all of the most known ballers like Kobe, Carmelo, Iverson, and Shaq. She had a huge poster of Steve Nash.

Mercedes sat cross-legged on her bed wearing an old junior high school basketball T-shirt with polyester long pants and playing Mario on her Gameboy Advance. She put her game system down.

“Come in,” she said. Mateo came in wearing his pajamas and a robe.

“Who was that boy you were talking to?”

“Just a guy from school.” She assumed he was talking about Robbie.

“I don’t want you talking to him.”

“Why?” She hated it when her parents tried to tell her who she could or couldn’t be friends with.

“I saw you hugging and kissing him.”

“So what, Dad, you know I don’t go out with Julio no more.”

“It’s too soon and I don’t like him.”

“Pero, Dad, you don’t even know him!” Mercedes said, using her hands.

“Don’t talk back to me. I don’t like all the secrecy. If I didn’t go to the park, would you have told me about you and him?” Mateo asked, getting madder that his daughter kept this from him. “He looks too old for you anyways.”

“Dad—”

“No, I don’t want to hear it. You are not to see that boy and that’s it!” Mercedes crossed her arms as she waited for her father to leave her bedroom. She didn’t care what he said. It had been a long time since someone made her happy and she wasn’t going to let anyone, including her father get in the way of that feeling.

**\*\*\*Chapter 4\*\*\***

*“... to be committed to bent promises.”*

Angela continued to puff on her cigarette on her way to the corner store for some groceries. She decided to walk rather than take the bus. Not only was it a fairly warm evening, but the store was only a few blocks away from her home. She sighed after her phone rang. It was her boyfriend, Travis.

“Hey, Trav,” she said after answering the phone.

“Hi, baby. How’s your day?” he asked. She cringed when he called her baby. The same sick feeling that she felt whenever she thought about how hurt Travis would be if he found out the truth about her unfaithfulness came back. A part of her wanted him to break up with her before he could find out about Sal. That would be much easier than her breaking up with him.

“Okay. Yours?”

“Good.” Angela blew a couple of rings of smoke out during the long pause of silence. “So, what are you doing tonight? I thought maybe we could go eat dinner-”

“I can’t,” she automatically responded. Spending time alone with Travis was not a good idea. Her guilt would become evident. At school she didn’t have to worry about seeing him much. They both had opposing schedules and he was heavily involved in extracurricular activities.

“Why not? Don’t you remember that today’s our two month anniversary?” he angrily asked. Forgetting their anniversary was another reason to just break it off with him before they invested anymore time into their relationship.

“I forgot. Sorry.” She took a deep breath before she proceeded. It was time to break up. “Look, Travis, we need to talk. We should-”

“Wait. Before you say anything else, I wanted to tell you something. I admit, I was upset that you forgot about our anniversary, but that doesn’t change the way I feel about you. Angela, I love you.” Angela coughed as the smoke from the cigarette choked her. She threw her almost finished smoke on the floor. He loved her? “Did you hear me?”

“Uh huh... hey, um... I gotta go.” She slammed the phone shut. Things had gotten out of hand between them in a matter of a couple of weeks. If only she was honest with him from the start. She glanced up when a black Lexus drove up to the curb of the sidewalk. The driver rolled down the window. It was Robbie.

“Need a ride?” Robbie asked.

“No. I’m good.” She was perfectly capable of making it to the store by herself without any help.

“You Sure? It’s about to get dark real soon.” Angela gazed up at the streetlights. They were already on. She looked back at Robbie. She hated being outdoors by herself at nighttime. She knew she wouldn’t make it to the store and back before it was completely dark outside. She subtly checked to see if her pocketknife was in her side pocket of her jeans. After thanking him for the ride, she hopped in the car. Robbie didn’t seem harmful. “Where to?”

“The corner store up on Eastontown Ave.” Robbie smirked as he drove with one hand.

“You know, I would’ve picked up the phone if you called.”

“Maybe I didn’t want to call you.”

“You wanted to call me. You’re just afraid that you won’t wanna be with your boyfriend if we talk.”

“What makes you think girls fall for your cheesy pickup lines?”

“Hate all you want, but you know I got more game than ESPN.” Angela let out a laugh at his cockiness. Robbie quickly sped through a red light.

“That was a red light.”

“It was. You scared?” he questioned as he intensely gazed at her. She stared in his sky blue eyes. Though he was still driving, he kept his eyes on her. She couldn’t gaze away. His beautiful blue eyes lustfully hypnotized her. He was much better looking close up. She gulped as she looked temptation right in the eyes. Once he reached his destination, he looked away from her and halted the car. Angela looked at the window. This was not the corner store. They were in a suburban neighborhood. Robbie put the car in park before leaving the vehicle.

“What are you doing? This isn’t the corner store.”

“I know. That’s my house. I forgot my wallet inside. I’ll just get it and then we’ll go.”

“Are you’re gonna leave me here by myself?” she questioned in a panicked voice. It was already dark outside and she knew it wasn’t safe to be in a running car at that time of night.

“Don’t worry. Just scream if you see someone coming after you. You have to have seen at least one scary movie to know what happens when someone screams-”

“You’re not funny,” she snapped when she saw him smirk. She stepped outside of the car and crossed her arms. Robbie laughed as he yanked out the keys from the ignition. “I’ll wait for you here.” She anxiously waited for him in the lonely night. She hummed to keep her mind from



wandering about the reasons why she despised being alone at night. “It took you long enough,” she said, in a relieved voice, once she saw Robbie come out of his house.

“So, what do I get for taking you to the store?”

“I already said thanks. If you want a pat on the back-”

“I was thinking more of a kiss,” he said taking a step closer to her. She folded her arms. She tried not to look into his eyes.

“Can’t. I have a boyfriend.”

“Like that’s stopped you in the past. Everyone knows about what you and Sal have been doing. Well I guess except for your boyfriend.”

“I’m not easy, if that’s what you were implying,” she retorted. She figured Marcela RHS’s notorious gossipier already told people about how Angela picked up Sal’s phone a couple of weeks ago.

“I didn’t say you were. You’re not easy. You’re complicated.” He pushed her blonde hair away from her face. His blue eyes drew her in. “I see it in your eyes,” he added, before kissing her. She pushed him off after kissing him back for a couple of seconds. What was she doing? She had a boyfriend.

“I have a boyfriend.”

“Who doesn’t understand you. If he did, you wouldn’t have kissed me back.” Angela gulped. He was right. Travis didn’t get her and certainty didn’t know much about her. Robbie took her hands.

“But, I’m not looking for another boyfriend.”

“And I’m not looking for a girlfriend. See, we understand each other,” he said, kissing her once more. She kissed him back. Temptation was winning over. He let go of her hands and wrapped his arms around her.

“If we...you know, it’ll be a onetime thing,” she said in between their kisses.

“No strings attached. I get it.” He led her inside his house.

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As Julia pulled out a dollar bill from her pocket and slipped it into the Coca-Cola machine, she asked, “So what’s up with you and Robbie?” Julia, Keisha, and Mercedes were at the usual spot where they hung out before the bell for homeroom rang.

“We’re just going with the flow,” Mercedes replied. She dropped her book bag on the floor. Julia took the Coke from the machine and opened the top of it and took a sip. Julia preferred it when Mercedes and Julio were not together. It made it easier to have a best friend who wasn’t dating her brother.

“Did you guys do anything more than kiss?” Keisha asked.

“Not as far as J and I went,” Mercedes replied.

“But I thought you and Julio never had sex,” Keisha said.

“I know, but we almost did that one night last year.” Mercedes took out her bag of Lucky Charms. Last year, Julio and Mercedes went to third base at her mother’s apartment, but stopped when Mercedes’s mother came home. Thankfully, her mother didn’t figure out what almost happened. Back then she regretted that nothing more happened, but now she was glad after learning about Julio’s unfaithfulness.

“Let’s not get into that,” Julia said, not wanting to hear any details of her brother’s sex life.

“Don’t worry,” Mercedes replied. Thankfully, now that Julio and her were no longer together life, she could feel free to talk with Julia about her love life. Mercedes shoved a handful of cereal into her mouth.

“You and Julio ever talk after ya’ll broke up?” Keisha asked Mercedes.

“Nope. That’s why Cedez never comes over to my house anymore,” Julia said, answering for Mercedes. Since Mercedes and Julio had broken up, Mercedes hadn’t been over to Julia’s house. She didn’t want to run into him.

“Julz, you know it ain’t even like that. I’d go over if Julio wasn’t there. And, no, I didn’t talk to Julio since we broke up ‘cause I’m trying to move on,” Mercedes said. Knowing Julio’s schedule helped her avoid him at school. “Hey, isn’t your dad coming today? I remember J was talking about it.”

“His flight gets in this afternoon,” Julia replied. She didn’t talk about it with her two best friends because they had been so used to her father telling Julio and her that he was coming to visit them, but it hadn’t happened in years. Hopefully he would show up this time. She didn’t want to her hopes up to be disappointed by her father, but she couldn’t help but feel excited about seeing her father for the first time in three years. She was dying to show him how much she approved with her guitar playing and singing.

“That’s what’s up. Girl, you can play the guitar for him and show him how much better you got since last time he saw ya’ll,” Keisha said.

“True. He’d be impressed,” Mercedes told Julia.

“I know. You never know, Julz. He might even put you on his tour,” Keisha said.

“In front of millions of fans just rocking on your guitar,” Mercedes said as she played a fake guitar. Keisha joined her back to back and acted the part of a guitarist.

“And don’t forget to smash your guitar after the concert,” Keisha added. She took her fake guitar and put it above her head. She fiercely and continuously smashed the fake guitar on the floor. The three of them laughed.

“He’s just visiting. Nothing more,” Julia said after the laugh. She in fact did want to someday go on tour with her father and play the guitar with the band. She remembered how much fun it was to go on tour. The last time Julia and Julio saw their father was during his tour in Puerto Rico when they were 12. Both of them loved going to different cities in Puerto Rico. Julia also admired all of the band and the other people that her father worked with.

“Robbie!” Mercedes called out after seeing him walk through the side doors of Roctown High School. Robbie looked over to Mercedes and her friends and walked over to them. “Hey, I want you to meet my down ass chicas.”

Robbie put his hands in his pockets. It was so unlike him to do that. Usually when he saw her, he’d give her kiss. Mercedes wasn’t sure if he didn’t kiss her because her friends were around. He didn’t even give her a hug. Mercedes put her arms around his as she introduced him to her friends.

“I’ll talk to ya’ll later,” Mercedes told her best friends after she introduced all of them to each other. She let go of Robbie to pick up her book bag from the floor. She wouldn’t normally leave Julia and Keisha before school began, but she wanted to talk to Robbie. Something was off about him. She placed her arms around him once again as they walked away from the Coca Cola machine. “You all right?” Mercedes asked him as soon as they were away.

“I’m good,” he replied.

Not believing him, she stopped, making him stop too. “If you wanna talk, I’m here.” Robbie’s eyes seemed to be focused on something else. Mercedes followed his eyes to where a door to a classroom closed. She caught the back of the blonde girl he was looking at. “Robbie,” she said gently, putting his head down so he was looking at her. “Is it me?” Was he already planning to move on to the next girl.

“No. Mercedes, it’s not you. I just didn’t get much sleep last night. That’s it,” he told her, suddenly snapping out of whatever mood he was in. He reassured her by giving her the kiss she had anticipated.

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Robbie walked into Mr. Everson's class earlier than usual. He placed his notebook on his desk as he sat down. He took a pen from his pocket and opened his notebook. Just a couple of seconds before class started, Angela came in and went to her seat. She took her book bag off and placed it on the floor beside her desk.

"Hey, Robbie," she said in a flirtatious voice as she ran her fingers slowly down his arm. She moved her desk a bit closer to his. Robbie gave her a quick smile before writing down the date inside his notebook. She watched his body language, wondering why he seemed so distant from how close they were that Saturday.

"Okay, class, today we're going to learn about . . .," Mr. Everson began.

"Saturday afternoon was pleasurable," Angela told Robbie, whispering. Angela took one of her heels off. She put her foot next to his ankle. Their desks were close enough to do this without drawing much attention.

"Yeah." Robbie slightly moved his foot away from hers. Not noticing this, Angela slid her foot closer to his. She pushed her bare foot above his sneakers to the inside of the bottom of his jeans. "Angela," Robbie said in a voice that was a little bit louder than a whisper.

"What? Still thinking about the best you've ever had?" she asked, teasing. She took her foot away from his and put her heel back on. Robbie raised his eyebrows and didn't reply. "So, nothing cocky to say?" she asked waiting for him to say how he was probably the best that she'd ever had. Robbie shrugged his shoulders, trying to listen to what Mr. Everson was saying. They stopped talking until the bell rang. Angela, upset, packed her stuff and got up as soon as the bell rang. Robbie got up quickly enough to catch up to her.

"Angela." He touched her arm to get her attention. "We cool?"

"Whatever. It's not like you're the first guy who doesn't want anything to do with me after sex," she replied, regretting sleeping with him. He was no different from the many other guys she had been with.

"I'm sorr--," Robbie began, but stopped since Angela was already out the door.

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Kim counted the money in the envelope on the counter which Angela left for her before she left for school. "That's all you're gonna give?" Kim asked Angela after she came home from school.

"That's the amount I always give you," Angela replied about the hundred dollars she gave her mother every two weeks.

"Well, it's not enough!" Kim exclaimed. She slammed the bills on the counter. Kim placed her hand over her forehead and sighed. She rubbed her nose that was pinkish red at the nostril area and opened the drawer that was next to her.

"What do you mean? Welfare sends you a check every month."

"That hardly pays all the bills." Kim took out a cigarette box, took two out, and handed one to Angela. From her pocket she pulled a lighter and lit hers, then Angela's.

"What's going on?" Angela asked after taking a few puffs of her cigarette.

"Steven got laid off," Kim admitted as she crossed one arm over her small stomach. Steven was Kim's boyfriend who helped pay the bills.

"Damn."

"Yeah. Damn. Without his help ...," Kim drifted off. The front door flew open and Christy ran inside following Tania. Their hands were filled with sugar-filled candies.

"I beat you!" Christy exclaimed. Angela put out her cigarette and hid the remainder in her hand. As the oldest, Angela chose not to smoke in front of her sisters. She didn't need them to pick up on her addictive, detrimental habit.

"Don't run in the damn house!" Kim yelled. Christy stopped running in the kitchen. The smile left their faces.

"Go to the bedroom with Tania," Angela said. Christy nodded and took Tania to the bedroom. "What are we gonna do?" Angela asked after Christy closed the bedroom door.

"We? You need to pick up more hours at that place you work."

"I'm already working overtime almost every week."

"I don't care. You live under my roof."

"Why don't you get a job?" Angela snapped, walking away from the kitchen.

"Why don't I get a job? You're dumber than I thought. What job around here is gonna pay me more than that check welfare sends?"

"Well if I'm so dumb, Kim, I don't need to keep giving you money every two weeks so you can buy meth," Angela retorted in a low voice, walking back into the kitchen.

"It's none of your damn business what happens to the money you give me," Kim replied, opening the refrigerator and pulling out a bottle of beer.

"It is 'cause I'm the one working hard for it." Angela was already tired of working and going to school at the same time. Picking up more hours was the last thing she would do, especially since she knew a part of her income would be to support her mother's addiction.

"Oh, really," Kim began as she unscrewed the top of the bottle with her hand. She placed the bottle cap on the nearby counter. "In case you forgot about the deal we made a couple of years ago, let me remind you." Kim took a sip from the bottle and smirked. "You work and pay those bills or I'll throw your ass out of this house. Nothing to say, huh?" she asked when Angela fell silent. "I want another hundred dollars soon."

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After reading another chapter of the required text for A.P. Literature, Jane Eyre, Julia placed the book on the floor of the bedroom that she shared with her mother. In the middle of the room was a queen-size bed. In the corner of the room was a medium-size TV on a black TV stand. Right beside the TV was a desk where Julia usually did her studying. On the wall over the bed hung a huge head shot oil painting of Jesus.

When she was near the bed, she jumped on it. Julia sat down on her mother's side of the bed where there was a nightstand. On top of the night stand was the cordless phone with the answering machine. She waited for it to ring.

*RINNNGGG!*

Julia rapidly picked up the phone.

"Hola, Papa," Julia said in an excited voice.

"Juliana, it's good to hear your voice," her father, Carlo replied.

"Why did your home number come up?" she asked, looking at the caller ID "Isn't your flight at three?" Julia looked at the clock by the door that read 2:30 pm. "You're gonna be late."

"I'm not going to be late, Juliana."

"Papa, you gotta go to the airport so you won't miss your flight," Julia insisted as she crossed her feet. "Julio's at soccer practice, pero he should be done in time to come with me and Ma to pick you up at JFK Airport." Julia had a sophomore class meeting that afternoon, but she skipped it just so she could get ready to go see her father. All day, all she could think about was her father's visit.

"Juliana, when was the last time you talked to your mother?"

"This morning before I left for school."

"I'm guessing she didn't tell you," Carlo said, sighing.

"Tell me what?" Julia asked, already having a feeling about what he was going to say next.

"Something came up ..."

"... And you're not coming," Julia said, finishing his statement.

"You understand, Juliana. With this music business so up and down you never know and I can't leave Puerto Rico now. They extended my tour."

Julia put the phone down. "Juliana? Juliana? Are you still there?" Carlo asked. Julia put the phone back to her ears.

"I'm here," she replied, trying to keep her voice calm.

"I'm sorry, Juliana. I really wanted to come to see you and your brother. I promise I'll come next time," he began. Julia rolled her eyes, contemplating why she ever believed her father.

"I gotta go," she said, not wanting to get upset over the phone.

"I love you."

"Okay," Julia responded, unable to say the same to him.

"Juliana, you're not mad, are you?" After a couple of seconds, he said, "Do me a favor and tell your brother for me."

"Do it yourself." Julia hung up the phone. She threw her phone down on the bed and covered her face. As much as she didn't want to, she sobbed. She hated how upset she got over Carlo. After all, after not bothering to visit Julia and Julio for three years, what would make this time different.

"Are you okay, Nena?" Gloria asked, walking into the room. She placed her black Liz Claiborne purse on top of the desk.

"I just talked to Papa an ... and he said he wasn't coming," Julia said in a shaky voice. Gloria came over by the bed and sat next to Julia. She put her hand over Julia's head. "I should've known he wasn't gonna come, but something inside me said maybe this time he would come. But no. He broke his promise like usual." Julia tried to wipe her tears.

"I'm sorry," her mother said, putting her arms around her daughter.

"It's not your fault, Ma."

"I know, but I shouldn't have told you and Julio that he was coming. You two deserve so much—," she added but stopped. The sight of her daughter crying had her near tears. Gloria pulled out a couple of Kleenex tissues beside the bed for both her and Julia.

"And he wanted me to tell Julio. Julio wanted to see him so bad. I asked God for him to come, Ma. I did."

"God hears your prayers, Juliana. Be patient. He'll answer them."

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Christy ran into her bedroom. She stuck her hands underneath her bed. She felt through the crumpled up papers, candy wrappers, and dirty clothes. Her hand passed through a couple of old cassettes.

"Looking for something?" Angela questioned by the wall.

"I got it," Christy replied. She continued to search for whatever she was looking for. Christy threw a couple of old notebooks from underneath her bed to the floor. She yanked out an old tennis shoe to the floor. Christy knelt on the floor and dug inside the shoe to find what she wanted. It wasn't there.

"Is this what you're looking for?" Angela questioned, showing Christy the same small bag of weed she showed Rachel at school. Christy faced Angela with surprise at the drugs in her sister's hand. They both stared at the little bag. Christy got up from her knees and took steps to get closer to Angela.

"Give it to me." Angela pulled her arm back when Christy tried to grasp it.

"So this is the reason why you've been acting like an asshole lately."

"Who said you can go through my stuff?"

"It's a good thing I did," she said, waiting for an answer and coming away from the wall. "You think it's cool to smoke pot?"

"If you're gonna give me a whole speech about how weed is bad and why I shouldn't do it, save your breath," Christy replied.

"I'm not." Christy folded her arms. "I think you know that weed is illegal, but you obviously don't know what this can do to you. Christy, weed is gonna mess with your head." Christy unfolded her arms and snickered. "Is this funny to you?"

"I'm leaving," Christy said, about to exit the room.

"Get your ass back here! I'm not done talking to you," Angela snapped, pointing back to the room.

"This is unbelievable." Christy walked back inside the room.



"Yeah, it's unbelievable. It'll be real unbelievable when you're sitting in juvie 'cause you got caught getting high."

"You know what, Angela, you're the last person who should be telling me not to smoke this stuff."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Figure it out. You're the one who went to rehab at fifteen. And I know you've been getting high since you were my age." Before Angela started her first time around as a sophomore, she went to rehab. She finished the 12-step program, but after a few months she was back to drinking. However, she didn't drink as much as she did before she went to rehab. It was safe to say that rehab stopped her from smoking marijuana and decreased her alcohol intake.

"Who told you I've been getting high since I was your age?" Angela asked, deciding not to bring up rehab. As far as Angela thought, Christy only knew about her going to rehab for alcohol abuse.

"The same person who gave me the drugs," Christy retorted, as she snatched the bag from Angela's hand.

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"It's not that bad," Amanda said, answering her three friends from St. Rose, her former high school. Amanda stretched her legs on the aqua satin couch in Madison's bedroom. They were having a sleepover that Saturday night.

"I couldn't imagine going to a public school where there's like middle and lower class people there," Cassidy said from Madison's queen bed. The year before, Amanda also attended St. Rose with them. St. Rose was an all-girls private school from kindergarten to twelfth grade.

"But at least she can wear whatever she wants when we're stuck with the same uniforms since seventh grade," Lin, the token Asian girl from St. Rose, said. She was tall and slender. Her long jet black hair fell to her lower back.

"Yeah, but I'd rather wear uniforms now and get the best education than forfeit my chances to getting into Princeton or any other Ivy League school," Cassidy said, going through a French Vogue Magazine. Cassidy flipped her brunette hair over her shoulders. She was about the same height as Amanda and was a bit slimmer than Amanda. She had dark blue eyes.

"There are students in Ivy League Schools who went to public high schools," Madison said in Amanda's defense. Madison was a redhead. She and Lin were a year older than Amanda and Cassidy. Madison was taller than both of them and, unlike them, she was not slim. She had curves, but she was not fat.

"Not many," Cassidy replied, looking at Madison as if she should agree with her since they went to St. Rose.

"Really, Cassidy, it's not that bad. I mean at least I get to see cute guys at school."

"Lucky! I'd kill for some testosterone at school," Lin said.

"It's good 'cause if Vic and I went to the same school, we wouldn't last," Madison commented as she picked up a bowl of Cheez-It Party Mix, and brought it onto her bed. She lay stomach down with her legs in the air.

"You can say that again. Boys are such a distraction. Especially this one boy," Amanda began as she went over to the bed, sat down and took a handful of the party mix.

"Tell us!" Lin exclaimed from the floor as she scooted over to the bed and leaned forward eagerly.

"Yeah, and don't leave any details out," Madison said.

"Well," Amanda began with all of the attention on her. "He's tall, dark, and handsome. He has brown eyes and black hair that's usually spiked up and this great tan. He's even on the soccer team."

"He must have a great bod then," Lin said, giggling as she nudged a smiling Madison.

"So, what's this guy's name?" Madison asked.

"Julio."

"Wait. Julio? That sounds like a Spanish name," Cassidy said, looking up from her magazine.

"It is. He's Puerto Rican."

"Oooh, he sounds muy caliente!" Lin exclaimed.

"You guys would make exotic looking babies with dark hair, light eyes—," Madison began.

"And all year round tans! I wanna marry a Puerto Rican," Lin said as she, Madison, and Amanda laughed.

"Let's not go there," Amanda said. "He just broke up with his girlfriend so I want to give him some time, and then see what happens."

"Please tell me you're not interested in dating a spic," Cassidy retorted.

"Excuse me?" Amanda said, taken aback by her racism.

"Don't use that kind of language in my house," Madison said, sitting up.

"Do you have a problem with me, seeing that I'm Asian?" Lin asked.

"No. Lin, come on we've been friends since preschool," Cassidy pleaded.

"Then what's wrong with Julio being Spanish? Isabel is Spanish and she's been with my family since I was seven. I never had a problem with her and she's one of the most caring persons that I know," Amanda said about her family's nanny and cook.

"I'm not racist. Madison's neighbor is black, and if I was racist, I would never go to her house," Cassidy said. Madison rolled her eyes at her ignorance.

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Julia continuously strummed the same G chord on the acoustic guitar they wanted her to play. She tried to stay awake, but her eyes were heavy. It wasn't as if she hadn't slept the night before. She was in church and it was her first time playing the guitar as part of the worship team.

Ebony sang the song of worship into the microphone. Ebony turned around to where Julia and the other members of the Sunday worship team were playing. Julia started playing the D7 chord. Instead of strumming the last four strings, she accidentally strummed the last three strings. Not paying attention, she continued to strum those same strings, making a horrible sound. Her father should have been here watching her debut on stage. Although her father encouraged her to start playing the guitar when she was eight years old, he hadn't seen her play in years. She tried closing her eyes to imagine her father was out in the audience. She opened her eyes to the audience and saw that it was just her mother and Julio.

"Keep playing D7," Ebony sang to Julia as if that was a part of the song. Julia blushed after realizing she was not even playing a real music note. She started to play the right D7. She probably would have been more into it if the songs weren't so mellow and slow. Why couldn't they sing more upbeat songs like "Stomp" from Kirk Franklin? After church was over, Ebony went over to Julia.

"I know your mom was the one who pushed you to do this, but I don't want you doing this if your heart's not in it," Ebony said.

"My heart's in it," Julia said, putting the acoustic guitar down on its stand. She didn't want the worship team or the congregation to think that she wasn't putting enough effort in it

"Then why were you playing a non-existent note? You don't even smile."

"My bad. I didn't mean to play that note. I'd be more into it if at least some of the songs were upbeat," Julia admitted as she walked off the small stage with Ebony.

“All the songs can't be like that, but I see what you're saying. If you want to make a change, go for it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it,” Ebony said, patting her on the shoulder.

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Turning the corner to go to the principal's office, Angela knocked right into somebody, causing the flyers in their hands to almost fall. Thankfully, she caught the papers.

"Thanks. If you didn't do that, I'd have to pick them up aga—," he began but stopped after looking at who he had bumped. He gulped when he checked her out.

"I'm glad you didn't have to pick it up again," Angela replied in a smile. He grinned back. She took the papers she had caught and arranged them so they were going in one direction and neat.

"Thanks," he said, watching her do that instead of fixing his own pile. He seemed like a nice guy. She handed him the pile in her hand. He took it from her. "Do you want it?"

“Want what?”

“A flyer. Do you want a flyer? It's for homecoming next Friday," he said, handing her a flyer that was upside down. He turned it right side up before giving it to her.

"Thanks, but I'm probably not gonna go this year."

"Keep it. Just in case you change your mind."

"All right." She took the flyer from him.

"I'm Jimmy."

"Angela," she replied. "Hey, I'd love to talk some more, but I got a meeting with Barrington.”

"I'll see you around."

"Okay." Angela walked away and into the front office.

Mrs. Barrington's secretary had her desk right in the lobby of the front office to the left of her private office. "Are you Angela es Fresh?" the secretary asked.

"Yes," Angela replied, walking past her desk. She folded the flyer and put it in her back pocket. Angela knocked on the door before she went inside.

"Come in," Mrs. Barrington, the principal of RHS, called out. Angela stepped into her office. Inside was a blonde woman sitting on a chair across from Mrs. Barrington. The woman turned around. Angela looked at her mother in confusion, not knowing what she was doing there. Kim wore an old blazer over a faded blue shirt. She had on black jeans from the eighties and worn loafers. Angela uneasily sat at the open chair next to her.

"Are Christy and Tania okay?" Angela asked in voice so only Kim could hear.

"They're fine," Kim began. Angela took a breath in relief. "This is about you." Angela gave her mother one more look before glancing at Mrs. Barrington.

"Your mother requested an academic evaluation," Mrs. Barrington said, seeing how lost Angela was. She logged into her computer. "What's your student I.D.?"

"34 009," Angela said. Mrs. Barrington typed her ID number into the computer.

"Had a little trouble finding the school?" Angela sarcastically asked her mother. This was the first time her mother stepped into Roctown High School in the three years Angela had attended the school.

"I managed," Kim replied with as much sarcasm.

"This is your second time in tenth grade since you failed more than half of your classes last year including American History, Biology, Algebra I, English II, and you failed Spanish I twice, in ninth grade and tenth grade," Mrs. Barrington said, glancing at the computer. "I see you're retaking the same classes this year."

"What are her grades now?" Kim asked.

"The first marking period she got a C in her English class, a D in Biology and a B in gym. However she got an F in American History, Algebra I, and Spanish I," Mrs. Barrington concluded with a sigh at yet another failing student.

"I'm trying to pull my grades up," Angela said, almost forgetting that her mother was in the room.

"If you don't, you're going to repeat tenth grade again," Mrs. Barrington responded, looking away from the computer to the mother and daughter. From the corner of her eye, Angela saw a smirk on Kim's face.

"Barrington, is it?" Kim asked, reading from her name plate on top of her desk. Mrs. Barrington nodded her head. "Please. Tell Angela why we're really here."

"I thought we were here for an academic evaluation," Angela said, looking from her mother to Mrs. Barrington.

"Your mother also called this meeting to discuss other matters," Mrs. Barrington said, pulling out a stapled form from a folder and handing it to Angela. She skimmed through the papers. Kim leaned back in her chair as if she knew what those papers were for.

"What's this?" Angela asked.

"Well, you are sixteen. And with a parent's consent, that's the age a student can drop out of school," Mrs. Barrington informed her. "Your mother said that the two of you talked about it."

Angela shot her mother a look. This was the first she had heard about talking to her mother about dropping out of school. Her mother beamed as she raised her knee up.

"Um ...," Angela said, not knowing what to say.

"Face it, Angela, you're not smart enough," Kim whispered.

"And you're smart enough?" Angela snapped in a normal voice.

"I might not have stayed in high school, but I got my GED the first time I took it," Kim snapped back loud enough for Mrs. Barrington to know what they were talking about. "You're just wasting your time in high school when you can be doing other things. How many times do you plan on failing the tenth grade? Five times? Eight times?"

"Shut up, Kim," Angela replied in a small voice.

"When you finally finish high school, if you ever finish high school, what college is gonna accept a dumbass like you?"

"There's no need for name calling," Mrs. Barrington interrupted.

"Just sign those papers and we'll be out of here. I might even give you a ride home," Kim said to Angela, handing her a pen from the cup on Mrs. Barrington's desk. Out of embarrassment, Angela bolted out of Mrs. Barrington's office to the hallway, trying to hold back her tears. The hallway was empty since lunch was in session. She held her head down, not wanting people to see that she was upset. She wasn't dumb. Right? The tears in her eyes prevented her from seeing what was in front of her. She bumped into somebody.

"Sorry," she said.

"Angela, are you okay?" he said. Angela looked and saw that it was her boyfriend, Travis. Angela wiped the tears that kept coming down. "Baby, what's wrong?" He used his thumb to wipe away some of her tears.

"I don't deserve you," she replied, pulling away from him. Thoughts of her sexual encounters with both Sal and Robbie raced through her mind. She knew how much Travis adored her and yet she couldn't do the same.

“Yes, you do. You mean so much to me.” He took her hand. There the queasy feeling in her stomach went again. She pulled her hand away.

“I cheated,” she admitted looking down to the floor, refusing to see how hurt she knew he would appear. Travis took a step back. His eyebrows raised as his mouth dropped.

“You didn’t sleep with him?” he asked, with hopefulness that she hadn’t gone that far with somebody else. Hearing those words, Angela looked at the ceiling, trying to control her crying. “How many guys?” he asked, realizing that she went all the way with at least one other guy. “How many?” he asked louder.

“Two,” she replied in a small voice.

“So that rumor about Sal was true? Who was the other guy?”

“Does it matter?” She finally looked at him. She didn’t want to rat out Robbie.

“It does. Don’t you think I deserve that much?” She could see that his eyes were red.

“The new guy.”

“Robbie?” Angela nodded. “Okay,” he said crying. He brushed the tears away from his eyes.

“It’s over.”

**\*\*\*Chapter 5\*\*\***

*“... Reckless Perfection.”*

"Are you going to homecoming?" Marcela asked Amanda during their drama class. Amanda was sitting on top of her desk as Marcela sat in a chair next to her.

"Marcela, wake up," Amanda began. "Almost everybody is going to the homecoming."

"Anyhow, what are you wearing?"

"I'm wearing a black Amsale Blush dress."

"It'll probably look great on you."

