

PART FOUR

Tilt & Time

6:36 a.m.

“Authorities have released the body cam footage taken by the android on patrol during the assault on the P90 units last night. The police are hoping the footage will prompt any further information on the suspects responsible for destroying the robots, as well as a P90 combat unit which Chief Bradley Silverman states was on a routine test run. No information has been discovered yet on the whereabouts of Marquis Thompson and the unidentified female accomplice. Law enforcements are asking for help from the local community for any information on the two and a reward of—”

Lauren muted the video post and plopped back down on her bed. She had heard enough. It was the third time she watched the news clip, which since then had gone viral, flooding all major social media outlets, and plastering Marquis’s mugshot on every phone screen across the nation. Marquis, of course, had run ins with police before, on several occasions in the past, but this was beyond anything Lauren could have ever imagined. A myriad of emotions washed over her all at once; fear, dread, anxiety, but the feeling that overtook her emotional attention at that moment, forcing her to quickly rise from the bed, storm out of her room, still in only panties and a large t-shirt that fitted her like a mini negligee, and into the living room of her eight-hundred and fifty square foot apartment where Marquis laid sleeping soundly on her couch, was without a doubt a near primal state of anger. She stopped her stride a few feet from the smoke gray L-shaped sectional and glared at the fugitive resting on her couch. The sight of him in such a deep slumber made her kiss her teeth, and in her enraged state, Lauren turned and flounced into the kitchen, began searching through the cabinets until she came across a large stainless-steel stew pot, which Marquis thoughtlessly purchased for her as a last minute anniversary gift, grabbed it, stormed over to the sink, placed the pot under the faucet, turned the cold water on, and impatiently waited for the pot to fill to the brim with water. Once it was full, she snatched it out the sink by both handles, carried it into the living room as fast as she could, making sure not to spill too much, and then without any hesitation or second thought proceeded to dump the cold water on her peacefully sleeping ex-boyfriend.

“What the fuck!?” Marquis yelled, immediately jolting up, flailing his arms, and coughing as if he had just been saved an instant before drowning.

“Did you really just bring yo fugitive ass over here to my apartment?!” Lauren yelled back.

Marquis, furiously wiping his face of water, glared at Lauren, and shook his head in disbelief. “I don’t even know what you talkin’ about right now!? You just dumped cold water on my face! What if my mouth was open? Huh? I would’ve swallowed all that, and I would’ve died.”

“Fuck that! You’re all over the news Marquis! You and some mystery girl on some Bonnie and Clyde shit? That’s what we doin’ now?”

Marquis understood his unpleasant run-in with the android officers, along with Nihari, was no longer a secret, and so, pretending to be oblivious about it all would have surely been futile. There was also an undeniable suffocating hostile energy that encompassed the apartment, but Marquis, not knowing if it was the joy of his ego being stroked, or the fact that Lauren’s concern made him feel that there was still hope of getting her back, he still could not help but smirk and ask arrogantly,

“You jealous?”

“Jealous?” Lauren was so offended by the question that she hurled the empty pot at Marquis, and if he had not timed it well, and dodged just at the right moment, would have been hit in the face with it. “Nigga, I’m pissed because you’ve made me an accomplice to whatever bullshit you’re involved in!”

Marquis was struck speechless and immediately became visibly deflated by the statement.

“Not only did you not think of the consequences I would have to deal with by you coming here,” Lauren continued, “but I also bet you didn’t even think to check if you were followed by the police or not.”

“Look, I’m sorry, but none of this is even my fault.” Marquis replied. “Remember last night, when I was telling you about my father? And how this niggas been alive this whole time. This is all because of that old asshole. You gotta believe me.”

Lauren just shook her head in disapproval.

“No. The news only mentioned you and that mystery girl destroying multiple P90 units. Do you understand how crazy that sounds? How do you even destroy a P90 bot let alone a combat unit? Aren’t they supposed to be like indestructible?”