"It does look great on me," Amanda said, complimenting herself.

"I want to go to homecoming, but I'm not sure."

"Honestly, I don't even know if I'll be able to go."

"I thought you just said—"

"I know what I said, Marcela. I just don't know if my dad will let me go since I got two B's on my report card."

"B's are good grades."

"Not in my world. A "B" is pushing it and a "C" is not in the equation." Amanda had to keep her grade higher than average to become one of the exclusive candidates to get accepted into an Ivy League School. The tutor her father hired for her was surely a stepping stone for that to happen. Since she got help, her grade improved.

"That sucks. If your dad doesn't let you go, you'll have to return that dress."

"Why? It was a little less than a grand. And besides, who returns clothes? That's so middle class." Amanda got off the top of the desk and sat down on the chair next to Marcela. "I should go to homecoming. Julio's planning to go." Homecoming might give them a chance to get closer. She was getting a little tired of the slow progression of their relationship. If only they were already in love...

"You must really like him."

"I do." I just hope he feels the same way, Amanda added to herself, thinking of when Julio would completely be over his ex.

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Mercedez ran down the stairs and into the kitchen. It was Saturday afternoon.

“What are you cooking?” she asked Mateo. The kitchen smelled of a mixture of spice, herbs and steak. Mateo was by the stove leaning on the counter. As a professional chef at a five-star restaurant, Mateo ran the kitchen, rather than Barbra.

“Hot, spicy lemon steak with white rice and some stir fried vegetables,” he replied as he took the spoon and used it to mix the rice. The steak was underneath, in the oven.

“It smells good, Dad.”

“Thanks. How are you?”

“Good.” She pulled a toothpick from the cabinet. She opened the oven and took a piece of the steak. After tasting it, she smiled and gave him two thumbs up.

“Really, are you okay? I know we haven’t spent quality time since we played basketball. When the baby gets here, I know things are going to get even more hectic.”

“So you want to spend more time with me before the baby comes since you’re probably not gonna have enough time to after the birth.”

“I don’t mean that we’re not going spend time together after the baby comes,” Mateo said with a look of concern on his face.

“I get it, Dad,” she responded, trying not to sound hurt. She knew that Barbra and the baby got in the way of their relationship, but she wasn’t going to admit it to her father. He seemed happy about the family growing bigger. Who was she to rain on his happiness?

“We used to cook together all the time last year. Remember?” He put the cover over the pot of rice.

“I remember,” Mercedez replied, throwing the toothpick into the kitchen garbage.

“I know it’s probably hard since we used to cook with your mother. You know she would want you to still cook and play basketball for the school team even though she’s—”

“Yeah, Dad, I know,” she interrupted, not wanting her father to talk about her mother’s current condition. She sat down on the chair and flipped through a real estate magazine that was on the table.

“I saw your mother yesterday.” He took a seat next to Mercedez.

“Yeah.” She continued to flip through the magazine, not really paying attention to the actual content of the magazine.

“Yeah. She misses you.”

“I’m sure she does,” Mercedes said sarcastically. How could a person in a coma miss somebody?

“She loves you, Mercedes,” her father told her at the same moment she flipped to the page where Barbra’s picture was promoting the real estate agency she worked for. Mercedes dropped the magazine and tried to wipe away the tears that suddenly dropped from her eyes.

“I’m home,” Barbra exclaimed as she came through the front door. Mercedes’s heart began to pound. This was one of the things she hated about her ADHD meds. If things got intense around her when she was on her meds, her heart would start to escalate or palpitate.

“Here,” Mateo said, giving Mercedes a paper towel. Mercedes took it without looking up at her father. She hated sobbing in front of people. Barbra came into the kitchen with her briefcase. Seeing Barbra made Mercedes want to cry more, but she resisted.

“Mercedes, are you okay?” Barbra asked, placing her hand on top of Mercedes’s head.

“I’m good. Something got in my eye,” she replied in a cracked voice. Barbra placed the briefcase down beside the table.

“Well, sweetie, if you want to talk about it, I’m here to listen, okay?” Barbara put her other free hand on Mercedes’s shoulder. Mercedes cringed as her stepmother’s pregnant belly touched her.

“I’m gonna go finish my homework,” Mercedes said, ignoring Barbra’s offer. Barbra let go of Mercedes. Mercedes went upstairs to her room. She closed the door behind her and plopped on her bed, waiting for her heart to beat normally. After calming down, she picked up the cell phone to call Robbie. .

“Hey, Mercedes,” Robbie said after the first dial. “What’s good?”

“Not much. You?” Mercedes replied.

“Just playing NBA Live.”

“What team are you?”

“Lakers. Playing your boyfriend’s team,” he joked. She knew he was talking about the Phoenix Suns.

“I hear you,” she replied, not caring about what he was talking about. As long as it wasn’t about her family, she was good.

“You all right?” he asked, sensing something was wrong.

“I’m good. I miss you,” she said rolling over to her back. She adjusted her pillow underneath her head.

“Me, too. Wanna meet up today?”

“My dad doesn’t want me to be with you ‘cause he thinks it’s too soon for me to move on from my ex.”

“He saw us kissing at the park?”

“Yeah. He says he hates the secrecy,” Mercedes told him.

“What do you think?”

“About what?”

“Us.”

“I like us. I don’t care what my dad thinks. I don’t meddle in his love life,” she added in spite, thinking about Barbra and how she was touching her as if she was her mother. “So, yeah, I wanna meet up with you today.” Mercedes sat up on her bed.

“I don’t want you getting in trouble.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll just tell him I’m going over to Julia or Keisha’s house. Can I meet you at your place?”

“Sounds good.” After hanging up, Mercedes changed into a black and gold Baby Phat sweater with dark denim jeans. She put gel in her wavy hair and put it into a high ponytail. Afterward, she slipped on her gold hoop earrings with her black and gold Air Force Ones. She ran downstairs once more.

“Going to Keisha’s house,” Mercedes told her father, racing out of the kitchen.

“What about dinner?” Mateo asked.

“I’ll eat later.” she replied, leaving.

Robbie gave Mercedes a hug after he opened the door. “You smell good,” he told her as he shut the door.

“Thanks,” she said appreciating his Irish Spring smell. He had on a white T-shirt and grey sweatpants. He gave her a kiss before releasing her.

“How’d you get here?”

“Bike.” She sat down on the couch. He took a seat beside her. The television was on and was connected to his Playstation 2. He was in the middle of a game. “You can keep playing”

“I can, but I like you more than the PS2.” They grinned at each other. This time it wasn’t as awkward as it was last time she was at his house. She didn’t have to feel guilty since she didn’t have a boyfriend. “I actually got you something.” He pulled out a poster from the back of the couch and handed it to her. Mercedes opened the poster to see it was of Steve Nash taking a shot with a basketball.

“Thanks,” she said giving Robbie a hug. She put the poster on the coffee table in front of them.

“I thought you’d wanna add that to your collection of posters in your room.”

“I do,” she said in appreciation of his remembering the conversation they had a while back.

“Now you’ll have a big picture of your boyfriend on the wall.”

“He’s not my boyfriend. He did ask me to be his girl, but I told him no ‘cause I’m waiting for this special guy to ask me to be his,” she said, joking along as she leaned her head against his chest.

“Is that special guy me?” He placed his arms around her.

“I think you know.”

“I want you to be my girlfriend, Mercedes,” he said before he kissed her.

“Okay,” she replied, feeling giddy inside.

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Julia plugged in her Agile AL 2000 electric guitar to the amplifier outside. Although the weather was in the mid-40s, she only wore a red DKNY sweater with black skinny jeans and black Crossovers. She knew her body would warm up soon enough. She cranked up the volume of her electric guitar and the amplifier. She played a few random chords to make sure the guitar was tuned.

“Juliana, the mic’s good here?” Julio asked his sister as he placed a microphone on its stand in front of her.

“Perfect. Thanks, J,” Julia said.

“No problem.”

“Ready?” Julia asked Dev, who had brought his drum set from his house. Although he was Muslim, he still came over to help Julia out at her church, Christian Water’s Life. “Keisha? Mercedes? Julio?” Mercedes held up the tambourines in her hands as Keisha shook it once. Julio pressed play on the boom box and took the microphone. They were all set up in front of the church. Even though Mercedes and Julio were at the same place, they did not speak to each other.

“One, two, three!” Julia exclaimed as they began to play “Revolution” by Kirk Franklin. Julia and Dev put a cool musical twist to the song with their instruments. The timing was perfect. The churchgoers were coming out of their cars for the Wednesday Bible study. Some of the adults smiled at them, wondering what was going on and walked inside. Other adults rolled their eyes and began to ridicule the loud music.

A few adults stayed to watch the teens worshipping Jesus. Julio talked as if he was Kirk Franklin. The rest of them sang the chorus. Once the rap section of the song came up, Keisha took the microphone and started the rap. Most of the younger people stopped and either joined in the choir or started to clap. Their energy hyped up Julia and the rest of them to get more into the song. Keisha and Mercedes jumped as they banged on their tambourines.

Julia closed her eyes as she played. She could finally get into to it. She prayed to God, thanking him for the moment. It was a good feeling to her. She felt a cold shiver down her spine. She knew Jesus was with her.

“What’s going on here?” Pastor Reynolds, the senior pastor asked. One of the annoyed adults pressed “stop” on the boom box. The young people booed whoever stopped the music. Julia and the rest of them stopped playing.

“We’re just praising our homie, Jesus,” Julio said into the microphone. Dev hit the cymbals.

“I don’t want this kind of music out in front of this church,” an adult, Mrs. White, yelled out.

“What’d you mean by this kind of music?” Julia asked.

“This *rap music*. All they talk about is killing people and violence.”

“If you actually listened to the damn words you’d know what they’re talking about,” Mercedes said to her.

“Oooh! She said the “d” word in church,” a seven-year-old said.

“Yeah. They’re talking about Jesus. I thought you’d be down with Jesus since you go to church here,” Keisha added to what Mercedes said.

“I can’t believe you are letting them talk to me this way,” Mrs. White, one of the eldest members of the church, said, turning to the pastor.

“What way is we talking to you?” Mercedes asked, stepping up to her. Julia gently placed her guitar on its stance.

“Cedez, I got it,” Julia told her best friend before things escalated. Mercedes took a step back. “I don’t see what’s wrong with us kicking it and jamming to a Kirk Franklin song.”

“I know. It is Christian music.” Dev said, getting up from the seat behind the drums.

“It’s exciting. It’s the first time I didn’t sleep during worship,” Julio pointed out.

“So all of you are saying the music we play is not good enough?” Mr. White accused, coming up behind his wife. “Is that the reason you played the guitar so badly last Sunday?”

“No. That was a mistake. I– we like the music the worship team plays. It’s just it’d be nice to clap and jump during a song of praise once in a while,” Julia admitted.

“In other words, ya’ll need to start playing black gospel music,” Keisha said.

“Keisha!” Julia exclaimed.

“It’s true. Why doesn’t the worship team ever play ethnic gospel? Isn’t this supposed to be a church that welcomes all?” Julio asked them.

“Our church does welcome all,” the pastor said.

“This ruckus needs to stop,” Mrs. White said.

“She’s right,” the pastor began. “You guys pack up your stuff and, Julia, you’re off the worship team.”

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Angela held the half empty small vodka bottle in her hand. She was outside the back of her home. It was Friday, about eight o’clock in the evening. A week had passed since Angela signed those dropout papers. She leaned on the railing of the mini-stairwell with her back facing her home. Her mother and Mrs. Barrington were the only ones who knew about her dropout. She was able to keep that a secret from her sisters and Rachel. Rachel called her and asked why she hadn’t been in school all week. Angela told her that she was sick. Angela switched from the same shifts she had with Rachel to the mornings instead since she didn’t have to worry about going to school.

“Hey, Angela, are you going out tonight?” Christy asked, opening the screen door that led to the back of the trailer. Angela turned around and hid the bottle behind her.

“No. Why?”

“Aunt René is coming to pick Tania and me up. We’re gonna spend the weekend at her house. Aunt René wants to know if you wanna come. She’s gonna be here in thirty minutes.” Their Aunt René was their mother’s younger sister by two years. She was the complete opposite of Kim.

“No. Tell her I’ll come next time,” Angela responded. Although she loved going over to her aunt’s house, she wasn’t in the mood. She also didn’t want her aunt to find out the truth.

“Suit yourself.” Christy went back inside. Twenty minutes later, a car beeped. René’s husband came by to pick up her sisters. Once it left, she pulled out a cigarette and a lighter from her back pocket and lit it. While putting the lighter in her back pocket, she felt a piece of paper. She pulled it out. It was the flyer that geeky boy gave her. She unfolded it and read it as she smoked.

“Guess I’m going to homecoming after all,” she said as she twisted open the bottle of vodka and drank the rest of it. As her throat burned, she chucked the bottle across the back lot of the trailer.

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“This better be fun,” Keisha said as she, Mercedes, and Julia rode up the elevator to Dev’s penthouse. Dev and Julio and their other friend, Keagan, decided to invite some of the girls over to his place to compensate for the homecoming dance that was cancelled because of a bomb threat.

“I’d rather do this than what we had planned,” Julia replied. After the boys called them, the girls cancelled their movie night and had Keisha’s mother drop them off at Dev’s place.

“Of course you do, Julz. You just wanna see Dev,” Mercedes said.

“For the last time, I don’t like him!” Julia exclaimed.

“Then why you dressed like that?” Keisha asked with her hand on her hip. Julia wore a black slip-on dress underneath a red sweater. She also wore black combat boots. She even had light makeup on.

“I can’t wear a dress now?” Julia sarcastically asked. After the elevator door opened, they stepped into Dev’s apartment. The apartment lights were dimmed while music played.

“Ladies,” Dev said, giving them all a single hug.

“You all look lovely,” Keagan said, looking directly at Keisha. Keisha smiled as she pulled off her coat. “Let me.” Keagan helped take off her coat.

“Thanks,” she replied, handing him her coat. Dev followed Keagan and helped Julia take off her coat. Mercedes took her coat off, not expecting Julio to help her. Julio was sitting on the couch.

“Can’t say hi to nobody?” Keisha asked, poking Julio as she sat down next to him.

“Hey,” he responded. He gave her a half hug. Keagan sat down next to them. Julio took the hint and got up from his seat.

“I heard you like to ball,” Keagan said to Keisha.

“I do. I’m actually gonna be on varsity this year,” Keisha began.

“I’m really glad you came,” Dev said to Julia, putting his hands in his pockets. He remained standing by Julia who was sitting on the stool by the kitchen counter top.

“Me too,” Julia replied, crossing her legs. She did indeed dress up since Dev invited her. The kiss they had a while back made things more awkward between them, especially with Keisha and Mercedes teasing them about liking each other.

“So ... um ... I’ll talk to you later,” Dev told her as he saw Julio give him a deadly look.

“Okay,” Julia replied. Dev went over to Julio. Seeing that Dev left Julia, Mercedes went over to Julia.

“What was that about?” Mercedes asked.

“I don’t know. Okay, I do know. I like Dev, okay,” Julia admitted in a low voice so only Mercedes could hear.

“I know you do. What’re you waiting for? You gonna make a move or what?”

“Not in front of my brother.” “Look who’s getting cozy.” Julia looked over Mercedes’s head to where Keisha and Keagan were chatting it up. Keisha seemed to be sitting closer than necessary to be having a conversation.

As Mercedes turned around to see who was getting cozy, the front door opened to Amanda. Mercedes winced. What the hell was she doing here? Julio greeted her at the door with a kiss on the cheek. Julio took her hand and held it all the way to the couch opposite from where Keisha and Keagan were sitting. Out of all of the girls, he had to choose the one girl she despised the most. Mercedes furiously got her phone out and dialed Robbie’s number.

“Two can play at this game,” Mercedes mumbled, waiting for Robbie to pick up the phone.

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“Thanks for the ride,” Angela said after opening the door to Sal’s car. Angela took a seat and closed the door.

“You’re welcome,” Sal replied. He pulled away from her home. “Can you put your seatbelt on?” he asked. Angela adjusted her coat before she put her seatbelt on. “They cancelled homecoming, but they can’t cancel the parties,” Sal said.

Angela called Sal so she could crash homecoming, but after he told her it was cancelled, he invited her to a party at Adam’s house. It was the first time they had talked since they broke off their relationship.

“How have you been?”

“I’m fine. I should be asking you that question. I haven’t seen you in school all week,” he said, turning on the corner of the street.

“I’ve been sick,” Angela lied, crossing her arms. She knew the truth was going to come out about her dropping out, but she didn’t want it to be known yet.

“Are you pregnant?”

“What? Where’d you hear that?”

“People talk, Angela. Rachel told everybody you were sick and I know that you had sex with Robbie around the same time we were sleeping tog–,”

“Sal, I’m not pregnant,” Angela replied, cutting him off. She should’ve known that rumors would have been flying around about her absence.

“That’s good. Great, actually,” he said in a relieved voice.

“Now we can party like we used to,” Angela said with a forced smile. She wasn’t really in the mood to go partying, but it beat staying home feeling sorry for herself.

“Party like we did a couple of months ago, not like the end of last year or freshman year.”

“I know. I don’t like being pissed drunk, waking up, wondering where the hell I am or what random guy I just slept with.” During her freshman year of high school, Angela frequently went to parties. Surprisingly, she passed her freshman year of high school. Barely, that is.

“Well, now that you’re single ...” Sal said, giving her a kiss on the cheek. They arrived at Adam’s house. They both got out of the car and Sal put his arm around Angela’s shoulder.

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Amanda pushed her way through the crowded penthouse. About an hour later after the girls came, more students from RHS came over. The music got louder.

“Here’s the water you asked for,” Julio said handing her a bottle of water.

“Thanks.” She accepted the bottle and drank from it. “Want to dance?” She took his hand.

“Can we talk first?”

“Let’s find somewhere quiet to talk,” Amanda responded, wondering what he wanted to talk about. Maybe he was finally going to ask her to be his girl. It took him long enough! Julio led her to one of the guest bedrooms. They closed the door and let go of each other. It wasn’t the first time they were alone, but this time, Julio didn’t have a girlfriend. Julio crossed his arms across his chest.

“Um ... remember that party last summer?”

“I remember,” Amanda responded. She didn’t want him to bring it up. That was the same day her boyfriend of a year, Spencer, broke up with her.

“And you remember what happened ... between us?” Julio asked, looking at the girl he cheated on Mercedes with.

“I do. You should’ve told me then that you had a girlfriend.” The previous summer, after her breakup, she went to a party with her friends. Since they all had boyfriends at that time except for her, she left them, not wanting to be the odd wheel. She met Julio by the pool area, and after he had a couple of drinks, one thing led to another between them.

“Well, I just wanted to clear the air between us.” Amanda took a seat on the bed. Julio gazed at her. That was the last place they were alone together. In a bed. “You were my first,” Julio revealed. “Mercedes and I never did it. We almost did at her mom’s apartment this one time, but—”

“Your first what?”

“I lost my virginity to you.” Amanda jumped up from the bed.

“What are you talking about, Julio? We never had sex.” She would have known if she had had sex with him that night or not. She didn’t drink that night.

“We did. I remember meeting you, making out and moving into the bedroom, where you took off my shirt. Then we started making out on the bed and—”

“And that was it! Julio, nothing else happened,” she emphasized. “I left after you tried to take off my top.” That night when they were in the bedroom, Amanda did take off his shirt and

made out on the bed with him, but stopped after he tried to take her clothes off. She realized then that that wasn't the way she wanted to lose her virginity.

"I did wake up with my pants on," Julio said taking a seat on the bed. "So this means, I didn't do anything as bad as she did," Julio mumbled to himself.

"You must have blacked out," Amanda said, sitting next to him.

"I guess. Amanda, I'm gonna go home. I'll call you a cab," he said, getting up.

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Sal put his arms around Angela's waist as she danced in front of him. After a few people stared at Angela's presence, people continued to party. The house was packed with people and alcohol. Angela was sure there were drugs being passed around, too.

"Get me something to drink, please," Angela asked Sal. She wanted to get buzzed and forget about her problems for at least a night. The vodka she had earlier wasn't enough to get her drunk.

"What do you wanna drink?"

"Anything with alcohol in it," she said.

"All right." He gave her a kiss before he left. After the kiss, she pulled out her chapstick and put it on.

"I see you made it to the party with Sal," Travis said from behind her. Angela jumped a bit. She didn't like people sneaking up behind her. "So you couldn't wait for longer than a week to move on?" Angela turned around to face Travis. "What we had was fake. I should've stayed away like people told me to," Travis said, looking hurt. She hated how she continued to use him even though she knew he was falling for her.

"I'm sorry," she apologized. She regretted coming with Sal instead of going to her aunt's house.

"I'm sure you are. And if you're pregnant, why are you partying? Oh, yeah. That's right, you don't give a damn about anybody but yourself," he said as the look on his face turned from hurt to anger.

"I'm not pregnant! If I was, I wouldn't be here."

"Then why weren't you in school this whole week? But then again you don't wanna admit that you don't know who the father is!"

“Back off!” Sal exclaimed as she approached them. He had a blue plastic cup in his hand. He handed the cup to Angela. “Leave her alone.”

“Mind your business,” Travis snapped. “We were just talking.”

“She obviously doesn’t want to talk to you,” Sal replied, coming close to Travis.

“Sal–,” Angela began pulling his arm away from Travis.

“What makes you think she’s gonna stay with you? You’re no Jesse.”

“Don’t say his name,” Angela snapped at Travis. Travis finally walked out.

“Forget about him,” Sal told Angela. Angela nodded, knowing that she could forget about Travis, but not Jessie. Never. He still had a special place in her heart. She downed her beverage in hopes to block any thoughts of Jesse.

“I wanna go home,” Angela said.

“Don’t let him ruin your fun.”

“I’m not–,” Angela began, but stopped when she saw Rachel out of the corner of her eye. Rachel was in the opposite side of the room inconspicuously buying what looked like weed. Rachel glanced around the room before she made the complete transaction.

“The same person who gave me the drugs,” a voice like Christy’s rang inside Angela’s head.

“Rachel,” Angela said out loud.

“She’s right over there,” Sal said.

“I’m gonna go talk to her.” Angela threw her empty cup on the floor..

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Mercedesz uneasily watched Robbie guzzle a third cup of liquor. Alcohol came along with some of the guests who came to Dev’s party. The side of the room where Mercedesz and Robbie were was filled with people who obviously wanted to get wasted. They were by the couches and a coffee table that held several different liquors and sodas.

“Baby, slow down,” Mercedesz said to Robbie, who was about to fill up another cup.

“Okay,” Robbie replied, taking a huge sip before setting the cup down. “I’ll stop for you,” he told her, leaning towards her. Mercedesz pulled away slightly, not wanting to kiss a tipsy Robbie.

“Wanna sit down?” She needed to get out of the area where everybody was drinking.

“Sure.” Robbie threw himself on one of the loveseats, right next to the alcohol. “Come sit.” Mercedes went over to him and sat on his lap since the other side of the couch was taken by a couple making out. Robbie put his arm around her lower stomach. Mercedes sucked in her stomach. “Relax,” he said to her, seeing how tense she was sitting on his lap.

“I’m relaxed.” She leaned her body against his and gave him a kiss to prove that she was relaxed.

“Robbie, why is there not a drink in your hand?” the guy beside them asked as he stopped kissing the redhead girl on his lap. Mercedes looked and saw that it was the same guy that usually played basketball with Robbie.

“She doesn’t want me drinking, Vic,” Robbie replied.

“Baller chick! I knew I’ve seen you before. I’m Vic and this is my girlfriend,” Vic said.

“Madison,” the redhead responded.

“I’m Mercedes.”

“Babe, can you pour me a drink?” Vic asked Madison.

“You got it,” Madison said, getting up from his lap.

“And pour one for Robbie and his girl. And pour yourself a drink, too,” Vic added.

“I don’t drink,” Mercedes said.

“One drink is not gonna kill you, hon,” Madison said, pouring vodka into four cups. She opened a Coke can and poured it into one of the cups. “Here.” Madison handed her the cup with the Coke in it. “Try it with Coke. It’ll taste better.” Madison gave Robbie and Vic their drinks before she sat back on Vic’s lap. Mercedes nervously glanced at the cup in hand. With all those around her drinking, she slowly began to sip the strong mixed beverage, thinking to herself that this was just a one-time thing.

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“Angela!” Rachel called out as Angela came up to her. “Dude, it’s been forever.” Rachel placed her arm around her shoulder. “Are you feeling better?” Rachel asked, drinking out of the cup that she had in her free hand. “I was gonna come see you tomorrow,” Rachel said, taking her arm away from Angela. “You’re not pregnant?” Rachel asked in a low voice.

“No,” Angela replied, thankful that Rachel wasn’t touching her anymore. “Did you give Christy weed?”

“Come again?”

“Did you give my little sister drugs?” Angela questioned louder.

“Is that what she said?”

“Not directly, but I figured it out myself.”

“Angela, I can explain,” Rachel started, resting her cup down on one of the plastic chairs.

“I don’t wanna hear it. You gave my little sister drugs. All this time I thought you were my friend and this is what you do.” She still couldn’t grasp the fact that her best friend really gave her younger sister illicit drugs.

“I am your friend. Angela.”

“No you’re not!” Angela yelled.

“How can you say that? I’ve been there for you through all your drama!” Rachel yelled back.

“Whatever. Just stay away from me and my sisters,” Angela angrily told Rachel as she walked away from her.

“Yeah. Walk away from your problems like you did last year with Jesse. And you wonder why he can’t even look you in the eye,” Rachel snapped. Angela felt her pulse rise.

“Do not go there!” Angela snapped as she turned around and pointed her finger in Rachel’s face.

“Don’t put your finger in my face!” Rachel pushed Angela’s finger away. Angela shoved Rachel, causing her to stumble backwards.

“Girl fight!” Adam, RHS’s linebacker, said loudly, watching the girls go at it. Several people crowded around them to see the former friends fighting. Angela snatched Rachel’s hair and yanked on it. Rachel threw Angela onto the tiled floor and dug her nails into her arm, pulling Angela’s hands away from her hair.

“Cops!” a partier warned out loud. “Cops!”

“Let’s go!” another partier exclaimed. Many of the partygoers scurried out of the house before the police caught them for underage drinking. The two females ignored the warning and continued. Rachel took advantage of being bigger than Angela. She put her knee on Angela’s stomach and held both of Angela’s arms together with one of her long arms. She used the other arm to bash Angela’s face.

“Get off!” Angela yelled in fear, feeling the pain of the hits Rachel was giving her. Angela cried, hating the feeling of losing control of her body. She wrestled her arms away from Rachel and kned her. Rachel let go of her arms. Angela reached into her back pocket and pulled out her maroon pocket knife, keeping it out of Rachel’s sight. Angela quickly swiveled the blade out from behind herself as she had practiced many times.

“What the hell are you doing?” Rachel asked, as she saw the knife coming towards her.

“Getting back control,” Angela answered, jabbing the knife across Rachel’s shoulder.

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Julia continued to kiss Dev in the coat closet. Dev took off the sweater Julia had over her dress. Julia let it fall and wrapped her arms around Dev’s shoulders. Dev moved his arms to her waist. She was glad that it was dark in the closet. It took away the awkwardness. Just as Dev’s hands began to go lower than her waist, Julia’s phone rang.

“Hold on,” Julia told him, taking her cell phone from the front pocket of her dress. She looked down at the caller ID and saw that it was Keisha. “Hey,” Julia said, answering the phone.

“Lip gloss gloss,” Keisha said over the phone. Hearing the code, Julia pulled away from Dev.

“What color?”

“Orange. I’m out in the living area,” Keisha replied.

“I’ll be there,” Julia said, hanging up the phone. “I gotta go,” Julia told Dev.

“Is everything okay?” he asked.

“Hopefully,” Julia replied, giving him a peck before she opened the door to the party. Dev and Julia went their own ways.

“See you Monday,” he said, fixing his shirt. He went over to talk to his soccer buddies.

“Okay.” She patted down her tight curled hair so it didn’t look sloppy. Julia rushed over to Keisha who was waving her hand in the air. Because of Keisha’s height, Julia could see her. “What’s wrong?” Julia asked as soon as she saw Keisha. Julia, Keisha, and Mercedes made up the code lip gloss gloss when they first started high school to let each other know if one of them had problems at a party, especially with rowdy boys.

“Cedez is all over Robbie,” Keisha replied.

“And?” Julia asked thinking about how she was all over Dev even though he wasn’t her boyfriend. “That’s her man.”

“You gotta see what I’m talking ‘bout.” She led Julia to where there was alcohol all over. Mercedes was kneeling on the couch on top of Robbie. Robbie’s shirt was completely unbuttoned. Mercedes sucked on one of his middle abs giving him a hickey there.

“Is she—”

“Drunk? Yeah. People told me she was drinking it up.” Mercedes rubbed her hands up Robbie’s chest as she gave him a drunken smile. She took off his shirt. Robbie leaned back on his seat with a look of satisfaction. Mercedes placed her hands on his belt.

“Let’s get her,” Julia said, seeing Mercedes begin to unbuckle Robbie’s belt. Mercedes pulled Robbie’s belt off and threw it on the floor. Julia and Keisha pushed through some of the people. Mercedes began to lower her head.

“Mercedes, girl, we was looking all over for you,” Keisha said She pulled her best friend off of Robbie. Mercedes stumbled onto the floor.

“We gotta make curfew,” Julia said, helping Keisha pick up Mercedes.

“No...I wan...want my boyfriend,” Mercedes slurred, reaching out her arms toward Robbie.

“Let her finish what she started,” an obviously drunken Robbie said, getting up with a huge smirk.

“She ain’t feeling to finish nothing,” Keisha snapped, trying to stop Mercedes from flapping her arms towards Robbie.

“If you wanna see her outside of school, she’s gotta make curfew,” Julia told him, grabbing Mercedes’s sweater off of the floor.

“I called somebody to pick us up,” Keisha said to Julia. Mercedes reached her arms towards Robbie and tried to go near him.

“Robbie, I love you!” Mercedes sang to him off key. “I love you,” she sang to him in a higher note. Julia and Keisha tried to guide Mercedes to the front door. “And I wanna have your babies, Robbie!” Mercedes screamed from the top of her lungs “And I wanna—”

“Okay!” Keisha exclaimed, covering Mercedes’s mouth before she said anything else. They finally made it to the front door.

Julia shook her head when a Ford Explorer pulled up by the apartment.

“Out of all the people!” Julia exclaimed to Keisha who was trying to hold Mercedes up on the sidewalk.



“He was the only one I knew with a whip.” Keisha brought Mercedes to her feet from one side. Julia sighed as she helped Keisha pick up Mercedes. Eddie unlocked the car door. Keisha got in first, helping Mercedes to get in before Julia. Mercedes closed her eyes and leaned her head on Julia’s shoulder.

“Thanks,” Keisha told Eddie.

“No problem. Her first time drinking?”

“Yes.”

“I wanna throw up,” Mercedes said. Eddie kept one hand on the wheel and grabbed a plastic bag from the passenger side. He handed Mercedes the bag. Julia took it from him since Mercedes didn’t respond. Julia put the bag in Mercedes’s hand, but kept an eye out so if she wanted to vomit, she did it in the bag and not Eddie’s car.

“Hi to you too, Julia,” Eddie said looking at her through the rearview mirror.

“Hi,” she replied not wanting to be ruder. He was giving her a ride after all. Eddie played Hot 97 until they got to Keisha’s house, where they all planned to sleep over. By the time Mercedes had gotten out of the warm car and into the cold air, she threw up. Keisha moved her hair out of her face.

“I’ll see you later and thanks again,” Keisha said.

“Thanks,” Julia also said, getting out of the car and closing the door.

“Julia, wait,” Eddie said pulling down the window. Julia went over to his side of the car and put her hands in her coat pockets.

“What’s up?”

“I miss you,” he replied.

“You gotta girl.” Although she missed being with him, she wouldn’t admit it.

“Not anymore. I broke it off with Silesia. Julia, I wanna get back together.” Julia’s heart raced. She had waited for this moment since after the moment he broke up with her but now Dev was in the picture.

“Reckless Perfection,” she told him.

“Huh?”

“Never mind. I’m going inside.”

**\*\*\*Chapter 6\*\*\***

*“... he’s the one that I want.”*

Dev sat down across the lunch room table from Mercedes, Julia, and Keisha. It was the first day back from school after the pent house party.

“You ladies had fun Friday night?” Dev asked.

“Yes,” Keisha replied.

“No,” Mercedes said, trying to forget about how much she had embarrassed herself in front of Robbie.

“What about you, Julia?” Dev asked. Julia looked up from her chemistry textbook. She had a test next period.

“It was okay,” Julia responded, taking a piece of paper, calculator, and pencil from her book bag.

“Just okay?” he questioned.

“More than okay,” she replied, turning to the end of one of the chapters she had a test on later that day.

“I called you last night,” Dev said.

“Sorry I didn’t call you back.” She didn’t pick up because she and Eddie were talking on the phone for hours.

“Can I call you tonight?”

“If you want,” Julia said, finishing the first problem.

“Well... I gotta go,” Dev said, getting up from the table with his stuff.

“What’s wrong with you? Wasn’t you the one saying the other day that you were feeling him?” Keisha asked.

“Es nada,” Julia replied.

“¿Te gusta él o no?” Mercedes asked.

“Yo no sé,” Julia responded.

“¿Porque?”

“Es como—”

“Stop! Speak English,” Keisha said. At times, Julia and Mercedes would go off in Spanish, forgetting that Keisha wasn’t fluent in that language.

“It’s like I don’t know if I like him. He’s cute and a cool guy, but I think it was one of those minute crushes.” Julia wasn’t going to tell her friends that the reason why she was giving Dev the cold shoulder was because she might have been a bit interested in getting back with Eddie. She didn’t want to let an opportunity to have him back slip away from her. Eddie’s interest in her made her realize how much she missed him, how much she...loved him.

“Girl, you don’t know what you want,” Keisha said. Julia sighed, knowing exactly who she wanted.

“Julia, you not gonna eat?” Mercedes asked, realizing that Julia hadn’t eaten lunch as she and Keisha had.

“I’ll eat later. I gotta study.” She could eat later, but not now. She hadn’t gotten a B on her report card since fifth grade and she wasn’t about to start now.

“You gotta starve to make all A’s,” Keisha joked.

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Mercedes went the opposite way when she saw Julio in one of the hallways of RHS. Julio walked her way. They hadn’t said a word to each other since their breakup.

“Can we talk?” he asked, coming up to her. It was the end of the school day.

“No. I got nothing to say to you.”

“Mercedes, please.” Although they were broken up, Mercedes still felt hurt by his unfaithfulness.

“No. Go talk to your girlfriend Amanda,” she snapped before going to her locker. Julio didn’t follow her. As she got closer to her locker, she saw Robbie standing there. Mercedes’s palms got sweaty. He was looking gorgeous with a red, black, and white leather biker jacket on over a black T with the same gray sweat pants he wore when he asked her to be his girl. His curly hair was up without gel.

“How come you didn’t call me back?” Robbie asked instead of saying hi first.

“Saturday, I had a hangover,” Mercedes said opening up her locker.

“And Sunday?”

“Church, dinner with the family, and finishing school stuff.” She moved her geometry book from her locker to her book bag.

“And you couldn’t make a simple phone call to say hi? You’ve been acting different since the party.”

“I wish I never went.”

“Why not? Is it ‘cause of what happened between us?”

“Yes. That’s exactly why,” she admitted as she took out two notebooks and jammed them into her locker. “I don’t drink, Robbie. If I didn’t, none of those things would’ve happened.”

“I get you don’t drink, Mercedes, but I’m your boyfriend,” he began. She liked the sound of him being her boyfriend. “Boyfriend and girlfriend do these things.”

“I know,” she said, glancing at his sky blue eyes. He was what she wanted. She wiped her hands before taking his hands. “I just wanna be sober if we do things or if things are said,” she replied.

“I understand,” he told her, smiling. Mercedes smiled back, feeling the butterflies in her stomach. “Just so you know, I enjoyed all of the hickies you gave me.”

“Hickies?” she asked, making sure he really had said the word in its plural tense.

“Hickies,” he repeated, letting go of one of her hands. “One right here,” he said pointing to the side of his neck. Robbie lifted up his shirt. “Another one right here,” he said pointing to one of his abs. “And of course this one,” he said pulling his shirt even higher. Mercedes looked at his abs. He really did work out. All of his abs were defined. Julio’s weren’t like Robbie’s. Julio wasn’t fat or skinny, but he didn’t have any abs. “Mercedes,” Robbie said out loud.

“Huh?” she asked, looking away.

“This is the last hickey you gave me,” he told her touching his left pec. Mercedes’s face turned red. On his left pec was a collection of hickies that formed the letter M. “Right over my heart.” He took her hand and placing it over his left pec. Mercedes’s knees got weak as she felt his heartbeat.

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“You should have just left me in there then!” Angela exclaimed to her complaining aunt.

“Do not talk to me that way,” Jerry, Angela’s aunt said. “Did you want to spend Thanksgiving in juvie?” Jerry was Angela’s father’s older sister by three years. Jerry had medium length brownish hair and dark blue eyes. She was tall and at times seemed as if she had a permanent frown on her face. Jerry was driving Angela back home that Tuesday. “You’re real lucky I was able to pull some strings to get you out of juvie because we all know how much your own mother cares to have done something about this,” she added. Angela rolled her eyes. As a

lawyer, Jerry was able to get Angela out of the juvenile center. After the fight, the police came and arrested Angela and took Rachel to a hospital. “And stabbing somebody, Angela? Really, where’s your common sense? You can do time.” Angela impatiently tapped on the side of the inside of the Toyota Avalon. She knew her aunt was just getting started. “But, since this is your first offence, I can try to see if you can get probation and do community service so you won’t have to do time.” Feeling cold even with the heat on, Angela adjusted the same top she had Friday night.

“Can you put the heat up, please?” Angela asked. Jerry glanced at her niece’s wardrobe and shook her head. Underneath Angela’s coat, Angela had on a thin low-neckline top, not suitable for the 30-degree weather. The shirt rested above her bellybutton, showing her belly button ring.

“If you weren’t dressed like that, you wouldn’t need the heat to be turned up.” Jerry turned up the heat. “Where’s all of the clothes that your Aunt René and I bought for you after you got out of rehab?” After rehab, Angela’s two aunts bought her more conservative clothes and got rid of most of the clothes that Jerry deemed promiscuous.

“They weren’t comfortable,” Angela responded.

“So showing your tah tahs is more comfortable?” Jerry rhetorically asked.

“Seriously, Aunt Jerry, does everything I do bother you?”

“Only the bad things you do. Start acting like a good little girl and—”

“I’m not a little girl.”

“Don’t we all know that, especially after what happened last year.” Angela squirmed, not wanting to rehash the previous year in her mind.

“Finally!” Angela exclaimed, yanking the car door open before her aunt could put the car in park. She was home.

“Wait!” Jerry put the car in park. She reached in the back seat and pulled her purse out. She took out several bills from her wallet and handed them to Angela.

“No. I’m fine,” Angela responded, getting out of the car. She despised it when people tried giving her money as if she or her sisters were charity cases.

“Give it to your sisters,” Jerry said, holding the money out.

“They’re fine, too.”

“Angela,” Jerry said with sincerity on her face. “Take it and buy a cold steak to put over that black eye,” she joked. Angela walked out of the fight with a black eye and sprained wrist

that was later bandaged. Angela gave her a half smile. Although her aunt was a nagger, she had a slight sense of humor. “Angela, we’re family. It’s okay if I give you money. What, you wouldn’t give me money if I needed it?”

“I would,” Angela replied, taking the money. “Thanks again, Aunt Jerry.”

Later, after hearing noises in the kitchen, Angela woke up from her nap. She sat up from the bottom bunk and yawned. She looked over to her alarm clock and saw that it was after two. It couldn’t be Christy and Tania coming back from school. They usually got home around three. The middle school that Christy went to and the elementary school that Tania went got out at the same time. Angela zipped up the large black hoodie. She rolled up her sleeves. The hoodie was covered in patches of different rock artists and band’s logos, such as Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix and The Red Hot Chili Peppers. Angel walked into the kitchen and saw that it was her Aunt Rene` there. Her aunt was by the sink, washing vegetables. René sometimes came over to their home and cooked dinner to eat with her nieces.

“Hey, Ang,” Rene` said, turning away from the sink. René had long light brown hair and big brownish green eyes. She was petite and was around the same height as Angela.

“Hi,” Angela said, giving her a hug. “How long have you been here?” Angela released her. When Angela had gotten home, nobody was there.

“About an hour ago.” René had a key to their home.

Jerry called and said you came home and, since I’m off today, I wanted to see how you were. And, by the looks of it, not too well.” René looked at the side of her black eye.

“I’m fine.”

“Take a seat so I can take a look,” René insisted.

“Aunt René, some nurses at juvie checked me out already.”

“Well, I want to make sure they didn’t make a mistake.” Angela took a seat at one of the kitchen chairs, knowing that she wouldn’t win this argument since René was a nurse at the local hospital. “So, why did you fight Rachel? I thought she was your best friend.” She checked Angela’s black eye to make sure she didn’t need any stitches.

“I thought so, too.”

“If you had come over the past weekend, all of this could have been prevented.”

“I know.”

“Where’d you get the knife that you stabbed her with?”

“It was a gift.”

“Now it’s evidence that proves you stabbed her. You got to be more careful, Angela.” Her aunt took her hand that was sprained. “Does this hurt?” she asked putting pressure in her hand.

“No,” Angela responded, feeling a bit of pain.

“Well, you should be fine. I know you missed school yesterday and today. Are you going to rest up tomorrow and go back on Monday?” It was Tuesday, but the students of Roctown schools had a half a day the next day and had Thursday and Friday off for Thanksgiving break.

“No.”

“Going back to school tomorrow.” René went over to the sink. “You got guts, Ang.”

“I’m not going back.” It was time she told somebody about the dropout. She was tired of keeping it a secret. After all, it was bound out to come out sometime.

“I know you don’t want to go back to school with a black eye where your peers are always starting rumors, but you have to go back to school,” René replied, leaning against the sink.

“I don’t care what people at school think about me.” Angela got up from the chair. She was used to hearing people gossip truths and lies about her. “I’m not going back ‘cause I dropped out.”

“What do you mean you dropped out? You need a parent’s consent to do that.”

“I got that.”

“Kim agreed to this?”

“It was actually her idea.”

“I can’t believe Kim. Sometimes she could be so—,” René started but stopped before she went off about one of her sister’s many poor decisions. “You should have stood up to her and stayed in school. Why didn’t you call me or Jerry?”

“I don’t know, but it doesn’t matter anymore. Who was I kidding staying in high school? I failed tenth grade last year and I was about to fail it again this year. School’s not for everybody.”

“Is that what Kim told you? You listen to me, Angela, you are smart so don’t ever let anybody, including your mother, tell you otherwise.”

“You’re just saying that ‘cause you’re my aunt.”

“That’s not true. Angela, if you actually applied yourself, you would get better grades and pass the tenth grade and eventually high school.”

“My mind’s already made up.”

“What good job do you think you’re going to get without a high school diploma?”

“I’ll be able to manage. With school out of the way, I’ve got time to work and make more money.” Since she had dropped out, she made double what she used to make at her job.

“Now, but what about later? All you’re going to get are dead end jobs.” Angela folded her arms and sat back on the chair. “Imagine what your father would say.”

“I wouldn’t know. He off’d himself before I could ask him,” Angela sarcastically replied, hating her aunt for bringing up a painful memory.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought up the past,” René said, sighing.

“You’re not the only one who does.”

“I take it that your sisters don’t know about you dropping out.”

“No.” Angela knew she had to tell at least Christy, but she didn’t want to give Christy an excuse to dropout when she turned sixteen since at it seemed as if Christy picked up on her bad habits, such as smoking weed. The front door opened and in walked Tania in front of Christy.

“Hi, Auntie,” Tania said. Tania took off her coat and handed it to René.

“Hi. Come wash your hands, honey,” René replied, giving her a kiss on her forehead. Tania went over to the sink and went on her tip toes to turn the faucet on. René pushed the soap forward for Tania to reach for it.

“Hey, Aunt René,” Christy said.

“Hi, Christy. How was school?”

“Good.”

“Angela!” Tania exclaimed seeing her older sister sitting in a chair. Tania ran over to Angela and climbed onto her lap. “I missed you!” She gave Angela a huge hug.

“I missed you too, Tania,” Angela said, holding her. Although she only spent three days without seeing her sisters, she missed them.

“What happened?” Tania put both her small hands on her sister’s face.



“I got hurt, but I’m okay.”

“Let me kiss your boo boos,” Tania suggested. “It’ll make you feel better.” Tania kissed the side of her black eye and took her hands away from her face. She kissed Angela’s hand. “Do you feel better?”

“Much better. Thanks, baby,” Angela replied, giving her a hug. Angela looked up from the hug and saw Christy staring at them. As soon as Angela put Tania down to talk to Christy, Christy went to the bedroom and shut the door. “Does she know about the fight?” Angela asked René.

“Yes,” René replied. Angela went to the bedroom. Christy was on the top bunk doing her homework.

“I’m happy to see you,” Angela told Christy. Christy nodded her head, keeping her eyes down on the social studies worksheet that she had for her homework. “You’re not happy to see me?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t say anything.” Christy hopped off the top bunk and put her hand underneath her bed.

“Here.” Christy handed Angela the small bag of weed.

“Does this mean you’re not gonna smoke pot anymore?”

“It’s not worth you getting hurt over it,” Christy replied.

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“I’m not going!” Julia exclaimed to her mother.

“Yes you are, Juliana. You cannot avoid church forever,” Gloria replied. Julia hadn’t been back since she and her friends sang in front of the church. It was Wednesday night about a couple of minutes before Bible study at their church.

“Ma, the pastor’s the one who kicked me out.”

“He kicked you out of the worship team, not church.” They were in the bedroom that they shared. Gloria was already dressed to go to church, while Julia had on a T and sweats.

“It’s the same thing to me.”

“Fine. You can stay home tonight, pero you will go to iglesia este domingo.”

“I’ll go this Sunday.” That would give people at church some time to forget what happened.

“Nena, don’t give up on God because of what happened.”

“I’m not giving up on him.” Although that whole thing occurred, she still prayed to God. “Just some of his churchgoers.”

“I’m leaving. I’ll see you later,” Gloria said. “I love you.”

“Love you too, Ma,” she replied, sitting on the floor. She pulled out her geometry book to work on some proofs.

“Julio, vamos! We’re going to be late!” Gloria said to Julio walking out of the bedroom.

“We’re always late,” Julio replied. Julia waited for Gloria and Julio to leave before she went to the attic. She had a four-day Thanksgiving weekend to worry about working on her proofs. When she got to the attic, she went to the corner where there was an acoustic guitar. She took the guitar out and sat down on the floor and played some chords, trying to figure out what song she should choose for the next time she performed at the retirement home. No song came to mind.

“There’s gotta be something here I could use,” Julia said, carefully placing the expensive acoustic guitar back in its case. Julia went over to the box of records she had found earlier that year. She went through the records, trying to find an album that was suitable for super senior citizens. She passed her father’s album, The Police, Luther Vandross, Madonna, Prince, and Olivia Newton-John. Most of the albums were from the eighties, around the same time when her parents moved to America. “I got time,” Julia said leaving the attic. It was the end of November and her next performance was in February. As soon as Julia came back into the bedroom, the telephone rang. “Hello, Eddie,” Julia said in a soft voice when she read the caller ID that had Eddie’s name on it. She sat down on the bed.

“Hey, Julia. Yo, you thought about what I asked you?” Eddie asked.

“I did. I wanna, but we gotta give it some time if we’re gonna get back together. You just broke up with Silesia,” Julia replied. She didn’t want to publically start dating Eddie and make Silesia feel how she felt when she found out Eddie was going out with somebody so shortly after their breakup. After all, it was barely over two weeks since Eddie and Silesia had broken up. She just hooked up with Dev the past weekend and now she was ready to move on, but she didn’t want to hurt Dev.

“But, Julia, you ain’t gonna be my rebound girl or nothing. I wasn’t in love with Silesia.”

“Was you in love with me?” Eddie went silent. “Of course not. You couldn’t even say those words to me when we was together.” After Julia told Eddie that she loved him, when they went out before, he said he was too young to be in love and broke up with her.

“Look, Julia, just know that I got strong feelings for you.”

“You had strong feelings for Silesia, too?”

“Nah, the only thing I was feeling ’bout her was her booty.”

“I don’t wanna hear about you feeling on some other girl’s booty!” Eddie was known for having a wandering eye whenever women were around.

“My bad,” he replied, laughing. “Yo, you told your man about breaking up with him?”

“My man?” Julia asked.

“Dev.” Julia almost forgot she had lied to Eddie about how she and Dev were going out.

“On the real, we never went out.”

“I know. My boy told me.”

“Oh,” Julia said, feeling a bit embarrassed. She wondered how long Eddie had known the truth.

“I can see why you lied about it.”

“Sorry for lying.”

“Forget about apologizing and tell me what you wanna do about us.”

“Let’s do it. I wanna keep it on the d.l. for a little bit, though. You know, give Silesia some time.”

“All right. That’s what I like about you, Julia. You’re caring and you always thinking of other people.” Julia heard her mother’s car pull up in the driveway.

“Well, mi amor, I gotta go ‘cause my mom is here, but I’m holla,” Julia said.

“Holla at you too, boo.”

**\*\*\*Chapter 7\*\*\***

*“... one hand can change it all.”*

Mercedes poured milk into her Luck Charms cereal for breakfast. She put the milk on the countertop and sat down on the stool by the kitchen. She put on her headphones and pressed play on her Sony portable CD player for the Black Album CD by Jay Z. She skipped over to the song “Encore.” Although it was about a year since the album was released, she still listened to it often. She started to eat as the music played.

“... You promised,” Barbra said, coming into the kitchen. “No, Mateo, I don’t understand why you’re always working. It’s black Friday. Can’t families eat their leftovers instead of going to a restaurant? Mateo, I have to go. I don’t want to argue,” Barbra added, hanging up the phone. It was the first time Mercedes had seen her father and stepmother come close to arguing. Barbra took a seat at the table and placed her hands over her belly. She was seven months pregnant and was getting bigger every day. Mercedes looked over to Barbra. Mercedes took her headphones off.

“Is everything okay?” Mercedes asked, as she saw Barbra start to cry.

“Hi, Mercedes. Sorry, I didn’t notice you,” she said, looking up to where Mercedes was. “I’m fine.”

“Well, okay.” Mercedes picked up her headphones, ready to get back to her music and favorite cereal.

Barbra began to cry more. Mercedes put her headphones down again. “It’s just that I feel like I’m the only one who’s excited about this baby. Mateo promised to come to the doctor’s appointment for the baby today, and again he can’t since he’s working. They probably think I’m a single mother with no family at the doctor’s office.” Mateo was Barbra’s first husband and the baby was her first. Mercedes got up from her stool.

“Barbra, we are excited about the baby. And, if you want, I’ll go with you to the doctor’s appointment,” Mercedes added, slightly dreading her offer .

“Really? No, I don’t want you going just because you feel sorry for me.”

“I’m not doing it ‘cause I feel sorry for you,” Mercedes lied.

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“I really do want to get to know you, Mercedes,” Barbra said on their drive to the doctor’s office. Barbra put the heat up higher inside the Lexus. “What activities are you in at school?”

“Nothing.”

“Are you planning on joining any clubs?”

“Next year.”

“What about basketball?” Barbra asked, remembering that Mercedes used to be on junior varsity last year during her freshman year of high school.

“What about basketball?”

“Are you planning to play this year?” Mercedes shrugged her shoulders. She stopped playing for the school team last year, right before the playoffs. She was cool about playing basketball at the park, but she wasn’t sure if she was ready to go back to play for the team. Mercedes turned the radio on to Hot 97, hoping that with the music, Barbra would stop talking to her. She was over their little small talk. “So,” Barbra began, realizing that the basketball subject was not a great topic to talk about. “Who’s the boy?”

“What?” Mercedes asked. Barbra couldn’t have known about Robbie. Mercedes never brought him over to the house, not wanting her father to find out she was still seeing Robbie behind his back.

“Oh, come on, Mercedes, I was once your age.”

“Thirty years ago,” Mercedes mumbled.

“Sixteen years ago,” Barbra corrected. “I’m not that old,” Barbra added, smiling. Mercedes cracked a smile as they parked in the parking lot. “Just so you know, I won’t tell your father you’re still going out with the boy he told you to stay away from.”

“How’d you know?”

“Like I said before, I was once your age. But let’s not talk about this anymore. The less I know the easier it’ll be for me not to say anything to your father. I know about liking a boy that parents don’t approve of. Sometimes, parents won’t even want to get to know the boy.” Mercedes nodded her head in agreement. “But, I want you to come to me if there are any problems with him. Promise you’ll come to me or your father if there’s ever a problem with him.”

“I promise,” Mercedes replied, sure that Robbie and her were not going to have any problems. At least not now. Barbra and Mercedes got out of the silver Lexus and walked into the doctor’s office.

After waiting for about fifteen minutes the nurse opened the door and said, “Barbra Thomas-Mendoza.” Barbra got up from her seat.

“Come on, sweetie,” Barbra said to Mercedes.

“I’ll wait here.” Mercedes replied. She didn’t want to actually go inside the room.

“Why? Don’t you want to see your future sibling?” Mercedes got up from her chair. How could she say no to seeing her sibling? They walked into the small room. Mercedes pulled off her coat and took a seat at one of the two swivel chairs inside the office.

“Let’s get your weight,” the nurse said. Barbra sighed, not wanting to see how much more weight she had gained because of the baby. After the weight check and blood pressure, Barbra and Mercedes waited for the doctor to come.

“I told the doctor I wanted to know the sex of the baby today,” Barbra said from the patient bed.

“I thought you wanted to wait ’til the birth.”

“I did, but I can’t wait. I’ll still love the baby no matter what sex it is. It’s just that I need to know in order to know how to decorate the baby’s room. I want to make the room either completely girlish or completely boyish.” The baby’s room was neutral yellow at the moment.

“They got mad sales at a lot of stores today. You’ll probably find some things for the baby.”

“You’re right. Today is Black Friday. I’ll drop you off home then I’ll go—”

“I don’t mind going,” Mercedes said. For some reason, she was getting a little bit more into the idea of having a little brother or sister. She would be able to teach her little sibling how to do things such as play basketball and maybe even help them to read or talk. It excited her. The doctor knocked on the door and came in.

“Barbra, so nice to see you,” the Jewish doctor said, shaking her hand. “And who is this young lady?” he asked, turning to Mercedes.

“Mercedes. My stepdaughter,” Barbra answered. Mercedes shook the doctor’s hand.

“Well, let’s find out how your baby is doing,” the doctor said to her, directing her to lie back. The doctor put gel over her stomach and used the ultrasound machine to check the baby.

Mercedes got closer to the screen. She looked at the screen and saw a little body moving about. It was the first time she had seen life this way.

“Is it a boy or a girl?” Barbra asked.

“It’s a girl,” the doctor replied.

“A girl,” Barbra said, about to cry with joy. Mercedes smiled; she was going to have a little sister.

\*\*\*

Angela walked out of her bedroom to the kitchen to where she heard the front door open. Kim was back from a three-day trip.

“Glad I caught you,” Angela said to Kim, pulling out a few bills from her pocket. “Here’s the hundred dollars you wanted after you found out Steven got laid off,” Angela said, giving her a hundred dollar bill. “And the one hundred I usually give you every two weeks.” Angela gave her another hundred dollar bill. “And a fifty to add to the money I usually give you every two weeks,” Angela finished handing Kim two twenties and a ten dollar bill. The money Angela earned from working double during her time off from school and the cash that her Aunt Jerry gave her made it possible for her to give Kim the money.

“Where the hell are you going?” Kim asked, accepting the money as she saw Angela head towards the front door.

“Where I should’ve been going for the past two weeks,” Angela replied, picking up her book bag and putting it on.

\*\*\*

“How was your Thanksgiving?” Robbie asked Mercedes at school Monday. They hadn’t seen each other the whole weekend.

“Good. I found out my stepmom is having a girl and after we found out, we went shopping for stuff for her,” Mercedes said, holding Robbie’s hand. They were chatting before their next class began.

“Stepmom? Your parents are divorced?”

“My parents were never married. But, they’re close friends,” Mercedes replied.

“Oh. Well, congratulations about your baby sister.”

“Thanks. How was your Thanksgiving?”

“Okay, but I wish we could’ve seen each other over the weekend.”

“We could do something this weekend. Just us, though.”

“You want me all to yourself?” he asked with a grin, stopping by the door of Mercedes’s class.

“Uh huh,” she responded, giving him a kiss. “I’ll see you later, papi,” Mercedes told him before going inside the classroom.

“All right,” Robbie replied, watching her sit down. When she sat down, she waved and smiled at him. Robbie smiled back before leaving to go to his American History class. Angela was sitting in her seat. Angela actually had a notebook out with a pen and looked ready to take notes in class for the first time. “es Fresh, I see you’re back,” Robbie said pulling out his supplies.

“I am,” she replied.

“Class we’re going to discuss...,” Mr. Everson began.

“Is that why you stopped coming to school?” he asked, pointing to her eye and hand. Angela’s eye was getting better and looking less as if it was a black eye. Her hand was also still bandaged.

“I stopped coming ‘cause I dropped out, but I changed my mind ‘cause my aunt convinced me to come back. I talked to Barrington this morning. Since I only missed a week and a half, she’s gonna re-enroll me later today, but she wanted me to go to my classes this morning so I won’t fall even more behind.”

“It’s good that you’re back in school.”

“Missed me that bad?” she asked jokingly.

“Very funny. You were the one playing footsie with me.”

“That was once. I got the hint that you weren’t into me like you were a couple of months ago.”

“I’m still into you. As a friend. I gotta girlfriend now and when you were rubbing against my leg, I was still going out with the same girl.”

“And was this the same girl you were going out with when we had sex?”

“I wasn’t officially with her then, and I’d appreciate if you kept your mouth shut about what we did,” Robbie snapped.

“I will keep my mouth shut. I don’t go around broadcasting the guys I’ve slept with,” Angela snapped back.

“Does anybody know?”

“I only told my ex. The one I cheated on with you.”



“It’s not my fault you cheated on him.”

“Did I say it was your fault?” she irritatingly responded. He was really working her nerves.

“Mr. Nease, Miss. es Fresh, talk on your free time,” Mr. Everson scolded, trying to continue the lecture.

“Did your ex tell anybody else?” Robbie asked so Mr. Everson couldn’t hear.

“I don’t know. I’m not with him 24/7!” Angela exclaimed, loud enough for the teacher to hear.

“Miss es Fresh, you’re going to sit up here from now on,” Mr. Everson told Angela, pointing to a chair in front of the room.

“Me? I was sitting here before Robbie,” Angela said.

“A year and a half longer than Robbie,” a student called out. Some students began to laugh. They knew this was Angela’s second time around in Everson’s American History class.

“Class, that’s enough,” Mr. Everson said calming the students down. “Angela, you can sit where you are now, but if the class is interrupted again by the two of you, I will move one of you up here”.

\*\*\*

“Mercedez?” Julio said, surprised to see Mercedez by his locker, right before his geometry class.

“I read your letter,” Mercedez said. She held up a folded piece of loose leaf paper. Julio wrote her a letter explaining what never occurred at the party over the summer.

“And?”

“And it doesn’t change anything, Julio.”

“But, I never had sex with that girl. I only went as far as you did with that guy.”

“J, it still remains the same. You thought you slept with another chick since the summertime and you wasn’t even trying to confess to it until I told you about kissing Robbie. I told you about the kiss only a couple of days after it happened,” Mercedez replied.

“So, it was Robbie. He was the one you cheated with me on.”

“So what?”

“You’re with him right now. How do I know it was just a kiss that you two shared?” Julio asked.

“Son, I told you the truth! After that kiss I had with Robbie when we was together, I didn’t talk to him or do nothing with him ‘cause I was with you and I wasn’t trying to hurt you. I started talking to him a couple of weeks after we broke up.” The one minute bell rang for class to start. “Look, Julio, I gotta go to class.”

“Can I call you later so we can talk about this more?” Julio asked as they both began to walk to their classes.

“You can call me, but it’s not gonna change anything,” Mercedes told him, going in a different direction from where her class was.

\*\*\*

Amanda went over to Ms. West’s class and sat down. Julio was already sitting down.

“Find a partner to work on the worksheet,” the substitute for Ms. West announced as she passed out the worksheets. Amanda waited for Julio to ask her to be her partner. After he didn’t turn around, Amanda gave in and tapped his shoulder.

“Do you want to work together?” Amanda asked. It wasn’t as if she needed his help. Since her father had hired the tutor for her, her grades had improved, but she still liked him.

“I guess,” he replied.

“I hope you don’t expect me to move my desk,” Amanda said when Julio remained seated. Julio turned his desk around to where Amanda’s desk was. They faced each other for the first time since the party. The teacher handed them worksheets. “We barely talked since your friend’s party.” She took out her mechanical pencil.

“Sorry.” Amanda rolled her eyes. This was not what she wanted to hear.

“I suppose it’s understandable if you’re still crying over your ex.”

“I’m not crying over her,” Julio insisted. “I’m way over her.”

“Then why don’t you call me anymore, Julio? I’m a good catch and if you’re not ready, let me know because there are other guys who are.” Amanda flipped her blonde hair over her shoulder.

“I am ready,” Julio replied, sitting up straight.

“I don’t think you are.”

“Come over to my house later this week and I’ll show you how ready I am,” Julio replied.

\*\*\*

Julia typed away on her A.P. World Literature essay on the computer at the front desk of the library. The paper was due in a few days and she had about a page to go. She was at the front desk with a few other members of Tutoring Teens, an afterschool program where teachers and some students helped their fellow students who needed help in different subject areas. It was usually slow during most of the school year except around midterms and finals.

“Is this where I can get tutoring?” a female asked Julia. Julia kept her eyes on the computer. It was ten minutes to five, the time when the tutoring ended, and she was almost done with a paragraph.

“Yes. Is this your first time here?” Julia asked, pulling up the sign-in sheet on the computer.

“It is.”

“Okay. I gotta fill out a short form on this computer since it’s your first time.” RHS didn’t trust the students to fill out the tutoring forms themselves. Julia typed in the password to get into the roster of students who attended Tutoring Teens. “Can I get your name?” Julia asked.

“Angela es Fresh.” Julia stopped typing and looked up to where Angela was leaning on the front computer desk. Julia knew that this was the girl who was known for being a slut. She also heard this Angela person got left back a couple of times. And, of course, how could Julia forget about the last rumor she heard about Angela of her stabbing her best friend multiple times since her best friend told other people she was pregnant with two possible fathers. “Lower case e,s space capital F-r-e-s-h.” Instead of typing her name, Julia looked at her partial black eye and bandaged hand. “Did you get that?” Angela asked Julia, noticing that she wasn’t typing.

“Repeat it again.” Julia listened this time and typed in Angela’s name. Julia filled out the form. “Um...the tutoring center closes in five minutes,” Julia said, not giving her eye contact.

“Damn,” Angela replied, looking up at the big white clock in the room. “What time does this place open every day?”

“It’s open at three and goes ’til five Monday through Thursday.”

“I know you guys are about to close, but I was wondering if you could help me with Spanish. I got a Spanish test tomorrow that I can’t fail. I know I should’ve been on top of my school stuff since the beginning of this year, but—”

“I can’t,” Julia automatically said.

“You don’t speak Spanish. I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have assumed you did.”

“I do, but the place is gonna close in two minutes.”

“I just need fifteen minutes of your time. Please,” Angela pleaded.

“Okay. Fifteen minutes after I close.” She didn’t want to tutor a dangerous person. “But we gotta do it outside of the library.” The library itself also closed at five o’ clock.

“Thank you so much. I’ll wait for you outside the library,” Angela told her before leaving.

“You better hope she don’t got a knife with her,” Keagan joked. “Just don’t look her straight in the eye,” he added, laughing along with the other tutors.

“Julia has to keep eye contact,” Marcela began. “How will she know if Angela’s trying to stab her?”

“She’s not gonna try to stab me,” Julia said, hoping that that really wouldn’t happen.

“That chick is crazy. She’s fighting people while she’s pregnant,” Keagan said. “Speaking of pregnant, I heard that Sal is one of the possible fathers. Who’s the other daddy?”

“Robbie,” Marcela said. Julia turned to Marcela.

“Mercedes’s Robbie?” Julia asked. It couldn’t be her best friend’s boyfriend.

“Yup. I honestly feel sorry for Mercedes. I heard Robbie’s completely in love with Angela, but she doesn’t want him,” Marcela told the whole group. “Are you going to tell Mercedes, Julia? I can’t believe Mercedes didn’t hear about this, especially since Robbie slept with Angela many times while they were together.” Julia logged off of the computer.

She didn’t really know Robbie, but she knew she needed to tell Mercedes about the disturbing news. Minus the part of Robbie being in love with another girl. And minus the part of that other girl being a violent girl. Knowing Mercedes, Julia thought that Mercedes might want to fight her.

“I’ll see ya’ll tomorrow,” Julia said picking up her belongings.