“That’s what I’m saying!” Marquis exclaimed. “It wasn’t even me! It was her and that damn blind stick sword havin’ ass nigga. I bet they didn’t mention him because that weirdo vanished into smoke before they got there.”

“What?” Lauren asked with a dazed look of confusion on her face. “Marquis, do you hear yourself? You’re saying that people are evaporating into smoke. If it wasn’t for your eyes not being blue, I’d swear you were on tilt.”

Marquis just sighed. He knew he wasn’t getting to her, but he had to continue to try in his own way.

“Trust me. I know what it sounds like. I’m still coming to terms with all this shit myself. And I’ve seen it with my own eyes.”

Lauren had always been privy to Marquis’s tendency to falsify the facts whenever he felt backed into a corner. On several occasions his lies nearly crumbled the foundation of their relationship, and because of maintaining their romantic arrangement, Lauren had become Marquis’s self-proclaimed

human polygraph and expert detector of his tells. But as Lauren stared at Marquis, looking him up and down, searching vigilantly for the dead give aways, she felt a cold chill run down her back. There was no nervous tapping of his foot, he did not break eye contact, the corner of his upper lip was not quivering, and the more she was unable to find evidence that he was indeed lying, the more Lauren began to fear the creeping possibility that what Marquis was claiming could be the truth.

“Call from, Donnell Williams”

The unexpected announcement from the deep British accented voice had startled Lauren out of her brooding state.

Marquis’s face, on the other hand, immediately scrunched up after hearing who it was calling, and he cringed.

“That nigga from yesterday?”

“Yes, Donnell from yesterday.” Lauren darted back.

“Call from, Donnell Williams”

“Don’t answer it.”

Immediately after hearing Marquis’s demand, Lauren scrunched up her face at him and replied, “Who do you think you’re talking to?”

“You!” Marquis answered back. “What if he’s seen the news?”

“You don’t think I’ve thought about that? I can’t just not answer.” Lauren rebutted.

“Call from, Donnell Williams”

“Why not?”

“Because I told him to call me. And it will look suspicious if I don’t answer.” Lauren replied and leaving Marquis with a gaping expression on his face. “Answer call!” She then shouted out.

“Hello?”

Lauren then took a deep breath and gathered her composure as best she could before replying, “Good morning”, in a honeyed tone which she also made her best effort to attempt to sound sincere in.

“Oh, hey, good morning.” Donnell responded and sounding oblivious to Lauren’s ruse. “For a second, I thought you had given me the wrong number.”

“Why would you think that? Do I look like the type?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.” Donnell said jokingly.

“I almost did. But you seemed harmless enough.”

“Well, I’m glad you didn’t. But anyway, how are you this morning?”

Marquis tensed up hearing Donnell's question. Not knowing anything about him, other than the fact that he's a security guard, made Donnell an automatic snitch in Marquis's book, and he was certain that if Donnell had seen the report there would be a problem.

"I'm good." Lauren replied nervously. "Why? You saw the news?" Lauren had decided that things were stressful enough as it was, and she was drained of any energy that would have allowed her to play coy about what was really going on, and so, she just went on ahead and asked the burning question.

"I haven't. Did something happen?"

Lauren was not only completely surprised, but she was also relieved that Donnell had not seen the report yet.

Marquis, although also relieved that Donnell had not seen the news report, still had not allowed his frown to disappear.

"When is something not happening, am I right?" Lauren answered. "I was just trying to make conversation though."

"Gotchu. Well, I was calling about the ride to work." Donnell had gone on to say.

"Really?" Marquis was so angered by what he had just heard that his loud whisper had almost been heard by Donnell.

Lauren, immediately realizing this, quickly glared at Marquis and mouthed the words "Shut up!"

"About that," she then said to Donnell, "I'm going to be late picking you up from the bus stop. Something's come up." Lauren explained while continuing to glare at Marquis, who was doing the same, and with his arms crossed like an upset toddler.