“Good luck,” Marcela said. Julia wasn’t sure if she was wishing her luck because of her being alone with Angela or about telling Mercedes what she heard.

“Stay in a crowded area just in case Angela tries something,” Keagan said, laughing. “Just scream and run if she hits you,” Keagan continued. Julia anxiously walked out of the library, hoping that Angela had gotten tired of waiting and left. As Julia walked out of the library, she saw Angela sitting on a bench with a Spanish 1 workbook out. Julia gulped.

“Hey, I started working on this,” Angela said. Julia nodded her head and sat down. The other members of Tutoring Teens came out of the library and mouthed to her Angela is crazy. Julia ignored them, hoping that Angela didn’t see them. Julia helped Angela for about twenty-five minutes. After a while, Julia forgot for a second who she was tutoring. “Thanks again,” Angela said as they both got up.

“You’re welcome.” Julia took a step away from Angela, remembering again about who she was. They walked outside the school building together to the bus stop. Julia wished she had a car so she could drive away from Angela.

“What’s your name?”

“Julia.” Angela grabbed a pack of cigarettes from her book bag and offered one to Julia. “No, thanks,” Julia said, not believing that Angela was about to smoke in front of school. Angela pulled out her lighter and lit one for herself. “Should you be smoking?” Wasn’t this girl having a baby?

“I know. I know. I’m not eighteen yet.”

“I meant should you be smoking at a time like this?”

“A time like this?” Angela asked.

“es Fresh, put that cigarette out!” Mrs. Barrington called out across the parking lot by her car.

“Yes, Ma’am!” Angela said dropping the cigarette, stomping on it, and throwing it in the garbage.

“I catch you with it again and I’ll suspend you!” Mrs. Barrington, added getting into her car.

“What’d you mean a time like this?” Angela asked. Julia finally looked at Angela. Julia was 5’4 ½” tall compared to Angela’s 5’6” height. That added to Julia’s intimidation.

“Aren’t you...,” Julia said, making hand gestures towards her own stomach.

“I’m not pregnant, Julia. You shouldn’t believe every gossip you hear.”

“My bad,” Julia replied, thankful that her best friend’s boyfriend wasn’t going to be a dad by another female. A car pulled up close to the curb.

“That’s my ride. You need a ride home? I can ask my friend to drop you off.”

“Nah, my ma’s coming to pick me up.”

“Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow,” Angela said, before hopping into Sal’s car.

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“You heard those rumors about Angela?” Julia asked Keisha in a whisper in hopes that Mercedes wouldn’t hear. Julia and Keisha waited outside the bathroom for Mercedes.

“Who didn’t?” Keisha replied. With Angela back after a two week break, various rumors swarmed around RHS about why she left for so long and why she was back. “Yo, somebody told me that Angela’s ’bout two months pregnant and she don’t know who the daddy is. She probably gotta go on Maury or something like that with about six different guys to find out who the—,” Keisha began.

“She ain’t about to have a baby,” Julia said.

“How do you know?”

“She told me she wasn’t.” Julia had already filled Keisha in about tutoring Angela.

“And you believe her?”

“I don’t know. I’m worried about Mercedes. I heard that Robbie slept with Angela while he was with Mercedes.”

“For real? You gonna tell her?” Keisha asked.

“She don’t gotta tell me nothing,” Mercedes said, coming out of the bathroom with a hurt look on her face.

“You heard the rumors, too?” Keisha asked.

“First of all, Keisha, you suck at whispering.” Keisha’s whispering sounded like a normal person’s voice and her normal voice sounded like she was yelling. “And, secondly, it’s all over school,” Mercedes said, walking between them.

“You think Robbie really did it with her?” Julia asked. Mercedes shrugged her shoulders. It wasn’t a far stretch to believe that other females were or had been interested or infatuated with Robbie. She just wasn’t sure if Robbie ever did anything with other girls or not while she was with him.

“I don’t wanna talk about it,” Mercedes said to them. “I’m gonna go to homeroom.”

“This early?” Julia asked. Mercedes nodded her head.

“See you at lunch?” Keisha asked.

“I don’t know,” Mercedes replied. After saying bye, Mercedes went to her homeroom. After homeroom, she walked out at a fast pace, hoping that Robbie wouldn’t find her. Feeling some people staring at her, she walked faster as her ears burned.

“Robbie’s girlfriend, right?” Jackie, a junior cheerleader asked with a couple of other cheerleaders behind her.

“Yeah,” Mercedes replied, wondering why those cheerleaders stopped her on the way to first period.

“We heard about Robbie constantly sleeping with that slut Angela while the two of you were together,” Jackie began. “And we’re sorry that Robbie’s the father of the whore’s unborn baby,” she added.

“There is no baby,” Mercedes insisted, upset.

“Is that what he told you?”

“Leave me alone. I don’t even know you,” Mercedes replied, about to walk away from them.

“Chill out. Just know that we hate Angela as much as you do,” Jackie said before leaving with her cheer buddies. Mercedes turned the corner and went to the bathroom right as the first period bell rang. If that was a preview of how that day was going to be, she didn’t want to continue with it. She had a biology and geometry test that day, but she didn’t want to go around school with people feeling sorry for her.

With nobody in the bathroom, Mercedes walked out the door of the bathroom that led to the outdoor woods. She ran as her heart tried to keep up with her speed. Robbie was supposed to be her boyfriend. Hers alone. Mercedes ceased running and took a deep breath. Who was this person she was falling for? Did she really know Robbie as much as she thought she did? Her cell phone vibrated. She opened her flip phone and read the text message from Robbie.

“Not going to school today. See you tomorrow, beautiful,” Mercedes read out loud, thinking about how many girls he called beautiful.

\*\*\*

"What movie do you want to watch?" Amanda asked Julio. He invited her over in the afternoon. Earlier that day he brought a couple of DVDs downstairs for them to watch.

"I got “Bad Boys,” “The Simpson's,” and “The Pirates of the Caribbean," Julio replied, picking up the DVDs by the television downstairs.

"I bought "The Wedding Planner," Amanda said, hoping he would rather watch a romantic comedy.

"I don't wanna see a chick flick." He went over to the DVD player. Amanda looked around the room. Amanda secretly stuck up her nose at Julio's home. She couldn't understand how someone could live in such small spaces. Julio's house was very small, especially compared to the large mansion she lived in. If she had known his house was that small, she would've suggested watching a flick at the petite movie theater at her home.

"Fine. Let's watch Pirates." She took a seat on the two-seat couch. At least that movie had the gorgeous Orlando Bloom. Julio put the movie into the DVD player and pressed play. Julio sat down on the opposite side of the couch from her. Already having seen the movie, Amanda glanced at Julio every once in a while; however, Julio kept his eyes glued to the TV screen.

"I'm glad you invited me." Amanda slyly moved closer to him. Julio finally took his eyes away from the TV and looked over at Amanda. She wore a pink cashmere sweater with khaki skirt and black stockings with light brown loafers.

"I'm glad you came." Seeing that they were far apart, he nervously smiled while he moved closer to her. There was still a gap between them. "You look pretty." Amanda smiled and leaned close to him.

"Thanks." She took the initiative to come closer to him. They looked at each other. Amanda waited for him to make a move.

*BOOM!* the sound effects screamed. Julio turned his head to the TV. It was his favorite part of the movie. Amanda turned to the TV during one of the action scenes. For the rest of the movie, Julio gave it all of his attention. Julio folded his arms across his chest.

Amanda rolled her eyes and leaned back on the couch with her legs crossed. The front door opened and in walked Gloria and Julia through the kitchen. They both went to the living area where Julio and Amanda were watching the movie.

"Hello," Gloria said, looking into the living area. Julio got up and kissed his mother.

"Mama, this is my friend—," Julio began.

"Amanda Elisabeth Prescott," Amanda responded, getting up and holding out her hand. Gloria shook her hand.

"This is my mom and that's my twin sister Juliana. You probably saw her in school," Julio added.

"It's nice to meet you," Amanda said, looking at Julia. She had seen Julia before, hanging out with Julio's ex-girlfriend.



"You, too," Julia said before leaving the living area.

"Well, I'll leave you two alone," Gloria said, leaving too. Amanda remained standing.

"I'm going to leave now," Amanda said, since his mother and sister were home.

"Already?"

"Yes. I'm going over to Marcela's house. She lives a block away from here." Amanda walked towards the door. Julio followed her to the door. She opened the door. "I'll see you at school," she said.

"Amanda," Julio said, turning her around.

"Yes." Julio came closer to her and gave her a peck on her lips.

"I'll see you later," he said at a smiling Amanda.

\*\*\*

Mercedes knocked on Robbie's front door. It was a little after five. She stayed in the woods for most of the school day. While there, she mustered the courage to just confront Robbie about the rumors. She had to get to the bottom of it before it drove her insane. To her surprise, an older woman opened the door.

"Hi, is uh... Robbie there?" Mercedes asked, looking at the woman. She had on one of Robbie's sweaters over barely visible short shorts.

"Who are you?"

"His girl. It's good to meet you. I didn't know Robbie had a sister."

"I'm not his sister."

"Cousin?"

"We're not related," she replied, coming outside and closing the door. "Are you sure you're Robbie's girlfriend?"

"Of course I'm sure," Mercedes replied. Was this girl going out with Robbie also?

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

"Robbie's already seventeen."

"I'm gonna be sixteen soon."

"Don't you think Robbie is a little too old for you?"

"No," Mercedes quickly responded. "He's only two more years older than me. Hell, less than two"

"Two years. That's two more years of experience he has...you know."

"What are you trying to say?" Mercedes asked feeling her nose flare out in anger.

"What I'm trying to say is Robbie's probably more sexually mature than you, so why don't you back off?" Was she talking from firsthand experience?

"I—" Mercedes began. The door opened to Robbie. He stepped out.

"Why didn't you tell me there was somebody at the door?" Robbie asked the female.

"I was going to," she said.

"Mercedes, Maria. Maria, Mercedes," Robbie said. Mercedes waited for him to say who Maria was to him and for him to tell Maria who she was to him. "I'm low on what I was drinking earlier today, so go buy me some more." He handed Maria a twenty. Maria kissed his cheek while she slipped her hands in his pocket, taking out his keys. What was this? Was he not going to push her off?

"See you later, baby," Maria flirtatiously said to him going over to the car. Mercedes rolled her eyes. He was looking guiltier by the second.

"Come inside with me," Robbie said, opening the door. They went inside. Robbie picked up a half-empty bottle of beer and sipped on it. Mercedes crossed her arms, feeling ill at ease with him drinking. "How was school?" He sat on the edge of the couch.

"I went today, but left after I heard people talking."

"About what?"

"About you having sex with Angela." Robbie placed the bottle on top of his lap. "So you did have sex with her," Mercedes accused, after he didn't reply.

"Yup," he responded, taking another sip from his beer. Mercedes stared at him with bewilderment. This was not the same guy that got her knees weak with one touch. "But, we had sex once and that was when we were talking, not when we became exclusive."

"Like that makes it better," Mercedes finally said, walking towards the door.

"Mercedes," Robbie said. He got up and grabbed her arm "Let me explain."

“No!” She pulled her arm away from him. “For all I know, you probably got that ho knocked up!” she exclaimed as her nostrils flared.

“I didn’t get her knocked up!” he yelled.

“I don’t care if you did or didn’t! I don’t want nothing to do with you.”

“Then go,” Robbie said, pointing to the door. “Maybe if you pleased me, I wouldn’t have slept with her.”

“I’m glad I didn’t please you ‘cause I don’t know where your ass has been,” Mercedes snarled. Mercedes gasped after he backslapped her.

**\*\*\*Chapter 8\*\*\***

*“... bridges will burn, but true friends remain.”*

Eddie put his arm around Julia and kissed her cheek.

“Eddie!” Julia exclaimed, hoping that nobody saw them. They had stayed on the low since their conversation. Eddie met up with her after homeroom.

“What? Julia, come on, it’s been long enough. Silesia’s over it. I don’t wanna hide being with you,” Eddie said, letting go of her.

“Me neither, but—”

“But what? You playing games, Julia.” She wasn’t playing games. She just hadn’t told Dev about her going back with Eddie yet.

“I’m not. See.” She put her small hand into his larger hand. It felt good to hold his hand once again.

“I got a home game today. You coming?” he asked, walking her to her first period. Eddie was super athletic, being on varsity football, varsity basketball, and track. It was now basketball season. “It starts around seven.”

“I’ll try to come.”

“You gonna be busy later?”

“Beta Club is volunteering around 6:30.”

“Get out of it and come support your man.”

“I’m not gonna get out of nothing. You never got out of anything when we was going out before to come see me play.” Before, Julia would put things on the backburner to support Eddie; however, he didn’t usually return the favor.

“Don’t bring up the past. I’m a changed man.”

“If you are, then you should understand that I can’t drop everything to cater to you.”

“Silesia would,” he mumbled.

“Excuse me?” she asked, dropping his hand. She couldn’t believe he had just brought up his ex.

“Nothing.”

“Whatever, Eddie,” she said leaving him to go to her next class.

\*\*\*

Julio went over to Mercedes who was by her locker.

“Hey, Julio,” she said with a weak smile. She shut her locker.

“Hey. Sorry I didn’t call you.” He never called her the day he said he would.

“That’s my line,” she joked, zipping up her book bag.

“Yeah,” he laughed. “I didn’t call ‘cause I didn’t know if you wanted to talk to me. I wasn’t gonna talk about getting back together. I just wanted to talk about being friends. I know it’s a cliché, but we’ve been friends since we were ten.”

“Nine.”

“What?”

“We’ve been friends since we were nine. You and Julia moved from the Bronx when ya’ll was nine, and me and Julz clicked right away. Then we started to be friends.”

“And you were my first kiss.”

“As you were mine,” she replied, smiling at him. They shared their first kiss when they were eleven at a day camp. “You’re right. We should still be friends, J.”

“Cool. Hug?” He opened up his arms. Mercedes hugged him. “I’ll call you tonight.”

“If you don’t, I’ll call,” she responded.

\*\*\*

“Angela,” Robbie said after opening his front door on a Saturday afternoon. “Come in.” Angela followed him to the couch.

“I haven’t seen you in school since Monday,” Angela said.

“Does it matter?” He took a seat on the couch.

“It does. Have you been avoiding school ‘cause of the rumors?”

“About us? And you being pregnant? Are you?”

“No. We were careful.” Robbie sighed in relief. “I wanted to apologize for that Saturday afternoon. I knew that you and that girl—”

“We weren’t official.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered. I still would’ve done it,” she admitted. If she was going to change, she needed to acknowledge her faults.

“What’s done is done.”

“Not necessarily.” She took a seat beside him. “I’ve done things in my past that I’m not proud of. I wanna take those things back, but—I want to change, Robbie. I’ve been trying to since I got out of rehab when I was fifteen. There’s always that moment before a person makes a choice, and at that moment, a person can do what they think is right or—”

“Do what they always did before, even though they know it’s wrong.”

“I always seem to repeat history.”

“I feel the same way sometimes. Trapped in the past.”

“But, Robbie, we don’t have to let what you or me did back then bind us,” she said, taking his hand. “That’s why I came here. I want to make sure I didn’t mess up your relationship with your girlfriend. If I did, I want to fix it.”

“Thanks, but there’s nothing to be fixed. She found out and broke up with me.” He let go of her hands.

“Are you gonna get her back?”

“No.”

“Robbie! You don’t let a girl you’re crazy about get away.”

“I’m not crazy about her.”

“Whether you want to admit it or not, I know you are. I was there last year with my ex.”

“J-Ryde?”

“How’d you know?”

“I saw the tat on your back that Saturday we—”

“Oh,” she cut in. “J-Ryde is my ex’s nickname. His real name is Jesse. Jesse Ryder,” she added. Angela had a tattoo of his nickname in cursive on her right shoulder blade. “I’m gonna cover it up with another tattoo when I get some money or something. It’s true what they say about never getting a tattoo of your boyfriend’s name. But, back to you getting her back,” she said, obviously not wanting to talk about Jesse.

“Angela, even if I tried to get her back, she wouldn’t want to.”

“It was a mistake.”

“It wasn’t a mistake. I knew what I was doing.”

“Don’t beat yourself over it.” Angela looked down at the clock on her cell phone. “I gotta go to work. I’ll see you Monday?”

“Yeah,” he responded. “Angela, don’t meddle in it. Maybe Mercedes and I just aren’t meant to be.”

“If that’s what you want, I won’t, but think about what I said.” She gave him a kiss on the cheek before exiting his house.

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Julia sank into her seat in the back of the church on Sunday morning.

“Juliana, we’re too far away. I want to sit closer,” Gloria said to Julia.

“Ma, you got me to go to this church. What more do you want?” Julia replied. Gloria rolled her eyes and sat down next to her. Julio sat down at the end of the row. After the announcements were made, the worship team got on stage to play. Julia sat up on her seat when she heard an upbeat tempo.

“Our God is an awesome God. He reigns on heaven and earth with wisdom, power and strength. Our God is an awesome God,” the worship team sang to Kirk Franklin’s “He Reigns”. Julia looked at the front stage in confusion. Was she in the right church? After glancing at the other faces around her, she realized that she wasn’t the only one surprised by the change.

Even the pastor and Mr. and Mrs. White were caught off guard. Little by little, people stood up and started to clap. Gloria jumped up from her seat and began to praise Jesus. Julia and Julio stood up and started to sing along. Once the song was over and most of the congregation clapped, Ebony took the microphone.

“As some of you might know, a couple of weeks ago, a member of the worship team was kicked off the team for praising God outside in front of the church,” Ebony began. “With her and her friends, she brought fresh and young energy to the church. And we don’t understand why she was kicked out for voicing her opinion of playing more of a variety of music during worship. So, if our own Pastor Reynolds is going to kick her off, then he can kick us all off.”

The congregation began to chat about what was going on and why the pastor did what he did. Ebony got off the stage, with the worship team following her over to where Julia was. Julia

began to blush as people turned to where she and her family were sitting. They all now knew that she was the one who was outed.

“Ladies, gentlemen,” Pastor Reynolds started as he quickly got on the stage. His face was slightly red. “That’s not what happened. I didn’t kick her out for that. I did because she—.”

“Boooo!” a person yelled out loud. “What’d she do to you?”

“Let her back on!” Gloria began. Several people began to chant Gloria’s words. Julia glanced around. She had never had this much support.

“Okay! She can come back,” Pastor Reynolds said in defeat.

“And?” another person called out.

“And we’ll start playing more of a variety of songs,” he replied through his teeth. Julia smiled, realizing that most of the churchgoers weren’t as bad as she thought they were.

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Mercedez walked into the hospital room she hated coming to. Her brother had dropped her off that Sunday after church. There Mercedez’s mother was, lying with tubes up her nose and other wires attached to various parts of her body. Those wires and tubes helped her breath, eat, and basically live. Mercedez sat down on the chair that was beside her mother. Her mother’s hair was lighter than Mercedez. However, it had gotten darker since she was hospitalized. Her mother being hospitalized drastically affected the way she looked. Her hair was now cut short to about underneath her chin. She also had gained about 25 to 30 pounds since she was in there.

“I’m sixteen today,” Mercedez told her mother. “But my birthday’s not the same with you being in a...” Although several months passed since her mother slipped into a coma, Mercedez still couldn’t bring herself to say it out loud. “I thought with age, things would get less confusing. Was I wrong,” Mercedez added, thinking about Robbie hitting her. “After I broke up with Julio, I met a guy and we started dating. Mommy, I was falling for him. Then I found out something he did and realized he wasn’t who I thought he was. And when I confronted him about it...” Yet another thing she couldn’t bring to words: her boyfriend put his hands on her. “Anyways, I just wanted to say that I love you and—,” Mercedez started, but stopped when the door opened.

“Hi, Mercedez,” Rene`, a nurse, said coming into the room.

“Hi. I wasn’t talking to her,” Mercedez said, getting up from her chair.

“It’s okay if you were.” Rene` began to replace the IV fluids. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of talking to somebody in a coma.”



“Not if the person’s been in that state for that long. Rene`, it’s gonna be a year in a month. I’m crazy for talking to her. She can’t hear me,” Mercedes continued. It was frustrating talking to someone she loved who couldn’t respond back.

“She can.”

“No, she can’t. Maybe some of the doctors are right. We should just pull the plug and let her—”

“Don’t talk like that. There are cases where individuals wake up from being in a coma for more than a year.”

“Not many. I checked.”

“You got to have faith, Mercedes.”

“I tried faith. It didn’t work,” Mercedes said, grabbing her purse from the chair. “I gotta go home.”

\*\*\*

“SURPRISE!” people exclaimed when Mercedes walked into her house. Inside were her family and friends, along with finger foods and other light types of food and gifts nearby. Christmas carols were playing on the stereo.

“Happy birthday, little sister,” Nick, her older brother, said beside her. He had driven her home from the hospital.

“Happy birthday, honey!” Barbra exclaimed, coming over to her and giving her a half hug. Barbra’s large belly prevented her from giving her a proper hug. She placed a party hat on top of Mercedes’s head. Although the hats were super cheesy, she kept it on her head. Mercedes and Nick took off their winter coats.

“Wait, let me get a picture of the three of you,” Gloria said, picking up her camera. Gloria snapped a picture of Nick, Mercedes, and Barbra. “Now one with the siblings.” She snapped the picture. “Now one with Barbra and Mercedes.” Barbra put her arm around Mercedes’s shoulder. Mercedes forced a smile at the camera as Gloria took the picture.

“I hope you didn’t mind us throwing a little party for your birthday,” Barbra said after the pictures were taken.

“I don’t mind. Thanks,” Mercedes replied, still a bit surprised about the party.

“Well, go have fun with your friends. Your father will be here later with the cake. He’s working a little late tonight.” Mercedes left her and went over to Keisha and Julia. Julio, Dev, and Keagan also were there.

“Happy b-day!” Julia and Keisha told her.

“Thanks,” Mercedesz replied, giving them a hug. “I can’t believe ya’ll was actually able to not say nothing to me.”

“Well, you know!” Julia said. “You seemed down lately and with you and Robbie breaking up,” Julia began. Mercedesz told her friends about the breakup, but didn’t tell them about Robbie hitting her. “We wanted to cheer you up. It was actually Barbra’s idea.”

“Really?” Mercedesz asked. Even though Mercedesz didn’t mind Barbra as much since they went out to the doctor’s appointment and shopping afterwards, she never thought that her stepmother would throw her a surprise party.

“Look at the mothers. Just like old times,” Julia said. Barbra, Keisha’s mother, and Gloria chatted in the corner by the decorated Christmas tree as if they’d been best friends forever. Mercedesz looked away from them. That used to be her mother in Barbra’s place. She tried to brush her feelings of resentment towards Barbra. At least throughout the party she threw for her. The boys came over to the girls and all greeted Mercedesz. After they talked as a group, they broke up. Julia nudged Dev.

“What’s up?” Dev asked.

“Can we talk?” Julia asked him. She needed to tell him in person that she was back with Eddie, even though he probably seen them at school holding hands. Dev nodded his head. They walked over to a quiet area. “I’m back with Eddie, and my bad for leading you on and for not telling you about Eddie sooner.”

“It’s fine,” he replied, taking a bite out of one of the Jamaican beef patties that Keisha’s mother had made. She wasn’t convinced.

“We’re still gonna be friends, right?”

“Of course.”

“Good. We’re better as friends.”

“I agree,” Dev said with a half-smile.

Mercedesz went over to the table and picked up a party hat and went over to Julio who was munching on the fried plantains that Gloria cooked.

“Too pretty to be rocking a hat?” she questioned, holding up the hat. Most of the teens had on party hats.

“The hair is,” Julio replied, grinning and touching his spiked hair. “But for you, I’ll wear it.” He lowered his head so Mercedesz could put the hat on for him.

“Tell your hair I said sorry,” she joked.

“Will do.” Julio gazed at Mercedes. “You look really pretty.”

“Julio...,” Mercedes started. She didn’t want to hear she was pretty. It just reminded her of Robbie and him always complimenting her.

“Just friends. I understand.” He put the rest of the fried plantain in his mouth.

“Yo, it’s snowing outside!” Keisha exclaimed. The teens crowded by the window to see the snow. It was the first time the snow had fallen that year.

“Hopefully it’s enough to cancel school tomorrow,” Keagan said.

“The news said it’s only gonna snow three inches,” Julia piped in.

“Thanks for ruining our hopes, Juliana,” Julio said. Mercedes glanced out the window as the snow fell to the ground. She wished it would snow more than the weatherman predicted. She had a feeling that Robbie would be back from his four days away from school.

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"I'm sorry," Robbie said, holding up the flower. Mercedes was walking to one of her classes. It had been six days since he slapped her.

"Okay," she said, walking away, tightly holding her book bag handles.

"Mercedes, I never meant to lay a hand on you," he said, keeping up with her and speaking in a low voice.

"Then why did you?" She continued to walk.

"It wasn't me. I drank a little too much." Mercedes stopped at her locker.

“Is that your excuse?” She opened her locker.

“No. I—” Mercedes turned away from her locker to him.

"Robbie, I'm done with whatever we had ... so do what you did for the past six days and don't call." Robbie stood there for a minute. Mercedes ignored him as she put the notebooks back in her book bag and pulled the ones she needed. Robbie eventually left. She watched him walk away. After he was out of her sight, she closed her locker.

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“Julia,” Angela said by the front desk of the library. Julia looked up from the Internet where she was searching musicians from the seventies and sixties. “Can you tutor me?” she asked. “These

other tutors are driving me crazy.” Since Angela’s first visit, she came about two to three times a week to get help. During that whole time, Julia avoided tutoring her by helping out at the front desk.

“I would, but I gotta watch the front desk,” Julia replied.

“If I ask one of them to switch with you, will you help me out?” Julia reluctantly nodded her head knowing that the three other tutors would fight over managing the front desk since at the front desk there was the Internet and they didn’t have to tutor anybody. “Thanks.”

Angela went over to Keagan to ask him. After he agreed, Julia walked over to where Angela had her books on the table next to another less frequent tutor who was helping out a freshman. The library was more packed due to the upcoming midterm exams before the winter break. Angela took out her Algebra 1 book before Julia began to explain how to do the problems. “Oh, I get it,” Angela said after Julia demonstrated how to FOIL and multiple more than two parentheses.

“Stop!” a girl a couple of tables away from Julia said while giggling, obviously sounding like she wanted whoever to continue whatever they were doing to her. “Seriously, baby, they’re gonna kick us out,” she added, just as loud with as much enthusiasm in her voice. Angela rolled her eyes, realizing who the annoying girl was and who she was with.

“Nobody’s gonna be mad if you just leave,” Angela said loud enough for Jackie to hear.

“What’d you say?” Jackie asked. She got up from her seat hand in hand with Sal. Angela found out about them dating the week after she came back.

“I think you heard me. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m trying to do my work,” Angela replied, refusing to look at Sal. They were never a couple, but she didn’t like seeing him with a girl who hated her especially since she liked being in an open relationship with.

“If you have something to say to me, whore, say it to my face, not when I’m tables away from you.”

“Just ignore her,” Julia said to Angela. There didn’t need to be any drama during one of the busier days of after-school tutoring.

“I said,” Angela began, not listening to Julia as she stood up to be on the same level as Jackie. “If you’re gonna be an ass to people who are trying to study, go.”

“Do you think you’re tough just ‘cause you stabbed somebody?” Jackie sarcastically asked, loud enough for people to turn their attention to them.

“Think what you want to think.” Angela took a seat. There was no point in making a scene. As far as she was concerned, she was done arguing with Jackie. She turned back to her Algebra. “Is this answer right?”

“It—,” Julia began.

“I’m not done talking to you!” Jackie snapped, crossing her arms.

“I am, so walk away from me,” Angela said.

“You can’t tell me what to do.”

“Then stand there and look like an ass.”

“You’re so lucky I can’t afford to get suspended, you sleazy trailer park trash,” Jackie retorted.

“Come on, Sal,” she added as she angrily took her belongings and left the library. Sal waited for her to leave before he spoke. Julia pointed to the problem that they were working on, thankful that Jackie left the area.

“And to think, you two used to be friends,” Sal said to Angela.

“We were never friends,” Angela replied. They might have hung out when Angela was a cheerleader during her freshman year of high school and in the beginning of her first time around her sophomore year, but they were never buddies.

“Do you think that way about Rachel, too?”

“Why do you care?” Angela didn’t want to bring up Rachel. She regretted stabbing her. From what she heard, Rachel was okay and had been out of the hospital about two days after the stab, and she also heard that Rachel supposedly switched schools and quit her job. She was glad that Rachel was okay, but still wanted nothing to do with her.

“You know I care about you.”

“Well said, Sal. Especially while you’re hand in hand with her.”

“That could’ve been you if you weren’t—”

“If I wasn’t what?”

“You know what, Angela, it doesn’t matter. I don’t think anybody matters to you.”

“You’re wrong about that.”

“Really? You got a bad habit of burning bridges. It’s no surprise you have no friends,” he added before leaving. No friends. Angela stared down at the page. Sal was right, she had no friends. Not even Rachel.

“Um... do you wanna keep working on this problem?” Julia asked. “You messed up here,” Julia added, pointing to one step of the problem.

“It’s okay. I’m gonna go,” she added, sounding down. She piled up her school work.

“Angela, you shouldn’t stop ‘cause of what they said,” Julia said, feeling sorry for her. Julia knew she probably would have gone crazy if people were against her like they were against Angela.

“He’s right, Julia.” Angela put her book bag on. “Thanks for the help,” she said before exiting the library.

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Gloria slapped Julio’s hand away from the fried pork grinds.

“Wait until your guests come,” Gloria said.

“It’s Christmas, Mama. You should be in a giving mood,” Julio replied, picking up a piece and eating. That year for Christmas, Gloria decided to invite Amanda and Eddie for dinner.

“Brush your teeth before your friend comes,” Gloria replied, squeezing his cheeks.

“Mama!” he exclaimed, pulling away from her in a grin.

“Ma, promise you’ll be nice to Eddie,” Julia said, coming down to the kitchen.

“Yes. I promise, Juliana. I told you that already.”

“And please don’t ask him anything about why he broke up with me.”

“I can’t promise that.” Gloria turned on the mini stereo on the radio. “Where Are You Christmas” by Faith Hill was playing.

“Ma—” The doorbell rang. “I’ll get it,” Julia said, hoping that it was Eddie. She rushed to the door. She hurriedly checked herself in the mirror by the door before she opened it. “Amanda, come in,” Julia said disappointingly. They all greeted each other and exchanged gifts. They all said their thanks for the gifts and waited for Eddie to come. The doorbell rang.

“Finally,” Julia said, getting up from the couch. She opened the door for Eddie. He kissed her on the cheek. “You’re late. Way to beat the stereotype.”

“Merry Christmas to you, too,” he said, stepping inside. They all went to the table and held hands as Gloria prayed.

“Dear God, you’re the reason for the season. This day is not about the gifts that are given or received, but about the celebration of our wonderful Savior Jesus Christ. With that said, Lord, I pray that you’ll bless this food and this time we have together,” Gloria prayed. “Amen.” They all sat down at the table.

“Lovely table, Ms. Rodriguez,” Amanda complimented. The table cloth was red with embroidered flowers. The napkins were green along with the burgundy plates and silver eating utensils.

“Thank you. It’s Mrs. Rodriguez,” Gloria corrected.

“Sorry.” Amanda assumed that she was a single mother since she never had seen Julio’s father or heard Julio talk about him.

“It’s okay. Sometimes I feel like I was never married- anyways, are you guys boyfriend and girlfriend?” Gloria passed a plate of rice and beans to Julia.

“Are we?” Julio asked Amanda, who was sitting right next to him.

“You tell me,” Amanda replied, taking a small bite out of the fried plantain. She wasn’t used to eating Caribbean food.

“We know we’re going out. Right, Julia,” Eddie said giving Julia a high five.

“Why did you break up with Juliana in the first place?” Gloria questioned.

“Ma! You promised!” Julia exclaimed. She preferred it if her mother didn’t put Eddie on the spot. She hoped that her mother and Eddie would get along. In the past, they got along okay.

“It’s okay, Julia,” Eddie said after he swallowed a piece of Haitian beef patty that his mother cooked for him to bring over. “I was stupid then. I had to break up with her to realize how much I wanted her in my life.”

“And I said yes to giving him another chance,” Julia said.

“I hope you don’t break my daughter’s heart again,” Gloria warned.

“I won’t. We’re meant for each other,” he said.

“Pookie,” Julia said, taking his hand. He gazed at her and winked. She felt warm. She loved the way it made her feel when he looked at her. “We are meant to be together,” she said, kissing him.

“Not at the table,” Gloria said.

“Sorry,” Julia replied, going back to her potato salad. Amanda stared at Julia and Eddie. That was how she would have liked her and Julio to be some day.