"That's actually great and works out. Of course, if what came up isn't anything bad for you." Donnell answered. "But I was calling to let you know that I didn't need the ride anymore. I really do appreciate it though."

"Is everything okay?" Lauren's concern caused Marquis to kiss his teeth. "How did it go with your interview yesterday? Should I call you Officer Williams now?"

"Everything is good. I'm just not going in today. Got some personal things I gotta tend to. But I think it all went smooth yesterday. The lady just asked me some questions and that was it. I'll know the decision in a few days."

"Okay, that's—"

Lauren was abruptly cut off by the ringing of her doorbell and,

"Lauren! Girl, you leave for work yet?!" A female's voice yelled out from the other side of her front door.

"Shit." Lauren muttered. She knew exactly who it was.

“Everything okay over there?” Donnell asked.

“Yeah, I’m good. It’s just my neighbor.”

“Is that Teresa nose ass?” Marquis then whispered after the doorbell rang again.

“Lauren! Gurl! I think I just saw Marquis on the news!” Teresa yelled again.

“Why don’t I let you go.” Donnell suggested. “I can’t really make out what’s being said but it sounds like you’re needed. I just wanted to let you know I wasn’t going into work.”

“No, it’s fine.”

Marquis sighed and threw his arms up in frustration after hearing Lauren’s response not understanding why she was determined to keep him on the phone.

“Just gimme a second to see what’s up. I’m sure it’s nothing. My neighbor is easily excited and loves to over exaggerate.”

Donnell was silent for a moment

“Ok, I’ll hold, but you positive everything’s okay?” He then asked.

“Positive.” Lauren replied and trying to sound as convincing as possible. “Just hold on for me. I’ll only be a second.”

“What’re you about to do?” Marquis asked as he watched Lauren make her way to the door. “I know you not about to answer that.”

“I gotta get rid of her!” Lauren loudly whispered back. “Now go hide somewhere!”

“What was that? I can barely hear you.” Donnell mistakenly replied.

“I didn’t say anything. That was the TV. Just hold on.”

Lauren then took a deep breath and once again attempted to gather herself as best she could to put on the illusion that everything was going well. The moment she felt she had her cool, she answered the door, but only opening it enough to peak her head out to speak to her neighbor.

“Hey gurl!” Lauren said with a smirk. “What’s up?”

“You okay in there?” Teresa asked and trying to get a peek into the apartment. She was so excited to pass on the news that, she rushed over just after getting out of the shower, and was standing at Lauren’s door in a bright pink bath robe, matching plush slippers, and a midnight black shower cap.

“Yeah gurl. I’m good. I’m just getting ready for work. I woke up late so I’m rushing. But what’s up.”

“Gurl, did you see Marquis is on the run from the police?” She said with excitement.

“What!?” Lauren gasped and making her best efforts to sound as if she was just hearing the news. “It couldn’t have been Marquis.”

“Nope. It was him. Him and some other girl on some Bonnie and Clyde shit right now. Imma show you. I can’t believe you haven’t seen this yet.” Teresa said and then began to excitedly scroll through a social media platform on her phone.

The severity of the trouble that Marquis was currently in began to pierce through into Lauren’s reality even further now that she had met someone else who knew that he was a fugitive.

“See!?”

And as Teresa put her phone screen just inches away from Lauren’s face, and she could see that it was the same video post that she had watched numerous of times earlier, Lauren started to find it harder to put on the act of a surprised and concerned girlfriend.

“It’s a good thing you dodged that bullet.” Teresa then said. “I probably would’ve been watching you instead of whoever this bitch is he wit now.”

“So, they don’t have any information on who the girl he’s with is?”

“You tryna see if you know her? I hope you don’t. That would be crazy. But they don’t have anything. Which is stupid.” Teresa then put her phone back into the pocket of her robe.

“Teresa, gurl, I’m so sorry but I gotta go.” Lauren finally said.

“I know gurl. You need to get ready for work. I had to call off work for this. It hits too close to home. I know you. You literally live like two doors down from me.”