“Mrs. Rodriguez, your food is banging as usual,” Eddie complimented. Unlike Amanda, Eddie enjoyed all the food and was on his second plate.

“Thanks,” she replied, grateful that he appreciated the same food that she cooked. “I hope I didn’t pry the two of you from your families today,” Gloria said to Eddie and Amanda before taking a bite out of the baked sweet potato.

“Nah, it’s all good. I was with my family this morning ’til I got here. And I’ma be back there after,” Eddie replied.

“Well, I’m not missing much at home. My mother’s in Santa Barbara with her friends. My father’s working on a murder trial,” Amanda started. “And my siblings are at my grandparents’ house in upstate New York. I decided to stay put this holiday season.” Amanda was the only one at her house. Her house maid, Isabel, was away for vacation until the second of January.

“Is your dad a lawyer?” Julio asked, chewing on more pork grinds.

“Yes, he works at and owns part of the Prescott Law Firm,” Amanda responded, poking at the rice and beans on her plate.

“I’ve seen commercials for them. I didn’t know you was related to the people who started it,” Julia said. Commercials for Prescott Law Firm came on every once in a while on TV and the radio.

“I did,” Eddie began. “They’re my family’s lawyer.”

“Ya’ll two know each other?” Julia asked.

“Yes. He’s also next door neighbors with my good friend, Madison,” Amanda replied.

“And Amanda used to go to the same school as my little sister,” Eddie added. “At St. Rose.”

“Why don’t you go there anymore?” Julio asked.

“I wanted to try public school,” Amanda lied. They didn’t need to know why she switched schools. She didn’t need anyone passing judgment on her. She only did what she did to get kicked out of St. Rose out of all of the pressure. At the end of the day, she was happy to be at RHS than the academically pressured all girls private school.

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After leaning her BMX bike inside the park, Mercedes put her hands in her black North Face coat. It was a couple of days away from New Year’s Eve. Although it was both cold and windy, she opted to not wear her hoodie over her head. It took her about an hour just to straighten her wavy hair. She waited by the side of the basketball courts. When Robbie spotted her on the opposite side, he jogged over. He had on a grey skullie with a faded blue Nike long



sleeve shirt and black shorts. As he came closer, her body got warmer and her hands got sweatier. She pulled her hands out of her pockets and rubbed them against her denim jeans. She hoped she wouldn't sweat so much that her makeup would run. Thankfully, she didn't.

"Thanks for coming." Robbie's cheeks were pinkish from the cold. He caught his breath before he said anything else. Mercedes nodded her head as she leaned back against the tall wired fence. Mercedes looked over to the game of one-on-one that was being played. It seemed as if it was a son and father playing against each other. "I'd tell you I'm sorry again but that's not what you wanna hear. I didn't mean to hit you. I don't want us to end." The son faked a jump shot. The father jumped to block his son's fake shot. With that the son went to the hoop for a layup.

"Mercedes?"

"What do you want me to say?" she asked, focusing back on him. "You put your hand on me and you think we should get back together? Come on. Be for real."

"I know you're mad—"

"You damn right I'm mad," she interrupted. "You just don't get it. It's more than that. You walk around thinking you can get with any girl. How many girls have you been with since we been together?"

"None. I slept with Angela once while we were talking, not when we were together."

"And Maria? She's probably pleasing you whenever you wanna get some, especially since I didn't give it up to you."

"Maria is just staying with me since she doesn't have a place to live. And I don't see you like that. Look, what I'm trying to say is that you're not like any girl I've been with. You're special to me and—"

"Stop running these games, Robbie!" she exclaimed, throwing her hands in the air as her nose flared.

"I'm not!" A few of the people who were walking around looked over to their argument. "Why do you think I called you back? If it was some other girl I wouldn't have called," he said, lowering his voice. Mercedes's attention went back to the game that was going on. The father jumped for the rebound and took the ball back to the three-point line and took a shot. "Mercedes, just give me another shot. I promise I won't hurt you again." Although she heard what he said, she did not look at him. "Please," Robbie added, shifting his body in front of where she was looking at the game.

"Fine. But, don't do it again," she added, glaring at him.

**\*\*\*Chapter 9\*\*\***

*“... ah, the infamous l word.”*

“Done?” Mercedes asked Robbie, getting up from the floor where she sat waiting for him to finish his after-school detention for skipping school. It was the first day of school from winter break. Robbie nodded his head. “You okay?” she asked.

“I’m okay. Now that I got you,” he responded, looking into her light green eyes.

“I’m glad we’re back together.” She placed her arms on top of his shoulders. “I tried to forget you, but I couldn’t. Robbie, I love you,” she whispered in his ear. Her heart began to beat fast as she waited for his response. Although they had hit a bump in their relationship, she was ready to move forward with him. “But, I understand if you don’t feel the same way,” she added, pulling away from him.

“I do. I love you, too, Mercedes. And I’m really sorry,” he added with his eyes on the floor.

“I know. Let’s forget about it,” she said, lifting up his head and gazing into his eyes. “I’m serious, Robbie. I’m not gonna hold it against you.”

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Julia voluntarily sat down at the computer seat right next to Angela in the library.

“Hi, Angela,” Julia said, logging into the computer. She wouldn’t normally have walked up to say what’s up to Angela, but she felt bad about what Sal said about her having no friends.

“Hey, Julia,” Angela replied. Angela continued to type her paper on the importance of the setting of the novel *To Kill a Mocking Bird* that was due in a week.

“How was your break?” Julia went onto the Yahoo search engine.

“Calmer than usual. Yours’?”

“It was good. My ma and boyfriend got along.” Julia put down artists of the seventies and sixties into the search box. “So what—”

“Are you just talking to me because of what Sal said about me not having any friends?”

“No. I uh—”

“Don’t feel sorry for me, Julia.”

“My bad.” Angela continued to type her paper. “I’m looking for a song ‘cause I gotta play at the retirement home next month.”

“Julia, I thought I said don’t talk to me ‘cause of what Sal said.”

“Sheesh. I’m just making conversation with the person next to me, which happens to be you. Someone’s intense,” Julia joked, hoping that Angela would lighten up.

“I’m not intense.”

“If you say so.”

“What song are you looking for?” Angela asked as she stopped typing.

“My boss wants me to play a song from the sixties or seventies, but the sixties is mad old. So, I’mma find a song from the seventies,” Julia said, satisfied that Angela had loosened up.

“I know Jimi Hendrix, Queen, Kiss, The Rolling Stones. Just to name a few,” Angela told Julia.

“I see you digging music from back then.”

“I didn’t always. My ex, Jesse, was obsessed with that genre of music so much that it rubbed off on me. Don’t laugh, but I’m more into classical,” Angela admitted.

“Nothing to be ashamed of,” Julia said smiling. “I love music of the eighties. Even the super long dance ones.”

“I never got into eighties music. Do you play any instruments?”

“The guitar and a little bit of the drums. You?”

“The piano. I don’t really get a chance to play it a lot, but I still remember some of the songs that my dad taught me how to play. That’s how I got into classical music.”

“Seriously? I didn’t know you knew how to play the piano.”

“There’s more to me than the rumors.”

“True.” Maybe there was a whole side of Angela that few people cared to find out about. Julia had a feeling that she would soon find out the other side of Angela.

“If you want, I can help you find a good song.”

“That’s what’s up.”

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Mercedes elbowed Julia. Julia looked up from her chemistry packet.

“You at your man’s game and you’re doing homework,” Mercedes said. They were both at a home varsity basketball game against Riverside High School.

“I can do both,” Julia replied, glancing up at the scoreboard. Riverside was up by 25 points.

“Overachiever,” Mercedes, said watching the game. She envied the players. She decided not to try out for basketball that year. If she had tried out, she would’ve been at an away basketball along with Keisha. When a time out was called, Mercedes looked by the door and saw Robbie. Mercedes sat up straight and quickly put on lip gloss. “Am I good?” she asked Julia. Julia looked at her and nodded her head. “Thanks.” Waiting for Robbie to come over, she thought about Robbie and Angela. “You’re my best friend, right?” Robbie was across the gym. Mercedes waved her hand for him to see. He saw and walked over to her.

“Of course.” Julia wrote out the different names of the compounds.

“Then why are you hanging out with Angela after you know what she did to me?”

“I don’t hang out with her. I only tutor her,” Julia replied, looking at Mercedes.

“Since when do you tutor people during lunch? Last time I checked, you only tutor after school.” Since Julia agreed to Angela’s help, Julia went to the library sometimes to meet up with her to discuss the song Julia would play for the retirement home. Besides the song choice, they chatted about other genres of music.

“Cedez, don’t worry. Me and Angela ain’t friends. She’s just helping me pick a song for the retirement home. She knows a lot about the type of music that my boss wants me to play.”

“Whatever. I ain’t telling you who to be friends with, but if I was you, I wouldn’t keep her nowhere near my man. We all know that chick’s been around the block and back,” Mercedes told Julia right before Robbie made it up to the bleachers where they were. Robbie gave Mercedes a kiss and Julia a nod. Julia returned the nod. Julia couldn’t see why Mercedes would get back with Robbie after he admitted to the accusations, but she was not about to say anything to her. She went back to her chemistry packet.

“Vic’s having a party this Friday. You wanna come?” Robbie asked.

“Is it a drinking party?” Mercedes asked, holding his hand.

“Probably, but I promise I won’t drink if you come.”

“Then I’ll come. But ,papi, when are we gonna do something with just the two of us?”

“Soon,” he replied, smiling as they kissed.

“Let’s go to the top of the bleachers,” Mercedes whispered in his ear. They got up to a higher seat. By the end of the game, Roctown lost by fifteen points. Julia closed her packet and put it in her folder. She looked up and saw that Robbie and Mercedes were still making out.

“I’ll call her later,” Julia said. She wasn’t going to bother them. Julia waited by the door for Eddie to finish talking to his coach. “Even though ya’ll lost, you was good,” Julia said to a disappointed Eddie. Eddie wiped his head with his towel.

“How would you know? It’s not like you was watching the game,” Eddie replied.

“Eddie–,” Julia began, feeling slightly guilty.

“I saw you, Julia. You was doing your homework.” He put on his Timberland coat. As they moved to the cold outdoors, Julia zipped up her coat.

“I was. Sort of. But at least I came. When was the last time you came to support me?”

“You ain’t invite me to nothing for me to support you!” He beeped his car. “Baby, I told you I changed. You just gotta give me a chance,” He added as he opened the door for Julia.

“I’m sorry, pookie,” Julia apologized as soon as Eddie got into the car. “I promise if I come to one of your games, I’ll leave my homework at home,” Julia added, realizing that she should have listened to Mercedes and put her packet away to watch the game. What was the point of coming if she wasn’t giving him her undivided attention? It was just like she wasn’t supporting him at all. Eddie turned the car on and turned the heat up. “Forgive me?” she asked, putting on her seatbelt.

“I forgive you.” Before he put his seatbelt on, he leaned in to kiss her. Julia pulled back.

“I’ll give you a kiss later, Mr. Chapped Lips,” Julia replied, squeezing his cheeks.

“If I lick my lips, will you?”

“How ‘bout some Vaseline?” Julia took the small Vaseline jar that he had on the top of his dashboard and opened it. She didn’t like kissing chapped lips. She dipped her free finger into the Vaseline and touched his lips with it. She paused halfway and gazed into his eyes.

“I never had somebody moisten my lips for me,” he said, grinning at her. Julia smiled as she finished. She took her finger away.

“Only ‘cause I love you.” Eddie’s smile turned into a frown. He began to drive. “Okay. Forget I said that.” She folded her arms, wondering if he ever was going to feel the same way.

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Mercedes and Robbie leaned back, listening to the Fat Joe's "Lean Back" at Vic's party. The people who were dancing in the large home were doing the roc away and leaning back along with the words. The teens danced to the music that was blasting from the sound.

"Thanks for coming, bro. You wanna drink?" Vic asked Robbie, holding a plastic cup in his hand.

"Not tonight." Robbie replied. Robbie had his arm around Mercedes.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure," Robbie replied, giving Mercedes a wink. Mercedes smiled at him.

"All right, Robbie. Have fun. I'll see you around," Vic said, taking a sip from his cup.

"You, too, Vic," Robbie replied, slapping his hand. Vic went over to where Madison was. Robbie put his arms around Mercedes's waist and kissed the back of her neck. She grinned as she led him to the dance floor. Robbie and Mercedes danced for a while until she looked down at her watch. It read 2:30 a.m. Mercedes immediately stopped dancing.

"What's wrong?" Robbie asked, stopping.

"It's 2:30 and I snuck out," she said. "I'm dead if I get caught."

"We can leave." They left, holding hands out to his car. They both climbed into the car. He drove away from the party.

"My hair is sweaty." Mercedes ran her hand through her wet hair. Dancing was really a workout.

"So, boo, it still looks nice." Robbie glanced at her. Mercedes's wavy hair was half up and half down.

"Robbie, you're just saying that."

"Am not." Robbie reached over and felt her hair. "Eww. It's sweaty," he said with a fake look of disgust as he wiped the sweat on Mercedes's arm.

"Baby, don't do that," she said, giggling. Robbie stopped one block away from her house as usual. Mercedes was about to get out, when he turned his engine off and took her hand. He kissed her, and she kissed him back. "I have to leave now," Mercedes said softly, giving him another kiss.

"Come on," he insisted. She gave in. Mercedes held his head with both of her hands as she kissed him. "Push it back." He took off his seatbelt. Mercedes pushed the chair back. Robbie leaned his body against hers. She hugged him while his lips touched her neck.

"Robbieeee...", Mercedez whispered in his ear as he continued to kiss her on the neck. As soon as Robbie reached for the zipper on her jeans, she pulled the chair back up. "Now, I really have to go," Mercedez said, nervously looking at the time, trying to play out the fact that she didn't want to go any further. "Why don't you walk me a little bit closer home."

"Sure." Mercedez slipped her hand into his. They stopped near a tree. "We really have to say bye now," he said, kissing her again. "I love you, Mercedez." Her heart fluttered.

"I love you too, Julio," she replied out of habit.

**\*\*\*Chapter 10\*\*\***

*“... eye love you.”*

Oops! Wrong guy! An upset Robbie backed up and turned away from her.

“Robbie, I—I didn’t mean to say his name,” Mercedes apologized, wondering why Julio’s name came out of her mouth. Robbie went to the tree and rested his hands on one of the weaker branches of the tree. “You—you go-gotta believe me. I love you, not him,” she added with her heart beating rapidly. She walked over to where he was. “You heard me? I said I love you, Robbie.”

“Don’t lie to me,” he calmly replied, still refusing to face her. He snapped the branch off the tree.

“I’m not ly—” Mercedes cautiously came up to him and touched his arm.

“Yes, you are!” he yelled, whacking her across the face with the branch. Mercedes dropped to the floor feeling a sudden sharp pain to her face. “I’m not Julio.” Robbie threw the branch right beside her. He angrily walked over to his car and drove off.

By the time Mercedes snuck back inside her home, her right eye stung. Her crying only made the eye hurt more. She went to bed hoping that the nightmare would end by the morning. She couldn’t sleep. This was the same Robbie who promised to never hit her again. He did it again. Mercedes’s tears kept coming as she thought about how much she loved him. She woke up Saturday morning from the sunlight that shined through her window. Although not having slept much, she got up and went over to the mirror in her room. She looked at it and saw that her right eye was black and blue and swollen. Around the eye were cuts. Her hand shook as she touched the eye Robbie damaged. She winced from the sting of the touch as she struggled to look through her affected eye that could barely open.

Later on that morning, she put on huge shades that she had on her dresser and went to the kitchen to eat. Mateo and Barbra were already sitting at the kitchen table. Mercedes poured her Lucky Charms and milk and sat down.

“Mercedes, we’re inside so take your sunglasses off,” Barbra said. Mercedes ignored her and continued to eat her cereal. “I really wish you would listen to me when I tell you do something.”

“Mercedes, you heard her,” Mateo said, gazing up from his newspaper. Mercedes pulled her long bangs so they were covering her right eye and removed the sunglasses. Out of nowhere, Barbra got up and pushed her bangs back away from her eye.

“Mercedes, what on earth happened to your face?” she questioned, looking at her eye.

“I fell over a branch when I went outside.”



“When were you outside?” Mateo asked.

“Yesterday afternoon,” Mercedes replied.

“I saw you around seven last night and your eye was not like that,” Barbra said. One word: Busted.

“Mercedes, I'm appalled,” Barbra said with her hand on her back. She slowly took a seat again. At eight months, she was so big that it looked like the baby was going to pop out at any moment. “I can't believe that you just lied to us.”

“Where were you last night?” Mateo asked, putting his article down. Mercedes played with the marshmallows in her milk with her spoon. “Contestas la maldita pregunta!!” he yelled.

“I was at a party and I got into a fight!!” she yelled back. Mateo's cell phone rang.

"I'm not finished with you," he said before he picked up his phone. Mateo walked out of the kitchen to talk on his phone.

“I don't understand you, Mercedes. Only God knows where you go at night,” Barbra said, getting up from her chair using her right arm to push herself up.

“Don't talk to me like you know where I was at,” Mercedes responded as she felt light palpitations.

“You're right. I don't know where you are at night.” Barbra got closer to her.

“Okay, Barbra, keep ya two cents to yourself and let my dad handle this.”

“Excuse me—”

“Yeah, excuse you.”

“You're out of line and being really disrespectful.”

"That's 'cause you're acting mad stupid. You ain't my mom so don't come up in here trying to lecture me.”

“I don't get teens these days. You're a rebellious urban teen who uses street vernacular to—”

“Urban?” Mercedes questioned, looking at Barbra. “In case you haven't noticed, Barbra, my dad, your husband, es un Cubano. He's not white like you.”

“This is preposterous. I refuse to let my daughter grow up in my house with that attitude.”

“Don't worry 'bout me. I'ma be gone in two and a half years.”

“By then you'll be stripping on a pole just like your mother,” Barbra snapped. Mercedes dropped her spoon. Here her mother was still in a coma and Barbra had the nerve to say what she said.

“I don't gotta take this,” Mercedes replied, getting ready to get up as her heart rate increased. She had to be alone right now. She knew if she didn't she would go off. “I don't know why my dad married your punk ass.”

“Just like how I don't understand why your father decided to keep you, considering the fact the only reason you were conceived was because your father paid your mother to sleep with him. You know what that makes your mother? A prostitute.”

Not only did Barbra weasel her way into her family, now she was foul mouthing her mother. Mercedes wouldn't allow anyone, let alone the stepmother she resented, talk down to her mother, a woman who dedicated her life to always being there for Mercedes.

Mercedes looked at her stepmother in disbelief as her nose flared out in anger. Though it was true about how she was conceived, her mother was not a prostitute. That was the only time her mother had slept with a man for money, but it hardly counted since her mother returned the money the following day. Mercedes got up and chucked her bowl off the table. Milk and marshmallows hurled out the bowl before it shattered into pieces onto the floor.

“I CAN'T STAND YOU!” Mercedes yelled.

“PICK THAT BOWL UP!”

“HERE!” Mercedes yelled back as she flung her glass of orange juice off the table. Mercedes watched in horror as the glass struck Barbra against her stomach. As the glass smashed to the floor and broke into pieces, Barbra screamed as she grabbed her stomach in intense pain. A shocked Mercedes froze, unable to comprehend what she had just done.

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“There you go,” a doctor stated as he placed a protective covering over Mercedes's eye. Nick had taken Mercedes to the hospital where Barbra was. He didn't ask Mercedes what happened. He wasn't aware that Mercedes was the one who caused Barbra's accident.

“Thanks,” Mercedes replied. Nick waited by the wall in the room.

“Is your eye hurting you?” Nick asked once Mercedes left the doctor.

“No,” she replied. The pain from her eye was nothing compared to the hurt she felt for her actions. Nick and Mercedes walked into the cold waiting room of the emergency room where Barbra was admitted. After Barbra screamed, her father raced to the kitchen and hurriedly called

911. The ambulance came shortly after, taking Barbra and Mateo to the hospital. Nick drove along with Mercedes, following the ambulance to the hospital.

After greeting Barbra's parents, Mercedes sat across the room from them and picked up a magazine and tried to get lost in it, but she couldn't.

"Want some?" Nick asked as he shoved a bag of cheese Doritos in her face.

"I'm good." Nick shrugged his shoulders and ate. How could he eat at a time like this? A doctor approached Barbra's parents. Mercedes listened closely to hear if everything was okay.

"Your daughter is having some difficulties, and we might have to do a C-section to deliver the baby," the doctor said.

"Won't that make the baby premature? She's only eight months," Barbra's mother asked.

"The baby will be premature, but if we don't do this C-section soon the baby might not make it," the doctor said.

"What about Barbra? Is she going to be okay?" her father worriedly asked.

"She's in good hands."

"I'll be back," Mercedes told Nick. She got up from the intense waiting room to go outside. She couldn't be there any longer. One more minute in there with the consequence of her transgression in her face would've drove her insane.

Julia and her mother came out of her 2000 maroon Honda Civic in the parking lot. Both of them approached Mercedes.

"Mercedes, your father's mother told me about your stepmother and the baby." Mercedes's heart dropped. "I don't know how Barbra could bump into a table that hard. I heard you fell over a branch. Is your eye okay?" Gloria asked. Mercedes took a breath in relief that they didn't know the truth.

"My eye is gonna be okay. Barbra's gonna get a C-section. My family's waiting in the ER."

"Oh, nena, you're going through so much with your mother and now Barbra and the baby. God is good. He'll make things better." Gloria gave her a hug.

"Thanks," Mercedes replied after the warm hug.

"Come on, Juliana."

"I'll be in there in a few," Julia replied. Her mother nodded as she went inside. Mercedes sat down on the bench next to the door. She leaned forward and put her hands on her head.

“So, what really happened?” Julia questioned sitting down on the bench.

“What?”

“I saw that look on your face. I know you, Cedez. We've been best friends since elementary school.” Mercedes took her hands away from her face.

“My baby sister might not make it 'cause of me,” Mercedes confessed.

“How?”

“My dad found out that I snuck out and went to a party last night. He was gonna punish me, but his phone rang and he stepped out to take it. Barbra tried to lecture me so I told her not to, but she kept going. It didn't bother me 'til she started talking smack. Even then I was like whatever, but I snapped when she started talking 'bout my mom.”

“She ain't got no right to run her mouth about your ma,” Julia said, comforting her.

“I got so heated that I threw the bowl of cereal that I was eating on the floor. She told me to pick it up. And I picked up my glass of juice and I—I threw it at her,” Mercedes struggled to say.

“Julia, I didn't mean for the glass to hit her,” Mercedes sobbed. “You know me, Julia. I'm not like that. I'm not a monster.”

“You're not. It was a mistake.” Julia scooted closer to her best friend and embraced her in a hug. Mercedes rested her head on Julia's shoulders as the tears flowed.

“Can you pray for them to be okay?” Mercedes questioned Julia. Although Mercedes believed in God, she had pushed him away several months before, after her prayers for her mother's recovery were not met. But, it wouldn't hurt trying to pray for an innocent baby and mother.

“Sure,” Julia replied, surprised by Mercedes's request. “Dear God, Thanks for the daily bread. Lord, we come to you today to ask that you would be the surgeon's hands through Barbra's C-section, so Barbra and the baby will be okay and healthy ...” After Julia finished her prayer, she wiped Mercedes's tears away. “Barbra and the baby are gonna be fine, okay? You just gotta have faith,” Julia added, completely believing that God would pull them out of their health scare.

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Mercedes lightly knocked on the hospital door Tuesday afternoon.

“Come in,” Barbra said. Though she was a bit pale, Barbra looked better than she had a couple of days before. She had wires up her nose to help her breath and an I.V. in her arm.

“What are you doing here?” she asked as she saw Mercedes. “I can call Security if you don't leave now.” Barbra had her brunette hair pulled back and a pair of glasses on. She was reading a magazine.

“I’m not gonna hurt you,” Mercedes managed to say, staying close to the door, afraid that she would really call Security. She didn’t care how much she might’ve resented Barbra, she never wanted to physically hurt Barbra or her baby sister. She didn’t know where all of the anger came from that would possess her to act so violently. Saying sorry to Barbra wasn’t going to change what happened, and wasn’t going to clear her conscience, but Mercedes knew that was the first step.

“You already have, and you hurt poor Stephanie, too,” she snapped. Mateo and Barbra decided to name their baby girl Stephanie. Stephanie made it safely through the C-section. However, Stephanie was to stay at the hospital for longer than Barbra due to her not doing well on the Apgar test.

“I just came to apologize. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“I don’t want to hear it.” She closed her magazine. Mercedes took one more look and walked out of the door. “Wait.” Mercedes stopped. For a second Mercedes thought she was going to accept her apology. “Don’t you ever let me catch you touching Stephanie,” she threatened.

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“Yo, where you been all day? We was looking for you,” Keisha said to Mercedes. It was right after lunch on Wednesday when Julia and Keisha caught Mercedes coming out of the library before the bell rang for lunch to end. It was Mercedes’s first day back from not coming to school for the past two days.

“I was late this morning so I went straight to homeroom.”

“What about lunch?” Julia asked.

“I had to catch up on the work I missed for the past two days.”

“How’s your fam doing?” Keisha asked. Keisha and her mother came to the hospital for Barbra a little while after Julia and her mother came.

“Barbra’s better,” Mercedes said, sorrowfully looking down at her geometry book.

“Is Stephanie doing okay?” Keisha asked.

“I don’t know, Keisha!”

“My bad,” Keisha apologized. Keisha was not aware of the whole truth behind the glass incident.

“How’s your eye?” Julia asked, looking at Mercedes’s patch. Mercedes shrugged her shoulders. Although Mercedes had her long bangs swept over her injured eye, it was still slightly noticeable. “What’d your eye land on after you fell over the branch?”

“The ground,” Mercedes said tapping her fingers against her geometry textbook.

“What on the—”

“Ain’t your man gonna say hi to you?” Keisha questioned when Robbie walked along with Vic right pass Mercedes without even acknowledging her.

“We don’t go out no more.” Mercedes watched Robbie from behind.

“What happened?” Julia asked.

“It just wasn’t there,” Mercedes said, tapping faster against her book. “I gotta go to class,” she added.

“I don’t believe her,” Julia told Keisha as soon as Mercedes was out of earshot. Julia could sense that her best friend was hiding something.

“About what?”

“Her eye and why she and Robbie ain’t together no more,” Julia said in a voice so only Keisha could hear her.

“What you trying to say, girl?”

“Maybe he had something to do with her eye.” The story about Mercedes’s injured eye and her reason for her and Robbie’s breakup didn’t add up to Julia.

“You think he hit her?” Julia nodded her head. “No. Not Mercedes. She’s too hifey for that. Since when was Cedez ever scared of anybody?”

“Since she started going with Robbie.”

“We shouldn’t jump to any conclusions.”

“I know. But think about it, her eye gets busted ’round the same time they break up? Come on, Keisha. It’s too much of a coincidence,” Julia added as she got near the door for her next class.

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Julia took a bow. Unlike last time, the crowd of seniors clapped for her February performance. Some even cheered. Julia beamed as she looked out to the audience. Besides the senior citizens, Eddie and Angela were also there. Julia had her hair down. She had on a red oversized sweater that could pass as a dress. She had on a mini burgundy skirt along with long striped black and grey socks with brown loafers.

“What a great performance. Let’s thank Julia for that again!” Annette exclaimed through the microphone as she got on the stage. “Good job, Julia,” Annette said to Julia, not using the microphone.

“Thanks,” Julia replied. Julia went over to Eddie and gave him a hug as she carefully held onto the acoustic guitar she borrowed from the attic. Although ecstatic about her great performance, she was more excited that Eddie came. “I’m glad you came, pookie.”

“Anytime, boo. You was killing it. Even though your voice went deep,” Eddie said, making his voice go deeper than usual.

“It wasn’t that deep, Eddie,” she said laughing. Whenever she sang, her voice sounded deeper and soulful. She could hit high notes as an alto.

“Yes, it was,” he replied making his voice even deeper.

“Funny.” She playfully punched his arm.

“Ouch!” he replied, acting as if his arm really hurt. “Before you go and beat my ass, I’m go warm up the car.” He left.

“Great performance,” Angela said, coming up to her. Angela had waited for Eddie to leave before she went to talk to Julia.

“Great song. Good looks on helping me find the song.” Julia sang a modified version of Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody.” The version she sang excluded the chorus parts. She ended the song with a guitar solo. She knew that the electric guitar would’ve made the guitar solo sound so much better, but the audience seemed to enjoy the acoustic better.

“No problem. If you want, I can show you some really cool underrated bands of the seventies during lunch.”

“I can’t,” Julia replied, remembering Mercedes’s words. “It’s just... you know the girl that Robbie was going out with when you and Robbie—”

“What about her?”

“She’s my best friend. I ain’t got nothing against you—”

“I understand.” She didn’t want to ‘cause a rift in somebody’s friendship. “Well, again, great performance ... and I’ll ask Keagan to tutor me. He wasn’t as bad as I thought,” she added with a forced smile.

“Good. I’m glad we’re on the same page.” Julia went over to Annette. Angela sighed. Yet another failed relationship. Somebody tapped Angela’s shoulder. She turned around.

“Do you have any grandparents here?” the male teen asked her. He had a few freckles around the center of his face. He had brownish green eyes. Although he was a sophomore, he looked like a freshman. His baby face and long dark brown eye lashes didn’t help him look his age. He also had no facial hair even though he had never shaved. He wore a blue Tommy Hilfiger fleece with khaki pants and loafers.

“No. I was here to hear my frie–Julia play,” Angela replied, recalling that she was not her friend. “You?”

“My sister’s Annette. She’s the event coordinator here. I come here sometimes to see the different acts they have. I got to say, though, that this one tonight was one of the best ones so far.” Angela gave him a hard look. The nerd looked so recognizable.

“Do I know you? You look familiar.”

“Jimmy. I gave you the homecoming flyer.”

“Duh! That’s who you are! Sorry I didn’t remember your name. I’m Angela, just in case you forgot.”

“I didn’t forget,” he replied, giving her a shy smile. Angela smiled back at him.

“Jimmy! We gotta go,” Annette called out from the small office by the auditorium where they were.

“Coming!” Jimmy replied to Annette. “Well, I gotta go,” Jimmy said to Angela.

“All right. I’ll see you later.” Jimmy nodded his head and began to walk away. He twirled back to Angela.

“Is it okay if I get your number?”

“Sure,” Angela said, a bit surprised that he wanted her number.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.” If this was the start of a new friendship, she wasn’t going to let this opportunity slip.

“Got paper?”

“Just a pen.” He took it from his front pocket. “I’ll go get a piece of paper from my sister.”

“It’s okay.” Angela took the pen from him. She took his hand and scribbled her number and name on his palm. “Hope we become friends,” she said, looking up at a blushing Jimmy.

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“Wow, Amanda, what's all this?” Marcela asked as she stepped into Amanda’s bedroom. Amanda had changed her bed cover from an all-white one to a red one with rose designs on it. She also had sprayed her room with Victoria's Secret Vanilla spray. Amanda put strawberries in a small clear bowl and across from it she put a chocolate dipping bowl. It was Valentine’s Day.

“It's just something I thought Julio might enjoy,” Amanda said as she sat on the edge of her bed.

“You want Julio to be your first, even though you think he’s still not over his ex?” Amanda had mentioned to Marcela how Julio always seemed to be around Mercedes whenever he thought she wasn’t looking.

“Marcela, Mercedes must have something, ‘cause if she didn’t, Julio wouldn't keep running back to her. Now, after tonight, Julio's gonna be so hooked on me, that he won't ever go near that thing again,” Amanda continued.

“Oooh, sounds like a plan that'll work. Do you have protection?” she asked with a look of concern.

“Duh,” Amanda replied. “I’m not stupid.”

“Does Julio know about all of this?”

“No, I'm gonna surprise him, you know, add some spice to this relationship. Julio called me this morning and finally asked me to be his girlfriend.” Amanda reached for her phone and dialed Julio’s number.

“Hey, Julio. What are you doing right now?”

“You know, just hanging.”

“I hear people in the background.”

“Oh, that's just people from the Café Lounge.”

“Who are you with?” Amanda asked

“Nobody.”

“I'll see you at seven, right?”

“Of course.”

“Marcela, I'm going over to Café Lounge right now to surprise Julio,” Amanda told Marcela as she got up and grabbed her scarf. “Come on, let's go.” Marcela drove Amanda over to the Café Lounge. When they arrived at the Café Lounge, they glanced inside the window.

“Whoa, look at that couple!” Marcela exclaimed. A boy and girl were sitting at a table

holding hands. They seemed as if they were the only two people in the place. "I hope I find a guy who's that into me."