“Yeah. Thank you for telling me. And thank you for your concern. I hope you feel better.” Lauren said but obviously not understanding why this was affecting Teresa so much.

“Gurl, of course. You be careful. Call me when you get off. And let me know if Marquis tries to hit you up. You know eventually he will. Maybe we can turn him in for that reward. Get yo compensation for all his bullshit you put up with.”

“Okay girl. I’ll keep you posted.”

“You better bitch.”

Teresa then joyously walked back to her own apartment which was only a few doors down.

Lauren waited until she saw Teresa enter her apartment, she then closed the door once Teresa was out of sight, and said,

“Donnell? You still there? I am so sorry about that. My neighbor wanted to— “

“That nigga been hung up.” Marquis answered with a smirk on his face and cutting her off.

“Damn it.”

“So, you two an item now?” Marquis asked.

Lauren glared at Marquis with a combination of disgust and confusion.

“Marquis what the fuck is your problem!?! Seriously!?” Lauren was so infuriated by Marquis’s misguided concern that tears began to whale up in her eyes.

“I mean first you give this nigga a ride home and now you givin’ him rides to work. Makes me wonder what’s up.”

“You’re on the run from the fucking police and you’re wondering what’s up with me and some random ass nigga!?! What is your problem!?”

“You givin’ him rides so he ain’t that random.”

Lauren just stared in disbelief at Marquis with tears running down her cheeks. It was like he had not fully understood the seriousness of the trouble he was currently in, and it hurt her to admit that she was looking at, not an evolving young man, but an insecure little boy.

“I can’t do this with you right now.” She said.

“So, you not gon’ help me?”

“How? How am I gonna help you? You not even concerned about the trouble you’re in.”

“What do you mean I’m not concerned?” Marquis lashed out. “I’m fucking terrified! But how can I focus when my girl is fucking around with another nigga!”

There was an awkward silence between the two for a moment. But then Lauren muttered,

“You have to go.”

She sounded so ashamed and hurt that it had come to this that, she couldn’t look Marquis in the eyes as tears cascaded down hers, and so, fixed her watery gaze onto her carpet.

Marquis was so shocked and confused by her demand that all he could ask was,

“But, why?”

8:13 a.m.

“Because I can’t really stomach it right now. I had a bagel and coffee earlier.” Chief Silverman was purposefully being curt, standoffish, and whatever other gestures or demeanor that showed he did not want to be up there any longer than he needed to be. It was already an abnormally chilly morning for a summer season in his opinion and being seven hundred and fifty feet in the air on the roof of the Bellfore Corporation building made the temperature much colder.

“A bagel and coffee?” Colton replied in a disapproving tone. “That’s not a full meal. You must try these frittatas chef Rene prepared. Come sit.” He then extended his arm, inviting the chief to join him at the table of his personal al fresco dining experience on the roof helipad, and eat

“If it’s all the same to you, I’d just like to get this over with.”

Colton smirked at the Chief, wiped his mouth with the napkin that had been lying on his lap, and although he could feel the hostile tension that was building between the two of them, Colton continued to ignore Chief Silverman's attempts to sour his day.

"You know, Bradley, I feel that I've grown to really know you over these few years, and I'm baffled. Saying to myself, 'How did it miss me that this man is not an egg person. You probably think I'm so inconsiderate.'" Colton said.

"I'm not an omelet person." Silverman replied with a straight face

Colton just shook his head at the chief and smiled.

"You are determined to let it be known you are having a bad day, aren't you?" He then said. "I understand human emotions though. The answers aren't always clear. Can't be sunny all the time. It's darkest before dawn. Or whatever other quote you folks like to use. I just keep it simple, and when I'm having a day, I come up here. That's why I love it up here. It too many people can handle it though. Being at this height. Seven hundred feet in the air. But me personally, I love it. I have my breakfast up here every morning." Colton then points to his chef, who, while covered in bandages from head to toe and constantly mumbling incoherently in French, continues to cook without a moment to look up or stop for a rest. "Prepared by, in my opinion is the goat of the 16th century, Pierre Jacques Rene. His food. The peace. It gives me a chance to think, ya' know?"

Chief Silverman just shook his head. He had tuned it all out. He then removed a dingy folded white envelope from his back pocket, inched closer to the table, and dropped the envelope in front of Colton.

"There. And if there isn't anything else, unfortunately, I don't have a delicious entrée waiting for me back at the station. I still have to stomach whatever shit it is though. But you should talk to your assistant over there." Chief Silverman said and then angrily pointing at Nephi, who was still standing a few feet from the edge of the roof meditating. "She told me that this was going to be a simple ride along to test out the unit's navigation systems. She said I had nothing to worry about and that it would not get out. And now I have multiple downed android officers and a destroyed combat unit that's going to cost millions. The damn thing wasn't scheduled for testing until next year. Not only do we have this lawsuit with this damn ex-con, but we've just shown, not only the city, the mayor, and those states that are looking to adopt the idea of android cops, but also those damn resistance groups that these so-called advanced robots, that were advertised as nearly indestructible, can be taken down by two kids. There was no warning, no paperwork of any kind to cover my ass, or yours, and now I have the mayor and board of commissioners jumping down my throat wondering how it all happened. And you're on the roof of this skyscraper without a care in the world."

Colton eyed the envelope, returned to the chief for a moment, and then shook his head at the Chief yet again as he picked up his fork to continue his meal.

"Are those the candidates?"

The chief was immensely thrown aback by Colton's response.

“Did you not hear what I just said? I’m not losing my job, my livelihood, because of your carelessness.”

“Are those them?” Colton asked again nonchalantly and with a mouth full of food.

“Yeah.” Silverman answered and sighed in anger. “All the applicants who were denied. Either they failed the written, physical, or psychological evaluation. And I’m assuming one of them has some answers to making this P-90 debacle go away that I’m not aware of, right?”

Colton was so enthused by the envelope that, he ignored the question, and said,

“I knew I could count on you.”

He then picked up the envelope, turned it upside down, and allowed a small turquoise container to fall out onto the table. “Nephi still thinks that I can’t trust you, but she’s suspicious of everyone. Isn’t that right!?”

Nephi ignored the question and continued to meditate.

Colton then opened the smaller container to reveal a single contact lens submerged in a clear liquid. He removed it, carefully placed it in his right eye, and after blinking a few times to get the lens into place over the cornea of his eyeball, he blinked once more, and then began to wave his hand in the air as if he were scrolling on an invisible screen.

The chief watched in disbelief as Colton waved his hand in the air, scrolling through, what Silverman assumed, were the files of each candidate that applied for the Academy, and without any second thought of what was going on with the department.

“You really aren’t going to do anything.” The chief stated.

Colton stopped his waving and put his attention back onto the chief upon hearing this.

“As long as you’ve known me, have I ever given you the impression that I am an individual without a plan?”

“Well, if you have a plan of some kind, you mind filling me in on what that plan is? Because when I woke up this morning, I wasn’t expecting this level of bullshit this early. And I’ll let you know this now, Mr. Phegore, before it gets too out of hand, I’ll lock you, your assistant, and your weird chef up until the bare end of y’all lives. And then you won’t just lose billions, you’ll lose your entire company. I think the familiarity in our business relationship has made you forget who I am.”

Colton chuckled.

“Forgotten who you are he says. I’m one of the few who does know who you really are. I think you’ve forgotten that.” Colton responded in amusement.

“I haven’t. And since you’ve brought that up, as of today, I’m done with it. Things are going well with me and Nancy, and I don’t want that part of my life spilling over and messing things up. And it may be too late to say this, but I’m getting old, and it’s time for me to get things in my life together. I’m trying to be a better man. For Nancy and I.”

Colton immediately bursts into laughter.