"As much as I'd like to see that couple, I have more important things to do." Amanda stopped looking in the window of the Café Lounge and went inside. However, Amanda left as soon as she recognized the two people who were together. She walked out fast and went to the side of the building. Marcela went after her.

"I should have known those two were Mercedes and Julio," Amanda said as she paced up and down the alley.

"Amanda, relax."

"How can I when my boyfriend is in love with someone else?" Amanda tried so hard to hold her tears, but she couldn't. She hated crying. Especially over boys. The last time she cried was over the summer when somebody outbid her for an autographed exclusive Versace purse.

"I thought you said you knew about him still not being over his ex."

"I do, but now I know that this relationship that we have is never going work," Amanda replied as she continued to cry. "The guy that I was going to let take my virginity away from me is ..."  
Amanda started but couldn't finish. It was true and Amanda couldn't deny it. Mercedes and Julio were in love.

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know!"

"Are you still going to do it with Julio tonight?"

"Hell, no."

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Mercedes let go of Julio's hand. "Thanks for the massage," she said to him after he massaged her hand. Her patch was off. A minute scar rested underneath her affected eye.

"You're welcome. So, why'd you wanna meet up today?" They were at the Café Lounge.

"We haven't chilled in a minute."

"That kind of happens when two people break up." Julio sipped on his hot cocoa. Mercedes broke a piece of warm French bread.

"You wanna piece?" she asked him, purposefully ignoring his last statement. Julio took it from her.

“I went shopping over the weekend with Amanda and I saw this grey and denim Armani Exchange sweater. It was like a hundred fifty.”

“And you bought it,” she said, knowing his expensive taste.

“Yup. And Amanda saw that I only had one sweater so she told me to look for whatever else I wanted. I took like six sweaters and two pants and she paid for the whole thing,” he said, laughing. Mercedes joined him.

“Whoever said guys aren't goldiggers?” she said, laughing with him. “You ain't even feeling her!” Mercedes waved her hand over her hot cocoa.

“I am feeling her. That's why I asked her to be my girlfriend this morning.” Mercedes's laughter discontinued. “I would've been with her right now, but you wanted to hang out.”

“My bad for wanting to hang out with a friend,” Mercedes sarcastically replied.

“On Valentine's Day, Mercedes? If you were still with Robbie you wouldn't be here, let alone want to hang out with me with it just being the two of us on any other day.”

“That's not true,” she said, knowing that it was partially true. A part of her wished she had never broken up with Julio. Even though he was unfaithful, he was never abusive to her.

“Then why is it that when you and Robbie are together, you never call or you barely acknowledge me, but when you guys break up, it's like we're friends again.”

“Sorry for coming,” she snapped, getting up from the booth as her nose flared. She didn't need to get lectured by her ex. If he didn't want to be friends, fine. She had other friends she could talk to.

“You shouldn't be mad, Mercedes,” Julio began also rising from his seat “You had a chance to go out with me after you and Robbie broke up the first time, but—,” Julio said, but ended as Mercedes slammed the front door of the restaurant.

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Mercedes got out of the bathroom stall at RHS during fourth period and went over to the sink to wash her hands. Gina walked into the bathroom. Mercedes pushed the soap dispenser, trying to ignore her presence. She was aware that Robbie took Gina out for Valentine's Day.

“Aren't you Robbie's ex?” Gina asked, unzipping her Guess purse and pulling out her makeup.

“Why does it matter to you?” Mercedes replied.

“So you are.” Gina opened up her makeup and took the brush out. “Robbie took me out to Olive Garden on Valentine’s Day and we had a fabulous time.” Gina looked at herself in the mirror as she put more blush on.

“I don’t care,” Mercedes lied. “We’re not a couple anymore.” She turned the water on to rinse her hands.

“After Olive Garden, I didn’t want the night to end so we started to hook up in his car,” Gina continued, disregarding what Mercedes had just said. Mercedes flinched, trying to block out thoughts of Robbie already moving on with another girl.

“I said I don’t—”

“I thought you should know that I was planning to go all the way with him, but he didn’t want to,” Gina interrupted as she put her blush away.

“Oh,” Mercedes responded in surprise that Robbie didn’t want to go any further.

“It seems pretty clear to me that he’s not over you. He must still be in love.” Gina dropped her makeup back into her purse. “I don’t know why you broke up with him in the first place. If I were you, I would’ve held on tight,” she added, zipping up her purse. Mercedes thought about Robbie. Was he still in love with her as she was with him? There was only one way to find out.

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Angela shut her biology book. She just finished reading through three chapters of what the next test was going to be on.

“Are you tired?” Jimmy asked, glancing up from his chemistry worksheet.

“I’m tired of studying. It’s Saturday, Jimmy,” she added. They met at the public library to study.

“Okay,” he said, disappointed. He put away the worksheet into his textbook and put it into his book bag. Angela and Jimmy were more study buddies than anything else. They never hung out without the books.

“Do you wanna go eat ice cream?”

“You wanna go eat ice cream with me?”

“It’s a little bit cold outside, but it’s more fun to eat ice cream in the cold weather than when it’s hot.” She got up from the table. “My treat.”

“Okay.” Jimmy got up with her. They walked side by side from the library and down a couple of stores to the ice cream parlor. They ordered their ice cream and sat down in a booth.

“So, Jimmy,” Angela began, taking her spoon and shoving it into her turtle sundae bowl of ice cream. “I don’t know much about you. What do you like to do for fun?” If Jimmy was going to be her friend, she was going to have to get to know him.

“Um...well, I like to play video games like Star Wars and Final Fantasy.” He started to dig into his banana split sundae. “I also play chess and I like watching movies. The old war ones.” Angela looked at him. Nothing he said surprised her. He was definitely a geek. “What do you like to do for fun?”

“Partying, drinking—”

“I like to drink, too.”

“Really? What’s your favorite drink?” Angela asked in surprise that the nerd liked to drink.

“I prefer soda over juice.”

“I meant alcohol.”

“But you’re not 21.”

“Since when does age stop people from doing what they want to do?” She asked, hoping that Jimmy wasn’t the judgmental type.

“I guess you’re right about that,” he replied, looking down at his ice cream.

“I also like listening to music, but what I love the most is hanging out with my sisters. It sounds cheesy, but it’s true.”

“I enjoy spending time with my older sister.”

“Is she your only sibling?”

“No. I have an older brother which makes me the baby of the family. How many siblings do you have?”

“Two. They’re both younger than me.” They both stayed quiet for a while to eat their food. “Tell me a secret.”

“What?”

“Tell me one and I’ll tell you one. Or vice versa,” she said. She wanted to spice up the conversation. She was a bit bored. If their friendship was going to work, she had to be able to

talk with him. “Okay, I’ll start first. I went to court last month. Thankfully, I’m only gonna be on probation for a year and a half and I gotta do 75 hours of community service.”

“What’d you do?”

“I got into a fight late November. And in the fight, I stabbed somebody. I wasn’t gonna do it, but when you panic.” She waited for Jimmy to say something disapproving.

“It sounds like self-defense to me. They shouldn’t even have given you anything.”

“I would have gotten less stuff, but I got busted for underage drinking too. So, I told you my secret, what’s yours?”

“I never had a girlfriend,” Jimmy said, blushing.

“Don’t worry. I got my first boyfriend last year. When I was thirteen, I thought this guy was my boyfriend, but he didn’t think so.”

“Really? How many boyfriends have you had?”

“Contrary to what people might say or think, I only had two boyfriends, Jesse and Travis. Do you hook up with girls? I sometimes hook up with boys when I’m not dating anybody—well, besides the times when I cheated on Travis—but that’s not relevant.”

“No,” Jimmy replied once again glancing down at his ice cream. “Honestly, I never kissed a girl.” He moved his spoon around the ice cream. His ears turned red.

“Honey, I didn’t know you were gay,” Angela said as she placed her hands on top of his. “It’s cool ‘cause I don’t judge people. We can go shopping together, check out boys, and—”

“Angela, I’m not gay!” Jimmy exclaimed. His face got as red as his ears.

“Oh! I’m sorry,” she replied taking her hands away from him. “I shouldn’t have jumped to the conclusion that you were.”

“It’s okay. I wanna have a girlfriend, but I get shy around girls.”

“As your friend, I will personally help you find a girlfriend,” she said, giving him a smile.

**\*\*\*Chapter 11\*\*\***

*“... no sé quién usted es.”*

Mercedez kept her eyes strictly on the food on her plate. Mateo, Barbra, and Nick were at the table eating with dinner with her. Nick started coming over for dinner more often since the glass incident. There was very little conversation going on.

“Pass the potatoes, please,” Nick requested. Mateo passed him the food. “Thank you,” he said. Everybody remained soundless as they ate. “You guys are all quiet.”

“We would all be happily talking if Stephanie was here with us,” Barbra replied, shoving a bunch of string beans in her mouth. Barbra had gotten out of the hospital a few days after she had the C-Section. However, even though it was March, Stephanie was still at the hospital due to breathing complications.

“She’s a Mendoza. She’s gonna make it,” Nick replied, putting the mashed potato onto his plate.

“He’s right, Barbra. Stephanie’s going to be okay,” Mateo said.

“All of this could have been prevented,” Barbra retorted, glaring at Mercedez. Mercedez could see Barbra staring at her from the corner of her eye.

“I didn’t mean to throw the glass at you, Barbra,” Mercedez said.

“It didn’t look that way to me,” Barbra snapped.

“Did you even say you’re sorry?” Mateo asked.

“I did,” Mercedez replied looking up. “Dad, I apologized to her, pero-”

“¿Que paso, Mercedez? Since when do we hit people when we get mad?” Mateo questioned. This was the first time they openly talked about the glass incident. “Your mother and I raised you better than that.”

“It was an accident!” Mercedez exclaimed, slamming her hand down on the table.

“You need to cut it out with the attitude!” Mateo came back at her.

“That same nasty attitude is the reason why Stephanie is struggling to survive,” Barbra said.

“Shut up, Barbra!” Mercedez yelled as her heart raced. She already felt guilty about harming Barbra and Stephanie. She didn’t need a constant reminder.

“Watch your mouth!” Mateo yelled back at Mercedes. “You need to learn how to respect Barbra.”

“She can respect my ass,” Mercedes mumbled.

“Mercedes, chill out,” Nick said, finally coming into the conversation.

“Get up from the table and go to your room, Mercedes. You’re grounded,” Mateo said. In the midst of all the drama with Stephanie’s health, Mateo forgot to ground Mercedes before. Now he remembered. “The only place you’re going is school and home.” Mercedes pulled her chair away from her practically full plate and got up from the table.

“So I can’t go to the hospital anymore?” Mercedes asked.

“No.”

“You’re gonna deprive me of seeing my own mother?”

“She’ll probably be in the same condition when you get off punishment anyways,” Mateo replied. Mercedes gawked at her father in disbelief. He was the one who always appeared to be hopeful for her mother’s full recovery.

“I can’t believe you just said that,” Mercedes replied, trying to keep her composure. Her heart beat more rapidly.

“Mercedes, let it go,” Nick said, sensing that she was going to say something else.

“Don’t tell me to let it go. Your mother is not in a coma. Mine is.” Nick and Mercedes had different mothers. Mateo had Nick with his first wife. Mateo’s first wife divorced him after she found out that he had an affair with Mercedes’s mother.

“Mercedes, stop starting—”

“No, Nick. You can go to Brooklyn anytime to see your mother and when you say something to her, she’ll say something back to you. That won’t happen when I talk to my mother,” Mercedes added, raising her voice.

“Mercedes,” her father began as he stood up from his chair. “I didn’t mean to offend you—”

“I get it, Dad,” she sarcastically retorted, storming up the stairs. She couldn’t stand being in the house for another minute. She never felt this much anger towards her so called family. She was over all of them blaming and hating her. After walking into the bathroom by her room, she slammed the door shut as she waited for her heartbeat to slow down. “I can’t stand this stupid house,” she mumbled as she opened the medicine cabinet. She pulled out her prescribed



medication. She twisted the cap off and poured one pill into her hand. She hopped onto the bathroom counter top. About to pop the pill into her mouth, she stared at the bottle. It was just another way for her father to control her. She opened the lid of the toilet and dispensed the pill in her hand along with the rest of the pills down the toilet. She flushed them away. Now she wouldn't have to deal with her heart racing.

She took her cell phone out of her pocket and went to the phonebook on her phone. She scrolled down to the R's. Mercedes hesitated, looking at Robbie's name. She took a deep breath and called him.

When night came, Mercedes lingered for Mateo and Barbra to go to sleep before she sneaked out. She strolled over to the park and waited by the parking lot under one of the streetlights at the park. A couple of minutes later, Robbie zoomed into the parking lot on his Suzuki motorcycle. When he got close to Mercedes, he took off his helmet and got off his motorcycle.

"I didn't think you'd come," Mercedes said, putting her hands in her New Jersey Nets jacket. "I'm here," he replied, taking off his biker gloves.

"Well, I—"

"I'm sorry, Mercedes," he cut in, coming closer to her, "about your eye." He reached over to touch the scar she had underneath the eye where he hit her. Mercedes slightly moved her head. The last time he had his hands on her, she got injured. He pulled his hand away before he made contact with her face. "I should've apologized earlier, but you probably didn't wanna hear me say sorry for the same thing I told you I'd never do again." He leaned on his motorcycle. Mercedes glanced at Robbie.

"You're not the only one who should be apologizing. I messed up real bad that night when I called you my ex's name. I don't blame you for getting pissed off. But you took it far by hitting me."

"I know. I wish I could take that night back. I'm really sorry. I don't expect you to believe me since I broke my promise to you. I hate seeing you hurting 'cause of me," he said, toying with his gloves rather than giving Mercedes eye contact.

"I said my ex's name out of habit. We'd been together since eighth grade before we broke up. Trust me, Robbie, I'm not into him the way I'm into you." She moved closer to Robbie. She cautiously stopped his glove playing by positioning her hands in his. They both gazed down at their hands together. A long time had passed since their hands had touched.

Mercedes put one of her hands on his face. She felt the need to tell Robbie the truth about her true feelings. "Robbie, I love you," she daringly told him looking into his eyes. "Only you."

"I love you too, Mercedes," he softly responded, looking back into her eyes.

“And ‘cause I love you, I want you in my life. I want us to work,” she said as she caressed his face.

“Mercedez, we can’t.” He gently took her hand away from his face. “You know when I get mad I lose it. And when I do, I can’t control what happens. I don’t wanna put you through that again.”

“You can change.”

“Mercedez—”

“I’m not ready to say goodbye to us. Baby, I’ll help you.

“I can’t make you any promises.”

“Just make me one. Promise you’ll at least try to change.”

“I promise,” he waveringly responded.

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“Okay, okay! Put me down,” Julia said, giggling as Eddie brought her upstairs on his back. They were home alone at Julia’s house.

“Right here, or in there?”

“Here’s good,” she replied at the top of the small stairwell. “You can’t come in my bedroom.” She hopped off his back.

“Why?” Julia opened the door to her bedroom.

“‘Cause if my ma sees you in here ... that’s why.” Julia went inside her room.

“Baby, please? Ya mama ain’t here right now,” he said, jokingly batting his eyes by the door.

“Okay,” she said, letting him in. He was too fine to leave outside. Eddie smiled and gave her a big kiss on the cheek. Julia went over to the vanity mirror and pulled off the scrunchie that held her crazy curls together.

“So this is where you sleep.” Eddie plopped on the queen bed.

“Eddie! Get your tall behind off the bed!” She went over to the bed and, pulling Eddie’s arm, tried to pull him off the bed. It didn’t work. He was taller and bigger than her. “If my ma walks in with you on the bed, all hell will break loose!”

“Relax, Julia. We ain’t doing nothing.” Julia rolled her eyes and went back to the mirror. She opened the jar of gel that was on the counter and swooped her hand in for a handful. “Yo, Julia, can I ask you something?”

“Go ahead.”

“If your dad’s a big musician in Puerto Rico, why he got your fam living here, where you don’t even got your own room? He don’t pay child support?”

“Sorry, not all families got a big house like yours,” she sarcastically replied. She always preferred to have her own room like Julio, but she was not going to complain to her parents about it.

“I didn’t say it like that.”

“He does pay child support. My ma uses it just in case me or Julio needs something or if we need something for the house. My pa was gonna give me and Julio money on the regular, but my ma convinced him to put it in a trust fund for me and Julio for college instead,” Julia informed him as she slapped the gel she had in her hand into her hair.

“What about the house? He can’t upgrade ya’ll?”

“Last time I saw him was three years ago, and that was when me and Julio went to P.R. When he was actually in the U.S., five years ago, he didn’t come by the house. He stayed at a hotel. He’s never even lived in this house.”

“You ever miss him?”

“I dunno. I got used to him not being around,” she said, thinking about her father. She already forgave her father for not coming back earlier that school year. Though Julia talked to her father over the phone occasionally, she knew better than to get her hopes up of her father coming to visit them. She promised herself to never get that upset over her father anymore. Maybe it was better that way. It wasn’t like she was new to living in a single parent home.

“So...,” Eddie began. Julia glanced at him from the mirror. Eddie looked comfortable on the bed. He lay on his stomach with his arms propped up. “I’m into the no glove, no love policy.” He pulled out a strip of packages from his pocket. “I got a bunch of gloves, so, baby, give me some love.” Julia laughed.

“You’re too funny.” She turned to him with half her hair up.

“I’m serious, Julia—”

“Eddie, you can’t even say I love you and you wanna make love to me?” It bummed her out that Eddie couldn’t tell her that he loved her. She wanted to say it to him over and over again, but she

always stopped herself before the words would come out. She would rather have Eddie without him saying the I word than not having him at all. She was smiling and happier with him than she was without him.

“Love, sex. Whatever you wanna call it.”

“I’m not into having sex. I’m into making love,” she responded, looking back at the mirror. “And besides, you know my policy.”

“No sex ’til you get married. I know.” He sighed. She made God a promise to abstain from sex until after she was married. It was a vow she planned to keep.

“What are you doing?” she asked, brushing her hair and looking at Eddie. He ripped off one of the packages and put the rest in his pocket. He tore it open and pulled the condom out.

“Making a balloon. It’s the only action I’ll be getting any time soon,” he said blowing into it.

“Too bad.”

“Dang, Silesia gave it up to me after the third week I was with her.” He pulled the balloon out of his mouth. He tried to tie it.

“That’s why she didn’t last. Now if you bring her up again–,” Julia started. Eddie let go of the balloon.

“What are you gonna do?” he asked, getting up from the bed, grinning. “Silesia, Silesia, Silesia,” he repeated.

“Stop saying her name!” Julia replied, smiling. She knew he was kidding around.

“Or what? Silesia.”

“Not funny.” She playfully pushed him. He purposefully fell onto the floor.

“Ow!” he exaggerated. He closed his eyes and spread his arms and legs out.

“Pookie, you’re not really hurting,” Julia said, dropping to the floor beside him. “Open your eyes,” she requested placing her hands on top of his stomach. “Pookie,” she said, kissing his eye. “Pookie!” She continued to kiss his eye.

“Stop! It tickles!” he said, laughing, as he opened his eyes. He sat up.

“Since when do you use the word tickle?” She wrapped her arms around his waist.

“You got me using these feminine ass words.” He put one of his arms around her back.

“It’s not feminine. It’s cute.” They began to kiss.

“!A dios mío!” Gloria exclaimed, walking into the room. Julia and Eddie immediately stopped making out. They both jumped to their feet.

“Mama, it’s not what it looks like,” Julia said in shock that she hadn’t heard her mother coming. “We was just–,” she insisted to her irate mother.

“Get out, Eddie!”

“On the real, Mrs. Rodriguez. We was only kissing. That’s it. Nothing else happened.” Gloria’s mouth dropped when she saw the condom on the floor.

“Nothing else happened?” she sarcastically questioned, pulling a tissue from the table to pick up the condom. “NOTHING ELSE HAPPENED!” she yelled. “Get out!”

“We didn’t–” Eddie tried to say.

“GET OUT!” Eddie hurriedly departed from the house.

“Is this what you do when I’m not around, Juliana?” she questioned.

“I wasn’t having sex,” Julia replied, desperate for her mother to believe her.

“Mentirosa,” Gloria said, throwing the condom back on the floor. “And to lie in my face? I don’t know who my own daughter really is.”

“Mama, tu sabes quién yo soy,” Julia pleaded. They had gotten into to arguments before, but this was the worst.

“I wasn’t born yesterday, Juliana. The condom. *The bed*,” she added, shaking her head. Julia looked over to the bed. It was ruffled up as if something did indeed happen on it. “Have you no respect for me?” she questioned, crying. “I will not keep this from your father. He must know.”

“No! Why does he have to know? It’s not like he’s gonna care anyways.”

“Is this why you’re acting loose? To get back at your father since he’s not around?”

“He’s got nothing to do with this. And loose, Ma. Since when did I get around?” Julia asked, upset and tearing up. She was offended. Her own mother was practically calling her a slut. Eddie was the only boy she had brought home to her mother as her boyfriend.

“Por favor, at least have the decency to change those sheets and put clean ones on the bed. That’s if you want, porque I’m not sleeping on that bed ever again,” Gloria said, grabbing a couple of tissues from the box before getting out of the bedroom.

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“Dang, son! She really thought you and Eddie did the bang bang boogie,” Keisha asked after Julia told her about how her mother misunderstood what she and Eddie were doing in the bedroom. They were all at the Coca-Cola machine.

“Yeah. And she refuses to sleep on the bed since she saw us in the room. She started sleeping on the couch so Julio told her she can have his bed and now he’s sleeping on the couch,” Julia said.

“I hope everything works out,” Keisha said. Julia nodded her head. Julia didn’t mention to Keisha and Mercedes about her mother calling her loose. Sine Julia’s argument with her mother, they barley spoke to each other. “Speaking of boyfriends, Keagan asked me to be his girl yesterday and I said yes,” she said with a huge grin.

“That’s what’s up, girl. How’d he ask you—”

“Hey, I’ll talk to ya’ll later,” Mercedes said after seeing Robbie by the front entrance of the room.

“Why bother saying bye when you never said hello,” Keisha asked Mercedes. Since they met at the soda machine, Mercedes hardly had said anything to them. She seemed distracted.

“My bad. I got a lot on my mind.” Mercedes picked up her book bag from the floor. Mercedes went over to Robbie.

“So they’re back on now,” Julia stated as Mercedes gave Robbie a kiss.

“I guess so,” Keisha replied. “Julz, I thought about what you said about them. If he was putting his hands on Cedez, why would she go back to him?”

“I dunno,” Julia replied.

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“Thanks for coming,” Mercedes said to Julio by the library. Earlier that day, she sent him a text to meet her by the library. “I just wanted to say sorry for Valentine’s Day. You was right about some of the things you said.” She knew she was wrong for what she did.

“Like what?” Julio asked.

“About me not talking to you when I’m with Robbie. But, it’s not like that anymore. To prove it to you, I’m back together with Robbie and here I am talking to you. Well, do you accept my apology?”

“I guess so.”

“Is that a yes or no?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” Mercedes said, smiling.

“We should double date one day,” he said as they hugged. The bell rang after they left each other. Julio went over to his geometry class.

“Okay, let’s get back to geometry,” Ms. West said at the beginning of class. “We’re learning about...” Amanda kept quiet for the rest of the period. She didn’t even acknowledge Julio. As soon as the bell rang, she marched out of the classroom. If Julio wanted to talk to her, he had to come to her.

“Amanda,” Julio said, catching up to her. He swung his book bag over his shoulders. “What’s wrong? You didn’t say anything to me today.”

“I don’t always have to say hi to you first.”

“I don’t always wait for you to say what’s up first.” They walked over to the lunch room.

“Whatever.”

“Where’s all of this coming from? Ever since Valentine’s Day you’ve been acting different.” Amanda walked in front of Julio, causing him to stop walking.

“That’s because, every time I turn around, there you are with your ex,” she snapped. Besides Valentine’s Day, she saw Julio and Mercedes hugging earlier that day. “If you want to be with her, go be with her and stop wasting my time,” she added, opening the door to the cafeteria. Julio followed behind her.

“Amanda, you got it all wrong. Mercedes and I are over. She’s just a friend.”

“Then why were you with her on Valentine’s Day holding hands?”

“Were you spying on me?” he asked, wondering how Amanda saw Mercedes and him together.

“No. I wanted to surprise you that day so we could spend more time together,” Amanda snapped.

“You don’t want me talking to her?”

“You do what you want to do, Julio,” she replied angrily, going over to the lunch line. Julio put his arms around her shoulders.

“I’m sorry. If I talk to her again, I promise I won’t touch her,” he added, kissing her cheek. “And I promise to talk to her less for you.”

“Fine,” Amanda replied.

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Angela merrily walked out of her Algebra class with her test in her hand. She rushed over to the library during lunch. Jimmy was standing by there waiting for her. They met in front of the library for lunch every day.

“Guess what, Jimmy,” Angela said holding up her Algebra test smiling. “I got a B- on this test!” she exclaimed, embracing him.

“Good job,” Jimmy replied, returning the smile.

“I’m so happy I could kiss you!” She said, releasing him as Jimmy blushed. She stared down at her test. “Studying really does work.” Her grades had begun to improve since she started to get help and since she actually made more of an effort to study.

“It does.” They both went inside the library and downstairs to the table where they usually sat.

“So,” Angela started as she set her test down before sitting herself. “I’m keeping my word. I will help you get a girlfriend.” Jimmy took a seat across from her and opened up his book bag to take out his American Literature book.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to.”

“I want to, Jimmy. Now, put those books away for at least today so I can give you a few pointers.” She handed him the books that were on the table. Jimmy took the books and put them back in his book bag. Jimmy carefully listened to the tips Angela gave him.

“All of it makes sense, Angela, but...”

“But?”

“What if I ask a girl out and she says yes and after the date, I give her a bad kiss?”

“Don’t worry about it. If she really likes you, she’ll show you how to kiss.” Jimmy sighed.

“I might as well become a priest so I won’t have to worry about dating girls,” he said, placing his head down on the table.

“If you’re that concerned about kissing, I’ll show you how to,” she offered. She could actually aid Jimmy in something he wasn’t good at.

“Help me? As in kiss another guy in front of me and I take notes?”

“No, silly. You’ll learn by kissing me.” Jimmy quickly lifted up his head from the table.



“Yo- you’re go- gonna help me by kissing me? Actually kissing me?” he asked as his ears reddened.

“Yes, Jimmy. Only ‘cause you’re my friend. Is Saturday good for you?”

“Um...I’m sure Saturday’s good.”

“Okay. Come over to my place around one in the afternoon. My sisters are going over to my Aunt Jerry’s house tomorrow in the morning, so my place will probably be empty. Hopefully that’ll make you more comfortable.”

“I’ll be there,” Jimmy anxiously responded.

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“How do I look?” Madison asked while she glanced at her reflection at the mirror. They were all at Saks Fifth Avenue. Amanda, Lin, and Cassidy stood around her by the triple mirror Madison was looking at.

“Well-l...,” Lin said, looking at the dress on her. Madison wore a turquoise Fendi mini dress that reached up to her knees. The top half of her dress was v-cut.

“Maybe you should up the size,” Amanda suggested. The dress looked as if Madison couldn’t breathe in it.

“What they’re trying to say is, you look like a cow,” Cassidy bluntly stated.

“Cassidy!” Lin exclaimed.

“What? I’m telling the truth. You do not want to go to prom looking like you’re going to pop out of the dress,” Cassidy replied. Although it was only March, Madison was shopping for prom dresses.

“Is it that bad?” Madison asked, gazing down at the dress.

“No offence, Madison, but you’re already up there in weight and wearing a dress that looks like you’re suffocating in it only adds to the horribleness of how you look in it,” Cassidy responded.

“I look fat in this,” Madison complained. Madison pinched the fat of her thigh and let it go.

“Don’t listen to Cassidy,” Lin began. “You are not fat. You’re not even chubby. It’s curves. Cassidy’s just mad since she doesn’t have any.” Lin took a seat on one of the chairs in the dressing room.

“Please, Lin. Curves is just another word for fat,” Cassidy retorted.

“Try a different dress,” Amanda said.

“No! I’m not trying on any other dress,” Madison replied crossly, walking away from the mirrors and into the dressing room.

“Way to go, Cassidy,” Lin said. Amanda pulled out her cell phone to text Julio.

“Whatever, Lin. I was simply telling her the truth,” Cassidy responded.

“Well, if we’re all about telling the truth, why don’t you tell Amanda about Spencer?” Lin questioned, getting up from her chair.

“What about Spencer?” Amanda asked, glancing up from her phone. Spencer was Amanda’s boyfriend of a year before Julio.

“Not now,” Cassidy said to Lin, giving her an evil eye.

“Yes, now,” Lin stated.

“What is it?” Amanda questioned Cassidy.

“You’re going to find out anyways,” Cassidy started. “Spencer and I are going steady.”

“What? Cassidy, you can’t,” Amanda said loudly. Cassidy always found a way to get underneath Amanda’s skin, weather if it was with boys or with them academically competing with each other. Amanda thought that one good of her not going to her old school was that she didn’t have to deal with Cassidy on a daily basis.

“You moved on with that Mexican, so what’s your deal?”

“First of all, he’s Puerto Rican,” Amanda replied, upset that Cassidy was again making racist comments. “And, secondly, that’s against the girl rules. You don’t date your friend’s ex’s.”

“Things just happened, Amanda. We have chemistry. It’s actually going to be ten months this weekend for us.” Amanda counted back the months.

“That would mean that you and him started dating in May of last year.”

“That’s what it means.”

“I was with him in May, Cassidy, and you knew that!” Amanda said loudly. Spencer broke up with Amanda in early July. She had a feeling that the reason Spencer broke up with her was because of another girl, but she had no idea that the other person was her friend.

“I did. But it’s your fault he was coming to me. I was giving him something you never did,” Cassidy responded with a smirk on her face.

“You–,” Amanda started as she took a step towards Cassidy.

“Don’t,” Lin said, jumping in front of Amanda before things escalated.

“Looks like the lower class people in her school taught her how to be ghetto,” Cassidy retorted, stepping away from Amanda.

“Shut up, Cassidy,” Lin snapped.

“I’m leaving,” Amanda announced.

“Amanda,” Lin began.

“No. I can’t be around people like her,” Amanda said before leaving.

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Angela opened the door for Jimmy. They greeted each other.

“Come with me,” Angela said, grabbing his hand and going to her bedroom with him. She let go of his hand after she closed the door. Angela went over to her bureau and took the chapstick and applied it. “Need some?”

“No,” he replied. Angela put it back on top of the bureau.

“Okay. Kiss me.”

“Yo- you wan- want me to ki- kiss you now?” he stutteringly asked. Angela nodded her head. “You’re not going to tell me how to before I do?”

“No. Jimmy, you’ll learn by hands on experience,” she replied. “Now come closer so we can practice.” She motioned him to come near her. “Are you ready?”

“I’m ready,” he nervously said. He tightly shut his eyes, puckered his lips hard, and leaned in.

“Okay,” Angela said, leaning back and putting her hand over his mouth. This was going to be more work than she anticipated. “We obviously need to start slow,” she said removing her hand from his mouth. “Relax, Jimmy. Don’t make it bigger than it is.” She came closer to him. They were now close enough to kiss. She reached over towards his head. “What’s wrong, Jimmy?” she asked when he pulled back.

“Sorry. It’s hot in here.” As he swung his arm to wipe the sweat off his forehead, he accidentally bopped Angela on top of her head.

“Ow!” Angela exclaimed, holding the part of her head where Jimmy hit her.

“Sorry! I was just trying to-”

“It’s okay,” Angela responded. She wasn’t hit that hard. She went over by the door and turned the fan on. When she came over to Jimmy she decided to go for it. At his pace, nothing would be learned. Jimmy’s eyes popped out as her lips met his. Angela put her arms around his neck. Not knowing where to put his hands, Jimmy placed his hands on his hips. “Don’t keep your mouth shut. You gotta move it.”

“Where do I put my hands?”

“On the girl.”

“Where?” Angela put his hands on her hips before placing her arms back around his neck. Jimmy blushed.

“Remember to move your lips with mine,” she said as they kissed. After a while, he relaxed and kept his lips in sync with hers. Angela slipped her tongue in his mouth.

“Thath’s thyour thongue,” Jimmy said, feeling it in his mouth.

“That’s the next step. Do what I do.” She let his tongue play with hers for a couple of seconds before she completely pulled away from him. “You’re ready,” she said, smiling. It felt good to help out a friend.

“Thanks,” he replied, giving her a cheesy grin.

“Now, since that’s done with you just gotta ask a girl out on a date. Is there anybody you like?”

“You—I mean not really. There’s no girl I really like at the moment,” he replied. Somebody knocked on the bedroom door.

“Hold on,” Angela said, opening the door. It was her Aunt Jerry.

“Is there a boy in the room?” she questioned, stepping into the bedroom.

“There is. And we’re kinda busy,” Angela replied.

“Busy doing what?” Jerry asked, crossing her arms as she glared at Jimmy. Her eyebrows went up in surprise. He was not the typical guy Angela usually dated.

“Aren’t you supposed to be with your kids and my sisters?”

“I’m here to get Tania’s Bratz doll that she left. She’s been crying about it all morning.” Angela went over by her bed and pulled the doll out from underneath the pillow.

“Here.” She handed it to her aunt.

“You still didn’t answer my question, Angela. What are you two doing in the bedroom that you couldn’t do in the TV room?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Angela knew her aunt liked to make a big deal out of things.

“It doesn’t matter, huh? I think I have an idea of what the two of you were doing or were about to do,” Jerry said, looking from Angela to Jimmy.

“We weren’t about to have sex,” Jimmy blurted out.

“If you say so. But, Angela, if you guys do, don’t forget to wear protection. You know perfectly well through experience what can happen if you don’t,” Jerry warned her niece before leaving the room. Angela rolled her eyes. There her aunt was again bringing up the previous year she wanted to forget. Jerry kept the bedroom door opened.

“Sorry about that,” Angela apologized as soon as she heard the front door shut.

“She said something about experience. You mind me asking what she was talking about?” Jimmy asked. Angela went over by the window and looked outside. She watched her aunt drive off. She continued to stare out of the window.

“I made a mistake last year.”

“You didn’t wear protection.”

“Yeah...and I got pregnant,” she admitted as her mind went back to when she first found out she was going to have a baby. It was one of the many times in her life that she avoided thinking or dealing with. That time had been one of the darkest moments for her. She made a choice about the baby that she partially regretted, but knew that it was for the best. “Not a lot of people knew about it. Just my family and a close friend.”

“What about the guy?”

“Jesse knew too. And his family.”

“Was he there for you?”

“He was. Jesse wanted to keep it, but–.” She stopped in fear that she might start to cry over her loss.

“What happened to the baby?” Jimmy asked.

“I don’t wanna talk about it,” she responded, moving away from the window. “Look, Jimmy, I wanna be alone.”

“Okay. I’ll go. See you at lunch Monday?” Angela nodded her head while giving him a weak smile.

**\*\*\*Chapter Twelve\*\*\***

*“... the art of confrontations.”*

Mercedez went behind Robbie at the library and covered his eyes. He was sitting at a table reading his American History book.

“Guess who,” she said, whispering in his ear. Robbie leaned back and snickered.

“My beautiful girlfriend.”

“Yup.” She kissed his cheek. She took a seat beside him and placed her book bag on top of the table.

“Why aren’t you at lunch with your friends right now?” Robbie and Mercedez had different lunch periods.

“I could be there.” She unzipped her book bag. She reached in for the extra bag of Lucky Charms she had packed that day. “But I’d rather be with you.” She hid the bag inside her book bag since the students of RHS were not allowed to eat inside the library.

“You were with me this morning instead of your girls.”

“And? I didn’t know I had a limit as to when we could be together.” Mercedez had hung out with her friends for years, yet she only got to spend, months with him, interpreted months.

“I didn’t say that. I like having you around,” he said, kissing her. “Only like?”

“Love,” he corrected pulling her chair closer to him. She put her arms around him as they kissed. Robbie had kept his word so far about trying not to hit her. Though he hadn’t put his hands on her since he struck her with the branch, she feared he would get physically abusive with her if she got him mad again. She tried to ignore her doubts of him actually changing for the better.

After all, she didn’t want to be alone, and at times, it felt as if he was the only one who got her. Her family was hardly speaking to her and it was getting harder to talk to her two best friends. She knew if she told her best friends the truth about Robbie, they would encourage her to break up with him and even tell her parent’s about their volatile relationship. “Mercedez,” Robbie called out. “Mercedez.”

“Huh?” She looked up, realizing he probably had to say her name a couple of times before getting her attention. She brushed her thoughts aside and attempted to concentrate on what Robbie was talking about.

“I was saying, spring break is next week. We should do something. Just the two of us.”

“I dunno if I’ll be able to since I’m on lock. But, I’ll try to sneak out.”

“I don’t want you getting in trouble because of me.”

“Don’t worry, papi. You’re worth it.”

“That’s why I love you,” he said, kissing her left dimple.

“I love you, too,” she said, smiling at him. “I got good news. My baby sister’s coming home today.” Stephanie was finally strong enough to breathe on her own without machines helping her to.

“That’s good.” Mercedes hadn’t filled him in as to what occurred about the glass incident.

“Hi, Robbie,” Gina said as she walked by their table along with Jackie.

“Hey,” he responded. He checked her out. Mercedes looked at what Gina had on. She wore a short pink cotton dress with white heels. Mercedes glanced down at her wardrobe. She had on a black and blue Pepe` feminine shirt along with blue jeans and white and black Jordan sneakers. Mercedes looked back at Robbie to find him still checking Gina out. Gina obviously liked to show more skin than Mercedes.

“I heard you and she went out for V-Tine’s Day,” Mercedes said, turning his head so he was looking at her.

“I did, but all I could think about was you.” He wrapped his arms around her. Mercedes embraced him, wondering if he found her as attractive as he found the other females he’d gotten intimate with.

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“Spring break!” Julio excitedly said after getting off the bus from school. “No school for a week,” he added.

“Yeah,” Julia said. She was not looking forward to staying home from school with her mother still mad at her. At least in school, Julia could see Eddie. Julia’s mother made sure that Eddie and Julia didn’t talk over the phone. Julia was only able to sneak a phone call to Eddie whenever her mother wasn’t home. She hated the distance and sneaking around to be with Eddie, but she wasn’t about to give him up. Both of them walked over by their house.

“What the—” Julio lifted up his Gucci shades from his eyes. A fancy black Rolls Royce stood right in front of their house.

“You don’t think it’s—” The chauffer of the car got out of the driver’s seat and opened the back door.



“Papa,” Julio said. Their father, Carlo, got out of the car. His short wavy black hair was slicked to the back. He had very little gray throughout his hair. Carlo had light brown eyes and tan skin. He was about the same height as Julio. Carlo wore a burgundy button-down shirt that was tucked in black slacks, and black dress shoes.

“Word is bond, my eyes are playing tricks on me,” Julia said, shocked to have seen her father. She closed her eyes for a few seconds before opening them up. Yup, her estranged father was actually standing right in front of her.

“I see him, too,” Julio replied just as surprised.

“Are you two going to just stand there, or are you guys going say hi to your old man?” Carlo asked them, walking towards them.

“Papa,” Julio said, giving him a big hug.

“Julio, you got taller,” Carlo said, putting his hands on his son’s shoulders. “Soon enough, you’ll be taller than me.”

“We gotta catch up,” Julio ecstatically told his father with a smile.

“We’ll do that later. But right now, I want to talk to your sister. Go inside and I’ll be there in a little bit.” Julio went inside the house. Julia stayed exactly where she was. Unlike Julio, she wasn’t sure if she was thrilled to see her father. She remained standing where she was as she watched her father, comparing how he looked now to how he looked three years ago when she last saw him. Not much had changed, He still looked young for his age. “Juliana,” he said, looking at his daughter.

“Hi,” she said, politely going over to him and kissing his cheek.

“Get in,” he told her as he opened the back door of the car. Julia got inside with her father following. They sat down. He closed the door behind him “I came here because, your mama called me crying a couple of weeks ago, saying that you’ve been having sex.” Julia felt her face burn red. Her father was the last person she wanted to talk with about her non-existent sex life. “You’re too young to be having sex. You’re only fourteen,” he told her with a look of concern on his face.

“I’m gonna be sixteen in June. And, Papa, I’m not—”

“So what? You’re still too young to be having sex.”

“Nothing happ—”

“Juliana, sex is serious, especially if you’re a girl. You can get pregnant, get any STDs. Do you know how many there are out there nowadays? Every day, it’s something new.”

“I didn’t—”

“I know I’m not around, but that doesn’t mean I don’t care or that you should be doing it at this age, even if it’s with your boyfriend.”

“I—”

“Your mama’s been worried sick about you and—”

“Papa!” Julia exclaimed. “I’m not having sex! I’m still a virgin,” she said, finally able to make a statement in what had to be one of the most awkward conversations she had ever had. Here was her father who never bothered visiting her for years, giving her the birds and bees talk. She would’ve preferred her mother have this talk to her about this again than him.

“Your mother said she found you on top of your boyfriend and she said she found a condom on the floor.”

“I was not on top of Eddie. We were kissing on the floor with our clothes on. That’s it.”

“What about the opened condom.”

“We were joking and we opened it and blew into it like a balloon. I promise you, Papa, that’s all that went down that day.”

“The bed?”

“Nothing happened,” she told him. He didn’t need to know that Eddie was on the bed.

“I believe you.” Carlo leaned back on the seat and crossed his legs.

“You believe me?” She expected her father to side with her mother and brother.

“I do. You’re a smart young lady, Juliana. I trust you. Just don’t have boys in your bedroom.”

“Thanks, Papa,” she said giving him a hug, smelling his Perry Ellis cologne.

“What I don’t get is why you and your mother share a bed. How many bedrooms does this place have?”

“Two.”

“This house is too small. You should have your own room,” Carlo said, glancing out of the window toward the house. “I’m going to talk to Gloria about it,” he said to himself. “What time does your mama get off from work?”

“Seven. You saw her yet?”

“No. Well...,” he started looking back at Julia. “You go inside and tell your brother I’ll be back around the time your mother gets home,” he said, playing with his infamous yellow canary diamond pinkie ring. Julia opened the door to get out.

“See you then.”

“One more thing. Don’t tell your mother I’m here. I want to surprise her,” he said.

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“I don’t believe my eyes,” Gloria said in astonishment when she came inside the house after seven. She placed the grocery bag on the counter top.

“Believe it, Gloria. Estoy aquí,” Carlo said, grinning.

“Carlo?”

“Come here,” he insisted, with arms wide open. Gloria embraced her husband, whom she hadn’t seen in years.

“If I knew you were coming, I would’ve come home from work earlier and gotten dressed up,” she said, looking down at her scrubs. She quickly ran her fingers through her hair.

“Don’t worry. You look pretty even with the scrubs on.” Gloria smiled. After changing clothes, they all sat down to eat as a family.

“Papa, these plátanos are good,” Julia said, eating the boiled plantains that her father flew in from Puerto Rico. Carlo had Julia boil them before their mother came home. He brought the rest of their dinner from the Café Lounge.

“True.”

“Thanks,” he said. “Gloria, I talked to Juliana and I think you just overreacted to a misunderstanding.”

“I saw what I saw, Carlo. You weren’t there,” Gloria replied.

“Give her the benefit of the doubt, Gloria. I trust her.” Gloria gave him an evil look. “What? You don’t?”

“If you were there—”

“My daughter is NOT a liar,” Carlo frustratingly told her. “You didn’t do it, did you, Juliana?”

“No,” Julia replied, thankful that her dad was on her side.

“You see. She’s telling the truth,” he said, drinking from the rum that he brought from Puerto Rico.

“You would believe anything anybody tells you but me,” Gloria responded, gazing down at her rice.

“Gloria! You’re really starting to piss me off!” Carlo exclaimed. Julio and Julia looked at their parents, knowing what would happen next. They always ended up arguing if they were put in the same room.

“I’m the one who should be pissed off!” Gloria snapped as she dropped her fork on her plate and glared at her husband. “I’ve been raising these kids all their lives, eight of those years without you, so don’t you come up in this house and try to tell me how I should discipline them,” she angrily told him.

“You call this place a house?” he questioned, throwing his hands in the air. “You’re sharing a bed with Juliana and—”

“Don’t try to divert this conversation. I’m talking about you not being there for your own kids!”

“What do you think I’m doing here? You called me and told me that Juliana had a problem, so I came.”

“It took you five years to come see them,” Gloria said.

“I saw them three years ago.”

“That’s when they went to see you on tour.”

“I got to make money somehow,” Carlo said, shrugging his shoulders.

“Of course you do,” she sarcastically said. “You always put your music in front of everything. Even your own children.”

“You know what, Gloria, I’m—”

“Stop!” Julio yelled. He was happy that his father was in town and that his family was sitting and eating together, but he couldn’t take them arguing.

“This is our first meal together as a family that we’ve had in years. Can’t we all just eat peacefully?” Julia asked.

“The both of you are right,” Carlo began. “But, your mother and I have some things to discuss. So go to your rooms and finish eating your meals there.” Julia and Julio both got up from the table with their plates and cups and went upstairs.

“Can’t keep those two in a room together,” Julio said to Julia so only she could hear as they walked up the stairs.

“I know. I wouldn’t be surprised if Papa leaves and never comes back,” Julia replied.

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Once Mercedes finished tying the shoelaces for her sneakers, she got up from the bench in the gym. Amanda walked along with Marcela, thankful that their gym teacher gave them a free period to do whatever they wanted.

“How was spring break?” Marcela asked.

“I can’t stand her,” Amanda said, ignoring Marcela’s statement

“Mercedes?” Marcela asked.

“Yes, her,” Amanda replied, glaring at Mercedes. “I saw her talking to Julio this morning again.”

“About what?”

“I don’t know. She only talks to him when she thinks I’m not looking or when she’s not with her boyfriend. I swear, I’m not going to let her take my boyfriend away from me,” Amanda insisted. She was not going to let another boyfriend cheat on her like Spencer did. If that meant doing whatever it took to make sure Mercedes stayed away from Julio, she was down.

“What are you gonna do about it?” Marcela questioned.

“You’ll see,” Amanda said, walking over to where Mercedes was standing dribbling a basketball and chatting to Keisha. As soon as she got close to Mercedes, Amanda brushed her shoulder hard against Mercedes and kept moving. Mercedes dropped the basketball and jumped in front of Amanda’s face.

“Don’t touch me,” Mercedes said, irritated. Keisha hopped in between them before Mercedes could get a hit in.

“Then don’t touch my boyfriend,” Amanda snapped, thankful that Keisha had gotten between them.

“Ain’t nobody touching your boyfriend.” Mercedes tried to get closer to Amanda to retaliate. Keisha used her hands to calm Mercedes down.

“I’m not dumb. Every time I turn around, there you are touching or feeling on Julio. You broke up with him, so leave him alone!”

“Don’t tell me what to do! I’ll talk to him whenever the hell I feel like it.”

“That’s what you think. I will get you back if I see you talking to him again,” Amanda threatened, thinking of what she would do if she did indeed see Mercedes talking to Julio again.

“Get it through your insecure ass head. I don’t want Julio.”

“That’s bull. It’s obvious you want him. The only problem is that he doesn’t want you.”

“If I wanted to be with Julio and if I didn’t have a man, I’d be with him. Trust me. He’d choose me over you any day.”

“Oooh!” Amanda angrily exclaimed as she twirled around. She was not going to let Mercedes get away with this.

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“Robbie,” Amanda said to him during his study hall. She took a seat right next to him.

“Can I help you?”

“Yes, you can. You see, your girlfriend—”

“What about her?”

“I should start off by saying that I’m Amanda, Julio’s girlfriend,” she replied. If this was going to work, she had to sound convincing.

“And?”

“Julio is Mercedes’s ex.”

“I know,” he said.

“They both seem to get a little too chummy whenever they’re together.”

“They’ve known each other for a long time.”

“Does that give them the right to cheat on us?” Amanda questioned Robbie.

“Mercedes and I weren’t together in February.”

“I’m not talking about February. I’m talking about now. They’re always touching each other at school. Who knows what they’re doing when they’re away from school and when we’re not around.”

“She wouldn’t cheat on me.”

“Then why did I catch her and Julio kissing just the other day?” Amanda asked, stretching the truth. She didn’t exactly catch their lips locked, but they were close enough to be doing so.

“You saw them kissing?” he asked, looking at Amanda.

“Yes.” Amanda made a frown. “I wanted to break them up when I saw it, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. I’m going to forgive Julio, but if they do it again, I’ll have to break it up with him.” Robbie got up and left the room. Amanda grinned. Payback accomplished.

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Mercedes stood up from the floor when she saw Robbie after school was finished.

“Is everything okay?” she asked, seeing how upset he looked.

“We need to talk,” he said.

“Okay.”

“Not here,” he replied. He walked ahead of her as she followed him. He led her outside the building away from where everybody was.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, sensing that something was off.

“You’re not gonna make me look like a joke.”

“What?”

“You think I didn’t know what you’ve been doing behind my back?” he asked, coming closer to her. Seeing this, Mercedes backed away from him, in fear.

“What are you talking about?”

“Julio. I know you’ve been hooking up with him whenever I’m not around. He’s probably the reason why you didn’t make an effort to be with me over spring break!”

“That’s not true. I told you before I probably wasn’t gonna be able to hang out during spring break since I was on lock. I would never cheat on—”

“Yes you would, you slut!” He grabbed her and slammed her body against the brick wall of the building. Mercedes winced, feeling a sharp pain run through her back.

“He— he’s my friend. Tha-that’s it,” Mercedes cried out to Robbie as he held onto her arms tightly against the building.

“He's you're ex!” he yelled as he let go of her and backslapped her. Her face stung as tears came from her eyes. “You better not let me catch you talking to Julio again,” Robbie said in a low voice.

“Or what?” she foolishly asked.

“Mercedez, you know what I'm capable of doing to you.” He slammed her head against the wall, causing her to have a sudden pain. He let go of her face. She touched the side of her face where he had hit her. She wiped her bottom lip that bled. There was the side of Robbie she despised. The dark, angry guy who struck her whenever he was upset. This time she didn't understand why he was upset at all. She never cheated, or even tried to cheat on him. Something was off.

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Adam, RHS's starting linebacker, approached Angela right after the third period was over.

“You're looking hot as usual,” Adam said to her.

“What do you want, Adam?” Angela asked him as she continued to go over to her fourth period class.

“You,” he replied grinning as he walked beside her. Angela crossed her arms. He was so not her type. She was aware of him dating many girls, even when he had a girlfriend, for short period of times. She couldn't see what other girls saw in him. He wasn't even that good-looking.

“I don't think your ex would approve.”

“Gina won't care. She went out with Robbie for Valentine's Day.”

“Travis would care.”

“You don't care about him.”

“I do care about his feelings. And, besides, he's your friend.” She hadn't talked to Travis since their argument at the party, but she still didn't want to hurt him anymore than she already did.

“So what? Come on, Angela, I know you've wanted me since you first laid eyes on me back in freshman year.” He put his arm over her shoulder. Angela rolled her eyes. They met during one of the football and cheerleading socials. They used to hang around the same people back when Angela was a cheerleader.

“Okay, Adam,” she said removing his arm from her shoulders. She was used to Adam's antics by now. It was so him to flirt with any breathing female.



“Look, Angela, you did me a favor by stabbing that slut Rachel. Let me return the favor by taking you out.”

“She’s not a slut,” Angela snapped. If anything, he was as much as what he was calling her since he had a girlfriend when he was seeing Rachel on the side.

“Why are you defending the girl you stabbed?”

“If I could take what I did to her back, I would,” she admitted. If she could go back that night, she would’ve walked away from Rachel, regardless of what she had said about Jesse. She knew that if the same situation happened now, she would’ve had enough self-control to walk away and not resort to violence.

“Just let me take you out.”

“Adam, no.” Jimmy waved across the hallway to Angela. Angela smiled and waved back to him before he went inside his next class.

“So you don’t wanna go out on a date with me ‘cause you’re getting down with Pee Wee?” he asked, sounding offended.

“His name is Jimmy. And I’m not getting down with him.”

“Since when have you ever been just friends with a guy?”

“We’re just friends.”

“You’re just hanging out with him to get Sal mad since he’s going out with Jackie.”

“My friendship with Jimmy has nothing to do with making Sal jealous.”

“Like you don’t know,” he said as they came close to Angela’s next class.

“What are you talking about, Adam?”

“What’s Sal’s last name?”

“De Laurentis.”

“And what’s Pee Wee’s last name?”

“I dunno. Why does it matter?”

“I think you know,” he replied as he laughed and walked away from her.

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Keisha opened the front door of her house. She closed the door after Mercedes got in.

“What’s up?” Mercedes asked as she removed her Net’s jacket off.

“Not much, son. I’m surprised you came,” Keisha said, taking the jacket from her and hanging on the wooden coat rack that was by the door. Mercedes cautiously sucked her bottom lip when she wasn’t talking so that it wouldn’t show where it was bruised.

“I’m here.” She hadn’t hung out with her best friends in a while. Since she was still grounded, she was only able to see them at school and even at school she would spend more time with Robbie than them. She decided to go over Keisha’s without her father knowing to catch up with Julia and Keisha. After taking her Timberlands off and leaning them by the door, she followed Keisha to the tan-colored carpet of her room. Julia was already there lying on the floor reading a Jet magazine. The Sony Stereo was playing a Sean Paul song on Power 105.3.

“Cedez,” Julia said.

“Julz,” she replied. Keisha got onto her bed and picked up the Seventeen magazine that was on her bed face down. Mercedes leaned against the wall. She looked at the alarm clock beside her bed. Above the alarm clock was a purple Bible with a bookmark inside of it. Mercedes pulled out a piece of yarn that she had in her pocket and began to twist it over her index finger.

“You read that?” Mercedes asked, pointing her head towards the Bible. Keisha looked up from the magazine.

“Yeah. I try to read it every day. Yo, believe it or not, most of the things I go through in life happened in the Bible in some way. It’s exactly the same, but it gets me through problems at times.”

“For real?” Mercedes asked, while she undid the yarn around her finger. She wondered if what Keisha said was true. Mercedes knew her relationship with God wasn’t so good. She didn’t even want to think about it, in thoughts of how God couldn’t stand to look at her for all of her mistakes.

“Yeah, Cedez, you should read it. It’s actually mad interesting.” Julia looked up from her magazine.

“What happened to your lip?” Julia asked, putting the magazine down. Mercedes’s bottom lip was a bit swollen. Mercedes sucked her bottom lip, panicking. She dropped the piece of yarn.

“Nothing,” she quickly answered. Keisha glanced up from her magazine and squinted to see her friend’s lip.

“Girl, you got in a fight?”

“Nah...it’s just a cold sore.”

“That ain’t no cold sore, Cedez,” Keisha asked. “It’s swollen. Who clocked you in ya mouth? It was Amanda, wasn’t it? I know you and her is beefing. If it was her–,”

“Like I’d let her white ass hit me,” Mercedes responded, trying her hardest to keep her bottom lip sucked.

“Yeah, but you’d let Robbie hit you,” Julia said bluntly. Julia wasn’t buying anymore of Mercedes’s excuses for her bruises. It was time she confront her best friend, and maybe help save her from a dangerously capricious relationship.

“He never hit me,” she quickly replied in a high pitched voice.

“And you’re defending him.”

“Don’t accuse my boyfriend.” Mercedes said with more reassurance in her voice as she got away from the wall and closer to Julia.

“¿Piensas que soy estúpida?” Julia asked, getting up from the floor.

“English, please,” Keisha requested.

“When your right eye got busted you told everybody that you fell over a branch but I know Robbie’s the one who hit you. You don’t gotta be with him if he’s treating you like that,” Julia said as she held Mercedes’s chin.

“Whatever,” Mercedes replied, slowly backing away from Julia’s hand.

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Mercedes hopped off her bike and placed it beside her house.

“Get in here, Mercedes,” Mateo said, once she came into the kitchen. “Where were you?”

“At the hospital,” she responded. He didn’t need to know that she made a pit stop at her friend’s house after she went to go her mother. “I told you I was going.” She was still grounded, but her father allowed her to go see her mother.

“What’s that on your mouth?” he asked, looking at her lip that was a bit swollen.

“Cold sore,” she lied. Mercedes made her way up the stairs.

“Get back here.” Mercedes turned around. Mateo had her report card for the third marking period in his hands. She went over to him and glanced down at her report card. “I don’t understand you, Mercedes. You’ve got all of the time in the world to get better grades. You’re not involved in any school activities, not even basketball, yet you managed to get two “Fs”, a “D”, a “C” on your report card,” he said in disappointment.

“I’ll bring my grades up,” Mercedesz replied. She knew her grades were slipping, but she didn’t know it was that bad. The geometry and biology test that she skipped and therefore got a zero on, hindered her grades the most. She got the F’s in her English II honors class and her geometry class. She had a “D” in her biology class and a “C” in World History.

“When? You could get left back this year if you keep playing around like this.”

“I’m not playing around.” She put the report card back on the table.

“Read this.” Mateo pointed to her report card to her teacher’s comments. Three of her teachers commented about how Mercedesz seemed distracted and disorganized. “I thought your taking your meds again would help you get back on track, but it’s not, so I’m going to call your doctor so he can up the dose.”

“No, Dad. I’m fine. The dose is fine,” Mercedesz insisted, taking her report card.

“Are you even taking your medication?”

“Of course,” she fibbed as she folded her report card in half. “I just have to concentrate harder.” She folded the paper once again.

“I’m home,” Barbra said. She came over to the kitchen. She had Stephanie in her arms. When she saw Mercedesz, she held on to Stephanie tighter. Stephanie was much healthier since she had left the hospital. She had black hair and blue eyes. Mercedesz gazed at the baby sister her step-mother forbade her to hold.

“Are we done?” Mercedesz asked her father. She did not want to be in the same room as Barbra.

“Yes, but you’re going to be grounded for longer for these grades,” he added before she headed up the stairs.

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Julia uneasily walked up to Robbie by his locker during the lunch break. She waited for most of the students to go inside the lunchroom so the hallways could be clear. Since Mercedesz had lunch detention that day, she decided to talk to Robbie at the library at his study hall. She found him by his locker on her way to the library.

“Can I talk to you?” Julia asked.

“Okay,” Robbie replied, giving her an odd look. They had never spoken before. He placed his American history notebook back in his locker and pulled out another textbook for his English 4 class. Julia looked inside his locker. To her surprise, it was orderly. His motorcycle

helmet rested on top of his neatly stacked notebooks, and his textbooks were straightly lined one right next to each other. “What did you wanna talk about?” he asked.

“Mercedez,” Julia replied, wondering why they would talk about another topic besides Mercedez. “She’s my best friend, I care about her, and I don’t want anything bad to happen to her.” Mercedez was her best friend and she couldn’t let a guy put his hand on her. Even if that meant getting out of her comfort zone, she was going to do whatever to protect Mercedez.

“Neither do I.” He wiped a smudge that was on his helmet with his thumb.

“Really?” Julia sarcastically responded, not believing him.

“What are you trying to say?”

“It doesn’t take a genius to figure out how her eye got busted. Or who got her eye to look like it did,” Julia added, boldly making eye contact with him.

“She fell over a branch.”

“It’s not just her eye. I saw her lip when it was swollen, and I know it was you.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he responded as he calmly closed his locker and went to the library. Julia let out a breath. As nervous as she was, she was relieved she had said something to him. Hopefully, Mercedez wouldn’t get upset by it.

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“I came as soon as you called,” Mercedez said, stepping into Robbie's house looking down at her umbrella. “I had to wait a hot minute for my dad and Barbra to leave since I'm still on lock.” With the door still open, Mercedez shook her wet umbrella off outside. “So, I didn’t see you at school today,” Mercedez said as she turned around to Robbie. His flustered look alarmed her. He walked up behind her and slammed the door. Mercedez jumped as she dropped her umbrella. “Di-did I do-do something wrong?” she asked, turning to face him. Robbie walked behind her again. She turned around so they were facing each other.

“Since when do we tell people our business?”

“What?” she said in a confused voice.

“You're gonna act like you dunno? Your stupid friend wanted to talk to me and she said she knew about your eye and the bruises. You told her,” he accused, walking towards her with his fist balled up. Shaking, she backed up away from him.

“Julia?”

“YEAH, JULIA! Why does she have to know our business?”

“I didn't say any—”

“Yes, you did, you liar!” He grabbed Mercedes's flip cell phone from her and threw it across the room. After hitting the wall, the battery and the cell phone parted ways. Mercedes took more steps back. Her hand slowly reached her umbrella that was by the door. She had never seen him that irate. “Don't touch the umbrella,” Robbie said, seeing this from the corner of his eye. Ignoring his request, she quickly picked it up. “I said PUT THE UMBRELLA DOWN!” he exclaimed coming towards her.

“No,” she said in a small voice.

“What'd you say?” he questioned, about a foot away from her.

“I-I said no. I- I'm-I'm not gonna let you hit me.” She backed up to the door.

“I CAN DO WHATEVR I WANT TO YOU!” He snatched her arms. He thrust her body off balance. Mercedes's body fell, hitting the hard wooden floor. Her jaw snapped up, sending a pain through her face. Her kneecaps hurt a little bit. Holding her chin, Mercedes dared to gaze up at Robbie's icy glare. His eyes scrutinized her as his mouth formed a tight line. Her mind went blank. She didn't know what to think, or how to act to his repetitive actions. The front door opened.

“Hey, Robbie I—,” Maria, Robbie's roommate, began. She placed the brown paper bag of groceries that she had in her hand on the floor. “Oh, my gosh! Honey, are you okay?” Maria knelt down and helped Mercedes sit up. Maria pushed Mercedes's hair out of her face. “You're not bleeding. And no bruises,” Maria said as she continued to examine her. “What happened?” Maria asked, glancing from Mercedes to Robbie. Mercedes kept her eyes on the wooden floor, trying not to cry.

“She fell over her umbrella,” Robbie finally said in a much calmer voice as he closed the front door that Maria forgot to close. Maria turned to Mercedes to hear what she had to say, but Mercedes remained silent.

“Aren't you gonna help her up?” Maria questioned him.

“She's got two hands.” He walked out of that room and into the kitchen.

“I told you to stay away from him for a reason,” Maria said in a low voice knowing Robbie was out of earshot.

“He didn't hit me.”

“He did. Mercedes, you need to end it before things get worse.” She obviously wasn't buying a thing Robbie or Mercedes said.

“I can't,” Mercedes said, finally looking up. She took a deep breath so she wouldn't cry.

“Why? Because you're in love? Just break it off with him. I'll talk to him so he doesn't bother you.”

“Don't,” Mercedes said, getting up from the floor. “It's none of your business.”

“Fine, but don't say I didn't warn you.”

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Mercedes warily walked over to Robbie the next morning by his locker. There was time before homeroom. “Hey,” she started.

“Hey,” he replied, grabbing out the books he needed for his morning classes. He kept his eyes on the books he was taking out.

“I'm sorry. For Julia finding out and for everything else I do that gets you so mad,” she continued. If she was the making him so irate, maybe she should apologize for it. The night after she and Robbie argued at his house, she contemplated how their relationship could work. Maybe it was something she was doing that was causing him to react so violently towards her. Perhaps if she pleased him more that would get her to stay on his good side and away from his dark, abusive side. “Robbie,” she added, as she touched his arm to get him to look at her.

“It's okay. I– Mercedes?” Robbie mouth slightly dropped as he glanced at her. She was wearing an orange tight V-neck short-sleeved shirt along with a short white mini- skirt. Mercedes wore darker makeup with her newly highlighted her dark brown hair with honey brown streaks.

“Yeah, it's me,” she said giving him a coy smile. “I thought I'd do something to make you happy.” She kissed his cheek. She wasn't used to wearing her clothes so tight or so short or putting on so much makeup, but if it satisfied Robbie, she was down.

“Wow. You look–wow,” he grinned as he checked her out.

“Speechless?” she asked, putting her arms around his shoulders. She gave him a kiss. He put his books back in his opened locker and wrapped his arms right above her derriere. “I love you, Robbie.”

“I love you, too,” he replied, kissing her neck.

“None of that! You two, get off each other,” Mrs. Barrington said to them as she passed them by. Robbie and Mercedes laughed.

“We can finish what we were doing later,” Mercedes said as she held his hands.

“Cool. I’m gonna go talk to Vic.”

“All right, papi. I’ll see you later,” she added, giving him another kiss. As she left him, she looked back and saw him still checking her out. She grinned.

“Damn, girl,” Keisha said when she saw Mercedes come by the Coca-Cola machine. “You auditioning to be a honey in a music video?”

“Ha, ha,” Mercedes said.

“Really, what’s good with the new look?” Julia asked.

“Don’t talk to me,” Mercedes said quietly.

“That outfit shows us more of your voluptuous assets,” Adam said, looking her up and down. Adam was by the soda machine talking to Julia about a question he had in chemistry.

“Is that a problem?” Mercedes asked.

“Not at all,” Adam said with a smile, still looking at her curves.

“You mad at me?” Julia said, responding to Mercedes’s previous statement to her.

“What do you think? You ran your fat mouth to Robbie.”

“I was looking out for you.”