“Done?” He then asked. “How many times have we been here Bradley? And how long did it take for you to go right back through the doors at Zurich Pharmaceuticals? Who are you kidding, Brad? A better man? Once again, I know you. Divorced, what? Twice? And you really think the middle-aged woman who works part-time as a cashier and lives with her mother is the one to break the cycle? Your last wife took the house. So now, you’re a fifty-two-year-old white man living in a shitty one-bedroom apartment. You’ve developed a dependency to tilt, which has caused you to acquire massive debts, and not to banks. But I do have to commend you, because despite how depressing your life is, you hide it well. You’re a highly functioning tilt addict. How you hid it so well in your high-ranking position before you met me is well deserving of applause. But you know me now. And thanks to knowing me, you walk through those doors of Zurich and get the purest of the pure. And because you get first dibs, because it’s coming straight from the cow’s teat, before it’s diluted and distributed to those street vendors, you don’t get the side effects. So, no blues for you. But let us not be hasty to forget that all of that came at a price. Those debts once belonging to various loan sharks are now owed to me.”

“Do what you gotta do. Like I said I’m done. If you think you can threaten me and those threats hold up, you have another thing coming. You forget, I know everything. The drug trafficking, the money laundering, you’re off the book’s excavation, all the bribes you made to get the go ahead to design and manufacture the combat units, all of it. I’m not your lackey anymore.”

The instant Nephi heard this, she quickly turned a glare towards the chief as if he had summoned her by name and interrupting her meditation. The chef, who continued to cook, first looked on in the opposite direction, then slowly turned his head in a full one eighty counterclockwise, causing the bones in his neck to snap and pop until his fully bandage face was in the direction of the chief, and mumbling angrily in French while still cooking.

When the chief saw this his heart began to race and he instinctively took a few steps back. Although he couldn’t see the chef’s face, he could still feel the same threatening glare from him that he was receiving from Nihari, and Colton.

“It’s okay, Nephi, that’s that bagel and coffee talking.” Colton replied with a smirk on his face and keeping his eyes on the chief. “You need some real food in your system, Brad. Lack of a balanced breakfast can leave you discombobulated. Not thinking straight and you end up saying dumb shit. Why don’t you have a seat. Let chef Rene prepare you something.”

The instant the chef heard this, he turned his head back clockwise, and his attention back onto cooking.

“I’m not—”

“That wasn’t a request.” Colton said and quickly interrupting the chief.

Silverman cautiously walked up to the table, slowly pulled out the chair, and sits all while keeping a watchful eye on Nihari and the chef.

“Chief I’m starting to think you don’t appreciate what I’ve done for you. We’ve been good up to this point so I’m going to chalk this whole ordeal up to you skipping the most important meal of the

day. But I thought we had an understanding and that it would go without saying that there is no done. I guess it does need to be clarified though. You work for me Bradley. All things considered I own you. And do you know why this business relationship we have is more quid pro quo rather than monetary exchange? It's because I want you to feel like you're a part of what I'm building. That's why I ask for task rather than money. Not five minutes before you walked through those roof doors, I was informed that the excavation is going great, and they've located the statue head. It's exciting. And I'm pretty sure that's why Nephi was off in her own world. She's excited too. We all are. I mean, this is the true owner of The Dark Blade we're talking about here. But as far as this P-90 fiasco. Don't worry, I have a lady from R&D who can take the fall for that. And I have Marquis Thompson being taken care of as we speak. Now, how about we switch the conversation to a more upbeat subject." Colton then gestures with his right hand and begins to scroll. "Well, so far no good." He said. "None of these even passed the written exam. It amazes me how so many illiterates want to be a part of law enforc—Wait a minute.... Who is this?" Colton asked with a genuine curiosity. "Donnell Williams. What's the scoop on him?"

Chief Bradley thought for a moment.

"He passed everything but the psychological exam."

"What happened?"

"Personal biases, which could trigger impulses that he would fail to control in the field, and he has unresolved trauma. I don't remember everything but it's all in his file. I remembered the trauma thing because he was the only from that particular group that was dealing with it. Something about his mother." Bradley then answered.

"How does the therapist determine this? Just from one conversation? I bet the boy had no idea he was being judged so harshly. I don't believe you can determine all of this in one sitting. Regardless of all of that, I can work with trauma. He's the one."

"The one for what?"

"I'm going to need you to do me another favor." Colton said and ignoring the question. "I'm going to need you to contact this, Donnell Williams. Let him know that he's passed or whatever, and that he's been selected for a special unit training."

"He's already on the rejected lists which makes him ineligible for hiring with any LA law enforcement for six months. And what special unit?"

"Well things are still in the infancy stage so there's really no need to worry that gray haired head about it. The first stage of his preparations is more of a Zurich Pharmaceutical thing. But in the meantime, can you have him train with swat? I need him to be ready." Colton answered and still going through the files.

Chief Silverman stared for a minute with an expression of confusion.

"You want a kid with no prior law enforcement experience to train with swat? How am I supposed to make that happen?"

Colton then removed the contact lens from his eye and tossed it to the ground.

“I have faith in you. Don’t worry. I’ll be personally handling this project so things will run smoothly on this end. Not like this P-90 fiasco. Trust me. This will all be over with before you know it. Big things are coming Brad.”

12:43 p.m.

“So, I can’t even bring this?” Donnell asked. “It’s a plastic water bottle. What am I gonna do with that?”

The P-90 security android suddenly stopped, which if Donnell was not paying attention would have bumped into from behind, then quickly turned the upper half of its body in Donnell’s direction, presented its open metal palm, and responded,

“Please hand over unauthorized object and I will dispose of it properly. Thank you for your cooperation.”

Donnell sighed and reluctantly handed over the bottle. Although it was only an older security model with no protective plating to cover the exposed intricate wirings and circuitry, which the director of Gunthurn Behavioral and Mental Hospital was more than happy to approve, it was still no less intimidating to be in its presence than any other P-90 patrolling the streets, and Donnell wanted no problems.

The android received the water bottle, quickly spun its upper body to its proper position, and continued down the long, narrow, brightly lit hallway. Donnell followed, returning to reading the last name on the large steel cell doors, and trying to get a peek into each cell he passed through their small, barred window. He had finally caught the news report explaining the trouble Marquis was in while riding in his Uber, and since then, had been feeling as if he had been played for a fool. It was so clear to him now why Lauren sounded so nervous earlier when they spoke on the phone. There was no doubt in Donnell’s mind that Lauren was certainly hiding Marquis, and if that were indeed true, then she would be harboring a fugitive, and Donnell felt ashamed that he had begun to contemplate if he would turn Lauren in or not.

The outdated android then stopped in front of a cell door with the name “L. Williams” on the digital name plate. Donnell gathered his thoughts and made sure, as best he could, that he was in the moment. He quickly attempted to meticulously comb over every detail of his last visit to the facility in his mind as he watched the security bot place the palm of its free hand in front of the security panel, release small wires that slithered out from the tips of its fingers, inject themselves into the panel, which allowed the cell door to slide open, and then look on as the android waited for Donnell to enter. Once he entered, the android reminded him of the fifteen-minute time limit and closed the cell door.

The whole of the cell was a bright white with fluorescent lights built into the floor, walls, and ceiling. There was a single twin bed, a private bathroom, with a shower, and a modest sized writing desk

in the corner of the cell. Sitting on the bed was a middle-aged black woman in an all-white inmate jumpsuit and the name "L. Williams" stitched in small black lettering above the right breast pocket.

"Do you remember me?"

Ms. Williams stared at Donnell with a raised eyebrow for a second after his question, and then said,

"You know the procedure doesn't give you Alzheimer's."

Donnell chuckled.

"You're right." He responded. "How you holdin' up today?"

"As good as a person in prison can."