“Just do me a favor and don’t do me any favors.”

“Mercedes, oh my freaking goodness! You’re mad stupid if you can’t see that he don’t love you,” Julia snapped. Julia wasn’t the type to get loud or get this angry but, once in a blue moon, she would explode, not being able to hold her composure.

“He does love me. You just hating ‘cause he ain’t with you.”

“Look, chica, I already got a man. And even if I didn’t, I’m glad I ain’t with him ‘cause I don’t need an asshole for a boyfriend.” Mercedes impulsively punched Julia in her jaw. Julia jumped back and didn’t say anything.

“Don’t talk about my boyfriend,” Mercedes snapped in anger. Who was Julia to talk about her man like that? Maybe if it was the only the first time Julia said something about Robbie, she wouldn’t have reacted like she did, but it wasn’t the first time Julia decided to stick her nose where it didn’t belong.

“Girl, you need to calm down,” Keisha said, holding her back.



“Hey, let her go,” Adam said. “I want to see a cat fight,” he added as Keisha shot Adam a dirty look.

“Yeah, let her go. I’ll hit you ten times harder than Robbie ever hit you!” Julia exclaimed, stepping up to Mercedes. Mercedes’s punch made her lose it even more. Once Julia lost it, it took her a long time to back down.

“The only reason you talking crazy smack is ‘cause Keisha’s holding me back!” Mercedes snapped, trying to get out of Keisha’s hold.

“Keisha, let her go! I swear to you, Mercedes, I’ll finish what Robbie started and blind you in your right eye,” Julia snapped, waiting for Keisha to release Mercedes.

“Shut up, Julia,” Keisha said. “You taking it too far.”

“Heifer, don’t tell me to shut up.” Keisha pushed Mercedes off of her to go up to Julia.

“Don’t start with me, dog. I will whoop your ass all the way back to Puerto Rico,” Keisha snapped. Adam got in Mercedes’s way to keep her from attacking Julia. As much as he wanted to see a fight, he knew he had to stop it.

“Come blind me in my right eye,” Mercedes said. Julia and Keisha stopped arguing. “I said come blind me in my right eye!” she exclaimed, looking right into Julia’s eyes as she began to breathe heavily, nostrils flaring in and out. Keisha, Adam, and Julia all looked at Mercedes in shock by her intensity. Although they all stared at Mercedes, the only person Mercedes focused on was Julia. The door of a nearby classroom opened.

“Did you guys not hear the late bell ring?” Mrs. Kinston asked. “You all need to leave, because you’re disrupting my class.” Julia looked from Mrs. Kinston to Mercedes, who hadn’t taken her eyes off of her. She finally left.

**\*\*\*Chapter Thirteen\*\*\***

*“... toast to the truth.”*

Amanda drank as Madison proposed a toast about a charity event she planned for St. Rose to the guests at the country club. It was a black-tie benefit dinner for a charity for children who had cancer. Amanda tried to avoid looking at Spencer and Cassidy, who were at the same table as she was.

“... And so far, we’re close to the amount we planned to raise for the We Choose Life Foundation,” Madison continued, speaking to her peers and the parents of her peers. “So, keep writing those checks so we can meet or even surpass our goal,” she added before taking a seat. The people clapped after her toast.

“The waiters will just give you guys alcohol without asking for IDs right in front of your parents?” Julio asked when a waiter dropped off a bottle of champagne and bottle of wine at the table though nobody at the table was 21.

“No one cares when you’ve got money,” Spencer replied as he picked up the bottle of wine, took the top off of it, and poured drinks for himself and Cassidy. Julio nodded his head as he adjusted his navy blue tie. Amanda took the bottle of Cristal and poured herself another glass.

“Do you want some?” she asked Julio. Julio pointed his champagne flute toward her as she poured some in for him. “Sorry if it’s awkward,” she said into his ear while she placed the bottle down. Julio seemed a bit out of place and uncomfortable. It was his first time meeting her friends.

“I’m okay,” he replied, right before he took a sip of the drink. He gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“So, what’s up with you two?” Spencer questioned Amanda and Julio.

“We’re dating,” Amanda responded, not wanting to make conversation with him. She still couldn’t believe that Spencer had cheated on her with one of her friends. Having Julio as her date to the event didn’t help her feel less distress over Spencer and Cassidy’s relationship. Although she no longer had feelings for Spencer she was still hurt. Questions from why wasn’t she good enough for Spencer to, was she good enough for Julio ran in her mind.

“Julio, like I was trying to say before, did you know that Amanda and I dated?” Spencer asked, snapping Amanda away from her insecurities. Amanda frowned at Spencer for bringing up the fact that they once dated.

“No. But I’m sure she was gonna tell me later.”

“We dated for a year. We broke up in July,” Spencer continued, just as the food arrived.

“Really?” Julio asked, looking at Amanda. That was the same month they hooked up at the party over the summer. He should have known that he was her rebound guy at the party. The waiter set the plates of food before each person.

“Yes, really. He broke up with me in July even though he started seeing another girl for over two months while we were together,” Amanda added, crossly looking from Spencer to Cassidy.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Spencer said..

“That’s funny because Cassidy already told me several weeks ago.”

“He’s with me right now. Get over it,” Cassidy piped in, reaching over to hold Spencer’s hand.

“I’ve been over him. I never thought you, being my friend, would stoop to that level to steal my boyfriend,” Amanda snapped.

“She’s obviously not your friend,” Julio said.

“Shut it, Mexican,” Cassidy started. “This is a conversation between us. Not you,” Cassidy rudely replied while she gave Julio a dirty look.

“I’m not Mexican, and even if I was, I wouldn’t appreciate your degrading my nationality,” Julio snapped as his face turned slightly red.

“He’s right,” Amanda began “So if you say something else about my boyfriend, there’s going to be a problem.”

“Oooh! I’m scared,” Cassidy sarcastically replied.

“What’d we miss?” Lin asked as she, Madison, and Vic joined the conversation.

“Cassidy’s acting like a bitc–” Amanda started.

“I’m not acting. I am one. And so are you,” Cassidy interrupted.

“Cassidy, quit it,” Lin said.

“Lin, seriously, stop telling me what to do,” Cassidy replied.

“She’s right, Cassidy. It’d be nice if we can get through this benefit dinner without arguing,” Madison said.

“Whatever,” Cassidy began. “I don’t know why Amanda’s here anyways. It’s not like she goes to St. Rose anymore.”

“Who cares?” Madison questioned.

“Of course that’s what you would say. It’s not like she—” Cassidy began.

“Shut up, Cassidy,” Amanda said, fed up with Cassidy’s antics.

“Should I really shut up? Even about the real reason why you don’t go to St. Rose anymore?” Cassidy questioned. Amanda glared at Cassidy knowing that the secret was going to come out of her mouth. Amanda’s mind raced as she tried to figure a way for Cassidy to shut up. She kept this secret for too long for it to come out like this, without her being able to tell people herself. She was ashamed of the truth behind her expulsion; her friends from St. Rose might never speak to her if they found out about her lies.

“She doesn’t go because she wanted to try public schooling,” Lin said in Amanda’s defense.

“Is that what she told everybody?” Cassidy asked, as she took a sip out of the wine. “I know for a fact that Amanda didn’t leave St. Rose on her own terms. She was kicked out.” Everyone at the table turned to where Amanda was sitting.

“Cassidy, I thought you said you wouldn’t say anything,” Spencer said. Spencer was the only person that Amanda told about why she was kicked out.

“Amanda didn’t get kicked out,” Madison said. “Did you?” she asked, after Amanda remained quiet.

“You told me you didn’t go there this year ‘cause you wanted to try public school,” Julio said to a silent Amanda.

“It’s more to it than that. See, I—” Amanda started.

“She stole the final exam for one of her AP classes and got caught. St. Rose was planning on pressing charges, but, of course, her father came to the rescue,” Cassidy informed the table.

“What’d her dad do?” Vic asked.

“He bribed them into not pressing charges by giving them a million dollar donation for a new wing at St. Rose and, in return, St. Rose couldn’t prosecute Amanda. And St. Rose also banned Amanda from returning to St. Rose as a student.” People at the table waited for Amanda to deny what Cassidy had just said. Amanda picked up her glass and drank the rest of what was in it. Amanda sighed in relief; the truth wasn’t so bad after all. She was relieved it was out in the open and she no longer had to keep it a secret. As Amanda felt people staring at her, she poured some more Cristal into her glass.

“So that’s why St. Rose is building a new wing for the library,” Lin said. “I can’t believe you lied to us, Amanda,” Lin said, looking at her.

“Neither can I,” Madison said in disappointment.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” Cassidy asked, smirking.

“Toast to the truth,” Amanda told the table as she held up her glass.

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After saying her prayers, Julia got up from her knees and sat on her bed. She looked over by her nightstand to a picture of her, Keisha, and Mercedes. It was a picture they took over the summer at the boardwalk at Seaside Heights. Julia sighed. In the picture, Mercedes had just won a huge flamingo from a basketball shooting game at the boardwalk. Julia glanced over to the side of her room to where the flamingo that Mercedes won for her was.

Although she wanted to call Mercedes to squash the beef, she stopped herself. She wasn’t over Mercedes’s violence towards her. Over their years of friendship, that was the first time Mercedes hit her. It was to the point that Julia could barely recognize her best friend. Mercedes just wasn’t the same to her. Besides her change in wardrobe and appearance, Mercedes became all about Robbie, making him number one in her life, neglecting her friendships, among other things.

There was a knock on the bedroom door. “Come in,” Julia called out to whoever it was.

“Hi, nena,” Gloria said as she came inside the bedroom.

“Hey,” Julia replied. Gloria went over by the bed and sat down.

“Were you just praying?”

“Yeah.” Julia took a seat on the floor. They haven’t talked much since the incident when her mother found Eddie and her in a compromising position.

“You always liked to pray since you were a little girl.” Gloria put her hand on top of Julia’s head. “I don’t want us to be like this,” she continued as she ran her fingers through her daughter’s hair. Julia smiled. She always loved it when her mother did that. “What I’m trying to say, Juliana, is lo siento for not talking to you for so long. You are my daughter and I should have talked to you instead of ignoring you and the problem. I trust you. The thought of you having sex at this age was just so heartbreaking for me.” She stopped playing with Julia’s hair. “But, if you and Eddie are having sex, know that I’d rather you wait, but I want you to trust me to tell me these things and I want you to be safe, Juliana.” Julia looked at her mother. She was surprised that this was coming out of her mouth. It was obvious that it was hard for her mother to talk about that. “Always wear protection and get on the pill so—”

“Mama,” Julia began as she sat down on the bed next her mother. “Thank you for being so understanding, but you don’t got nothing to worry about. Eddie and I aren’t having sex. I don’t plan on taking that next step until I’m married and Eddie knows that.” Julia told her mother what really happened the day she caught Eddie in the bedroom. Gloria laughed after Julia finished.

“Oh, nena,” Gloria said, as she touched her face. “You’re growing up so fast,” she added as she smiled at her daughter.

“I know, Ma,” Julia replied, giving her mother a warm hug.

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Angela studied Jimmy as he rambled on about his date with a freshman. They were at the library during lunch.

“... Then Mindy goes, I like you even though it’s the first date. So I tell her that I like her, too. Then we kissed,” Jimmy said as he opened his Jello.

“How was it?” She looked at his nose. He and Sal had the same long nose.

“Good.” He took a bite out of his snack. “Thanks for helping me. We didn’t use our tongues, though. Anyways, after the kiss, I asked Mindy to be my girlfriend and she said yes.”

“You asked her to be your girlfriend after just one date?” She glanced at his head. It was the same shape as Sal’s.

“I did. You don’t think it’s too soon?” Jimmy asked in a worried voice.

“It’s however the two of you feel.” She noticed he and Sal shared a similar worried facial expression.

“Good. ‘Cause I don’t think it’s too soon. After all, Mindy’s—”

“You said you had a brother,” Angela cut in. She had a feeling that they were brothers, but she wanted confirmation.

“I do. He actually goes to this school.”

“What’s his name?”

“Salvatore,” Jimmy responded while he finished his snack. “Or as most people call him, Sal.”

“Oh.” Just as she thought.

“What?” Jimmy asked, sensing something was off.

“Your brother and I had a thing a couple of months ago, but—”

“A thing? Did you guys go out?”

“Not really. We weren’t even boyfriend and girlfriend.”

“So, you guys kissed before.”

“More than kissed. We hooked up a couple of times. But that was then, not now,” she added when she saw Jimmy turn a bit red. “Last time I talked to him was January and it’s May.” Angela placed her hand on top of his. “Jimmy, I want you to know that I’m your friend ‘cause I enjoy your company, not because I’m trying to get back at Sal for him dating this girl I don’t like.”

“As my friend, I believe you,” Jimmy said as he gave her a half smile.

“Good. Now continue to tell me about Cindy.” She took her hand away.

“Mindy.”

“Mindy. Sorry,” she said, thankful that he was on the same page with her about their friendship.

**\*\*\*Chapter 14\*\*\***

*“... it only takes one night.”*

Mrs. Kinston handed Mercedes her progress report. Mercedes opened it up to see her grades. “B” in phys Ed, “C” in World History, damn, “D” in biology, damn, “F” Geometry and English, hot damn. Mercedes sunk into her seat as she thought about whether she should start taking her meds. She knew she had to do something so she wouldn’t get left back. She hated her meds, but they helped her concentrate and when she was on them, her grades were better. “Mercedes, see me after class,” Mrs. Kinston said.

After class, Mercedes waited for her to speak. “I’ve told you countless times that your skirts must be fingertip length and pull your shirt down.” Mercedes looked down at what she was wearing. She had on a silk green shirt that barely covered the bottom half of her stomach and a short brown mini skirt.

“My bad,” she replied, not meaning it. She tried to pull her shirt down so her stomach wasn’t showing. She wasn’t planning to change her wardrobe anytime soon. With her new look, Robbie was paying more attention to her and wasn’t checking out any other girl. At least not in front of her.

“Now, Mercedes, lately, you’ve been slacking off. If there’s trouble or a problem, feel free to talk to me about them.”

“There’s no problem.”

“Okay, so I want to see a change for the better in you, Mercedes, okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Here’s the extra credit report.” Mercedes stared at the requirements and saw that it had to be five pages. “Mercedes, if you start doing your homework, get better grades on your quizzes, and test, you’ll be lucky to get a D in my class. However, if you do all of that and the extra credit, you’ll definitely get at least a C in my class.” She nodded her head, taking the sheet of paper. “The choice is yours.” Mercedes got up from her desk, staring down at her paper. She walked out of her classroom.

Mercedes looked up when she heard the familiar loud laughter of Keisha. She smiled. She could always hear Keisha before she saw her. She stopped smiling when she saw Julia was next to her. Mercedes tried to turn away so they wouldn’t see her. She hated the fact that she was no longer talking to her best friend. Even though she didn’t want to admit it, Mercedes understood why Julia talked to Robbie, but she couldn’t get over what Julia said about blinding her and hitting her ten times harder than Robbie ever had.



“Girl, turn around. We see you!” Keisha called out as she made her way towards Mercedes. Mercedes turned around to Keisha. She didn’t have a problem with Keisha. Julia stood slightly behind Keisha and refused to look at Mercedes. “So, I was thinking, we, all three of us, together can do something this weekend like movies or bowling, like we best friends used to do.”

“Can’t. I’m on lock.”

“She wouldn’t have wanted to even if she wasn’t on lock,” Julia mumbled.

“What’d you say?” Mercedes questioned, not in the mood for Julia’s remarks.

“Yo, ya’ll both need to get over this lil’ drama ya’ll got going on,” Keisha cut in. “I’m tired of it. We supposed to be down ass girls and ya’ll beefing over some dude.”

“That’s not why I’m beefing with her,” Mercedes replied.

“Then what is it?” Keisha asked. Julia gazed down at her book bag.

“It doesn’t even matter to her. If she did, she would’ve apologized. But of course, why would she apologize when I was wrong and she was right, as usual. Isn’t she always right?” Mercedes questioned sarcastically.

“Whatever. I’m not doing this today,” Julia said, walking away from them, feeling hurt that Mercedes talked as if she wasn’t even in the room. Julia especially didn’t like it when Mercedes mocked her by saying she was perfect. As Julia walked away, she wondered if they were ever going to be friends again.

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“Hey, Amanda,” Julio said, kissing Amanda after he opened the door to his house.

“Wow, this house looks better than the other one,” Amanda replied as she got inside the new and bigger house Julia and Julio’s father bought for his family before he returned to Puerto Rico.

“It does. You can’t stay long ‘cause my mom’s gonna be here in about two hours and I’m grounded.” Julio placed his arm around her waist.

“Is that enough time for you to draw me?” she coyly questioned with a smirk. They went over to Julio’s bedroom. Neither his mother nor sister was home.

“I guess we’ll see.” He turned her around and kissed her. Julio closed the door and continued to kiss her. Amanda happily put her arms around his neck as they made their way over to his bed. She finally felt that she had him all to herself, without Mercedes in the picture. After Julio took off his shirt, he began to take off Amanda’s top.

“Do you have protection?” Amanda questioned as she stopped him from removing her blouse. Julio nodded as he pulled out a condom from his back pocket.

“Are you sure you wanna do this?” He made his way to put the little package away.

“I’m sure,” Amanda whispered as she took the package from him and kissed him. He kissed her back.

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“You can come in,” Amanda called out to Julio. Julio came back in the room in his jeans. Amanda was completely dressed with her hands behind her back right next to the bed. Julio went over by the unmade bed, picked up his white beater, and put it on. “So, now we’re really each other’s first,” Amanda said with an uneasy smile. Everything about it was awkward for the both of them. Although always confident, Amanda seemed nervous.

“Yeah.” He scratched the back of his head. They both looked at each other, but glanced away. “Where does that leave us?”

“Still boyfriend and girlfriend?” She took her arms away from her back.

“Of course.” He came up to her and gave her a hug. Amanda closed her eyes and tried to act as if it was like any other time she had hugged Julio or any other guy, but she couldn’t. This was the first guy to not only see her in her birthday suit, but to also take away her v-card. It was nothing like how she imagined her first time would be, like the movies and romance novels portrayed it.

Amanda opened her eyes and noticed the wall that was adjacent to his bed. It was filled with artwork, mostly drawings that he had done throughout the years. Amanda began to smile at his talent. Some of his drawings were of houses and others were of animals. He even had a couple of drawings of people like his mother. And Mercedes.

Amanda backed away from Julio’s embrace and removed the happiness from her face. Yup. It was definitely a drawing of Mercedes on his wall. “What’s wrong?” Julio questioned.

“That’s Mercedes,” Amanda replied, staring at the picture. It was a drawing of a headshot of Mercedes.

“What?” Julio asked. He looked over to where Amanda was gazing. “That’s an old picture. I drew it over the summer,” Julio added after he realized that Amanda was upset by the drawing.

“And you still have it up even though she’s your ex?” Amanda asked as her voice rose. Her feelings of Julio cheating came back to her. Amanda saw the medium heart right next to Mercedes’s ear.

“It’s just a drawing, Amanda. I don’t like her anymore. I like you, Amand—”

“And that’s why you couldn’t erase the heart you drew right next her ear?”

“It’s an old picture.”

“At the center of all of your artwork.” Amanda shook her head. She should’ve known he wasn’t over his ex. Amanda stopped looking at the picture and furiously grabbed her purse from the floor.

“Amanda, wait,” Julio said jumping in front of her.

“No. And to think you were different. Consider this the last time we ever talk!” she added as she stormed out of the house.

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Amanda, distressed, opened the door to her house, trying not to show any sign of the fact that she had been crying the whole way home from Julio’s house. She hurriedly made her way up the spiral stairs. When she saw her mother, Mary Anne, going down the stairs Amanda positioned her head to face the wall, so her mother wouldn’t see her red eyes.

“Amanda, what’s wrong?” Mary Anne asked as she approached her. Mary Anne looked like an older version of Amanda. She was about a foot taller than Amanda. Mary Anne also had blonde hair and brown eyes. She was fairly fit.

“I broke up with my-my boyfriend,” Amanda cried out to Mary Anne.

“Oh, honey,” Mary Anne replied with a look of concern look on her face. “Do you want to talk about it?” She placed her hand on Amanda’s shoulder. Amanda nodded her head. “Okay, I’ll go ask Isabel to make us some tea and we can talk about it in your room.”

“Okay,” Amanda replied in appreciation that she could at least talk to somebody about her failed relationships with guys. Amanda hoped her mother would have some advice of not choosing loser boyfriends. Mary Anne’s phone rang.

“I’ll tell whomever it is that I’ll talk to them later.” She glanced down at her cell phone. “Hello. How are you?” Mary Anne asked in much enthusiasm. “I can’t stay to talk. It can’t wait? Well, go ahead. Right now? I’m sure Amanda won’t mind,” Mary Anne added as she began to travel up the stairs. Mary Anne put her hand over the phone. “We’ll talk later, okay. I have to go over to Suzy’s. She needs a friend. You know how she’s going through a nasty divorce.”

“Sure,” Amanda sarcastically retorted, moving over to her bedroom. She made certain to slam the door shut loud enough for her mother to hear it. Once again, her mother was choosing her friend over her own daughter. Amanda angrily turned on her computer. After the internet

window popped up, she searched for airline tickets to go anywhere out of the country. She was tired of Roctown and all of the screwed up people who lived there. From the boys who didn't love her, to the friend who slept with her boyfriend. And how could she forget about her dear old family; her father, who was only concerned about her making into an Ivy League School, only so she wouldn't disgrace the family's name. And her mother, a woman who hardly knew who her daughter really was.

"Goodbye, Roctown." She impulsively clicked buy on a one way ticket out of the country, leaving the day after the last day of school. She unhappily smiled at the screen as she stared at the country she would try to make a new life in without notifying anybody. Sure, her parents would figure out where she was eventually since the credit card she used to pay for the ticket was underneath their names. But hey, if that's what it took to get attention from them, so be it.

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As soon as her shift was over, Angela left her job. She anxiously lit a cigarette on her way home. She hated the quietness the weekday brought even more than walking home alone. She missed not having Rachel with her to walk home with. Not only did Rachel keep her company, but she also made her feel safe. Angela picked up the pace trying to reach her home faster. She continuously looked over her shoulder.

After seeing a familiar truck of her mother's ex-boyfriend parked in front of her home, her half-smoked cigarette fell to the ground. Her pulse escalated once the front door of the trailer opened. The man came out of her home. Once he saw Angela, he mockingly grinned at her. She stared at his 5'11" frame and downturned eyes along with his gray-streaked dark hair.. His average weight didn't fool her. She knew just how strong he was.

"Surprised to see me?" Chuck questioned as he slithered his way closer to her. "We had some good times throughout the years. You remember?" he asked her as he checked her out. Oh she remembered the good times they had. All too well. "You still got a nice body." He reached over to touch her face. She flinched when she felt his big craggy hands on her face. "I wonder if you're still good in bed like the time we--," he continued as he ran his index finger down her cheek.

"Don't touch me," Angela finally told him in a small voice. He took his hands from her face and chuckled.

"Why not, Angela? You know, you should be nicer to me 'cause... I'm back." She cringed once he leaned closer to her. . "I know about your dirty little secret. Or should I say our dirty little secret," he said into her ear. He viciously sucked his upper teeth, before taking a step back. Angela shook her head, unable to speak. Just the sight of the man who gave her paranoia and trust issues, paralyzed her. The previous year played in her head of Chuck and Jesse and the

pregnancy in a matter of seconds. She backed up as she hyperventilated. The memories were too much to contemplate so soon, especially since she suppressed them for so long.

Out of fear, she raced inside and locked the door, checking it twice to make sure it was truly locked. Still breathing heavily, she stormed into her mother's bedroom. Kim quickly slid the meth she had underneath her pile of clothes that covered the bed. Seeing that it was Angela and not the cops, Kim sighed in relief.

"What is Chuck doing here? He— he said that you and him are back together," Angela said to her mother, as she tried to slow her breathing. "How— how could you bring him back in our lives after you know what he did to me?" she asked in sobs.

"Let's get two things straight," Kim replied as she got off her bed. "First of all, don't you ever come barging in my bedroom like that again. And secondly, he's not going to hurt you," she said in a softer voice.

"How would you know?" Angela asked, looking at her mother in disbelief.

"Because. Look, Angela, I'm not back with Chuck 'cause I'm in love with him. I don't love him. I'm with him because he gives me money. The way I see it, I'm using him just like he's using me. I pretend we're together and give him good sex, while he gives me money."

"If you need money, I can give you more. School's gonna be over in a couple of weeks and I can work more hours," Angela pleaded. The thought of having Chuck back nauseated her. She couldn't deal with him, with her past. Her past was her history and she fought so hard to keep it buried.

"You won't have to work all summer to give me more money. Hell, you might not even have to give me money anymore. Think of us using him for his money as payback for what he did to you," Kim added after Angela didn't respond. Angela glared at her mother as she wiped the tears from her eyes.

"Payback? I don't wanna get even. I just want him out of my life!"

"If you think about it, it's not such a bad idea. You know, could've still had the knife I gave you last year to protect yourself if you hadn't stabbed that girl with it." The year before, Kim gave Angela the knife after she found out what Chuck did to her. "I'll get you another one."

"Like that's really gonna stop Chuck." She was aware of how strong Chuck was and how he maliciously used his physical strength. She knew using a knife to protect herself wouldn't stop Chuck. It might've slowed him down, but it wouldn't stop him.

"Angela, I'm trying here—"

“Sure you are! You know what, just do what you want,” Angela added leaving the bedroom. She went across to her empty bedroom and closed the door. She pulled out one of the drawers to the bureau where most of her important paper work was. She dug underneath the piles of paper to a tan folder. Her hands shook as she read over the documents of the dirty little secret Chuck was referring to.

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“Next!” the photographer called at the junior/senior prom after Eddie and Julia posed for prom pictures. Eddie took Julia’s hand as they walked inside the Hollywood- themed dance floor of the prom.

“You look mighty fine,” Eddie said, giving her a kiss on the cheek. Julia wore a royal blue sequined dress gown. She had her hair straightened and done up in a high do. She also wore silver and blue eye shadow, mascara, eyeliner and red lip stick. Eddie wore a white tuxedo with a royal blue and silver striped tie, light blue shoes and a white top hat.

“We look mighty fine,” Julia replied, ecstatically, now that she was able to be with Eddie with her mother’s trust. As soon as they hit the dance floor, they began to dance. A slow song came on.

“Come here, baby.” Eddie pulled Julia closer to him. He wrapped his arms around her waist as she reached her arms out to encircle his neck. As she gazed at him, her heart warmed. She chuckled. “What’s funny?”

“Nothing.” Although she wanted to say the I word, she did not want to upset Eddie.

“Julia, I care about you a lot and I like being around you. And...,” he continued as his voice started to crack.

“Same here,” she said, resting her head against his chest. She felt his heart beat rapidly. She slightly pulled her head away from his chest and placed her hand over his heart. “Pookie, your heart’s beating fast.”

“It’s ‘cause I’m kinda nervous– not nervous,” he replied, letting go of her. Eddie took a deep breath. “Julia,” he started.

“Yeah.”

“I love you.”

“What?” Julia asked, almost sure he hadn’t said those words she wanted to hear for the longest time.

“I said I love you. I love you, Juliana Adeliz Rodriguez,” Eddie told her with much more confidence.

“Eddie...,” she said feeling her eyes begin to moisten. Her heart raced as fast as Eddie’s did before. It felt so good to finally hear those words she longed for. Now she was certain that Eddie was the one and that they were meant to be. Words couldn’t describe the heart-felt emotion she had for her man.

“Say something.” he said nervously, smiling.

“I love you too, Eddie.” She kissed him.

“Picture!” Gina squealed with a camera in her hand as she approached Eddie and Julia. Eddie put his arm around Julia and posed for her to take the picture. Although Julia’s smeared mascara made her look sad, she was the happiest she had been in a while.

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Mercedes glowered up at Robbie, who hovered above her. He icily glared back at her. Mercedes wiped the blood that dripped from the side of her head. Robbie looked away from her and marched over to the other side of her bedroom. He took a deep breath.

“That wouldn’t have happened if you didn’t pissed me off. I swear you do certain things to get me riled up. It’s like you enjoy getting hit...” Mercedes used the mirror doors to her closet to push her body up. The blood from her hand smeared the mirror.

Mercedes paused when she caught a glimpse of the girl in the mirror. Who was she? Though the female resembled her, she was unrecognizable. Her dark make-up buried the many bruises she received from the last several months. Her wardrobe was even unfamiliar. Unlike Mercedes who wore laid back clothes that made her comfortable, this girl had on a tiny black shirt that hung inches above her belly button along with an extremely short skirt. Mercedes stared back at the girl. She saw the trepidation and anger in her eyes. Mercedes gulped as she turned her back on her. She couldn’t look at herself for one more second.

“Get out,” Mercedes told him in a low voice, refusing to look at him.

“Are you serious?” Robbie asked, caught off guard.

“Yeah, I’m very serious,” she added going over to her bedroom door. Robbie grabbed her arms before they could touch the knob of the door. “Get off of me,” she growled.

“No. Look, I’m sorry. I-”

“What? You didn’t mean to hit me?”

“Mercedes, I didn’t... I love you,” he added as he let go of her arms. Mercedes shook her head, still refusing to look into his eyes. She chose not to in fear of believing him.

“No you don’t.”

“Mercedes-”

“GO!” she screamed as she pushed him against his chest. “Get out!” She yanked open her door before marching down the stairs. She heard Robbie thumping downstairs behind her.

“Mercedes, I’m sorry. I don’t know what else you want me to say.” Mercedes waltzed over to the front door and jerked it open. “So it’s like that?” he asked stepping outside.

“It is what it is,” she replied staring in the inside of her house, realizing he wasn’t worth her looking at.

“Don’t bother calling me again,” he told her in fury.

“With pleasure,” she retorted slamming the front door in his face. She stared at the door. She knew that this time, she and Robbie were done for good. Nothing would cause her to go back to him.

“Why was there a boy in your room?” Barbra said from a couple of steps behind her. Mercedes’s heart jumped a bit in surprise. She assumed nobody was home since both Mateo and Barbra’s cars were gone.

“Sorry. It won’t happen again,” Mercedes replied as she turned to where Barbra was. Mercedes covered her latest bruise with her hand as she made her way past Barbra, towards the stairs.

“Mercedes?” Mercedes continued to walk away from Barbra. She knew her stepmother already saw the dried up blood across the side of her head. “Mercedes.” She picked up the pace. “Wait,” Barbra added as she took hold of Mercedes’s wrist. It worked. Mercedes finally stopped moving. Mercedes glanced away from Barbra as her nose flared out. “Did- did that boy have anything to do with your face?”

“No. I hit my head.”

“Just like how you tripped over that branch outside a couple of months ago.” Mercedes shrugged Barbra’s hand away from her. They looked at each other. The truth was finally out. “Honey, you deserve so much more than that. Any guy who has the audacity to put his hands on a woman is a coward. Why don’t we talk about it?”

“I broke up with him. There’s nothing else to talk about,” Mercedes replied not wanting to discuss her abusive relationship with a woman who was trying to be her mother. She raced



upstairs to her room and locked the door. She was thankful that Barbra hadn't followed her. She grabbed her Nets jacket and slipped on her basketball shorts. She made a quick text before escaping from her window. As soon as she reached the bottom of the ladder that she usually used to sneak out of her home, she snatched her bike from the floor and pedaled.

Julia opened the door to her home as soon as she saw Mercedes coming towards her in the dark. Mercedes dropped her bike on the front yard. By the time she reached Julia, her eyes were filled in tears. Julia threw her arms around her best friend.

"Cedez..." Julia began. No matter what happened in the past, she didn't like seeing her best friend hurting. At the end of the day, Mercedes was still her best friend, and nothing could change that. Not even a boy.

"I'm so sorry, Julia," Mercedes cried out. "I was so stupid to think that he loved me."

"You weren't. He was," Julia replied, in relief that Mercedes was not only no longer with Robbie, but was finally admitting, though indirectly, to what he had done to her.

"I've been a horrible friend to you-" Mercedes let go of Julia.

"I haven't been the greatest friend to you either. My bad for all I said about your eye. I just can't believe we let this fight get this far."

"Me neither. Before this the longest we stopped talking to each other was for half a day."

"At camp when we we're nine. I remember. We we're arguing about who was gonna get the last ice cream treat they had during snack time," Julia responded. They both laughed at their childhood memory.

"We shouldn't be fighting like this. We're like sisters."

"Like? We are sisters," Julia corrected. "Love you, Cedez."

"Love you too. Sisters for life... Ice cream?" Mercedes asked, poking the side of Julia's ribs.

"You know it," Julia replied as they giggled on their way to the ice cream parlor.