Just as his previous visit, Ms. Williams, although willing to participate in conversation, kept a cold and unfriendly disposition.

"I think you'd probably feel better about it if you looked at it as a highly secure hospital." Donnell replied.

"If calling it that helps you sleep at night then be my guest, but I don't see the world through rose colored lenses."

Donnell then began looking around the cell, examining every detail, and nodding his head in approval.

"Well, rose colored lenses or not, if I had to choose between a prison cell or this set up, then I'd definitely choose this." He then said.

"Then how about we trade places? You seem to like it so much and it's only your second visit."

Donnell just responded with a wistful smile and then sat in the chair at the desk.

"I heard that just like the patients, those few inmates who've had the procedure done are required to attend daily therapy. How's that going?"

"The purpose of therapy is to make sure that I'm not remembering, right? In that aspect, I guess you can say it's working."

"Do you ever find yourself wanting to remember?"

"No." She immediately said and angered by the question. "And that's why my family doesn't come to visit now. Fuck'em though."

Donnell took a deep breath and calmed himself after hearing her response. It hurt him to hear her feelings towards family, but Donnell needed to keep his stoic demeanor in order to continue his ruse undetected.

"How are you with your family?" Ms. Williams then asked. "You gotta relationship with your parents?"

Donnell hesitated to speak for a moment. such a simple question had such a complicated answer that opened the door to an unresolved painful past that Donnell was still trying to understand.

“My pops is dead.” Donnell replied. “He was killed before I was born.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. What about your mother?”

“She....”

Donnell trailed off. He could not come up with a lie fast enough to tell her. His father was in fact killed before he was born, but his mother, of course, had suffered a different fate.

“You okay?” Ms. Williams asked. “You paused at like a word in. I know your eyes not blue but you ain’t a tilt addict, are you? I know I’ve been in here for over a decade, but I keep up with what’s going on. My ain’t shit sister used to bring her tilt addicted ass boyfriend up in here with her before I told her not to come back. College student or not, I don’t need it around me. You can take your research paper and go if that’s what you on.”

“I don’t do tilt.” Donnell darted back. “If I did, then I wouldn’t be able to....” He trailed off a second time.

“There you go again.” Ms. Williams pointed out. “How you gon’ write a college level paper and you can’t even complete a thought?”

“I’m fine. My thoughts are complete, and everything is under control.” Donnell assured her.

“Okay. Where’s your phone then? Shouldn’t you be audio recording this for notes for your paper?”

Donnell immediately began patting his pockets, and not soon after, was struck by shock when he had come to realize that his phone was not on him.

“You know what? I let them take it at check-in this time.” Donnell replied while shaking his head in disbelief. The news of Marquis was so heavy on his mind that, when he arrived at the hospital, he had forgotten to show his expired student ID, and check-in as a student conducting research for class so he could keep his phone.

“It’ll be alright though. I’ll just have to remember everything you say.” Donnell then said and nervously chuckling afterwards.

“Whatever kid. It ain’t my grade.” Ms. Williams answered nonchalantly.

“So, you were saying that your family doesn’t come to visit?”

“They used to come in the beginning, but as time went on, each one stopped coming. Either by their own choice or by mine.” Ms Williams explained.

“Did any of them ever try to remind you of what got you in here?” Donnell asked.

“Some tried. Those were the ones who I banned from ever coming back. There are others who couldn’t understand why I made the decision to have the procedure done and those are the ones who

stopped or just never came at all. I even had family I ain't never heard of, cousins and aunts, who came just to see if it was real. Like I'm some family spectacle." She replied.

"To be honest, other than you, I haven't met or known anyone who's had it done. So, it is kind of hard for me to believe that it even works."

"Isn't that why you're doing your research paper? To prove or disprove the validity of what they do here?"

"It is." Donnell said.

"Well, they don't erase the memory." She started. "If you look at it like that you won't get it. Your memories will always be there. What they do is block the specific memories you want them to and it's like it never happened. At least your mind believes it to be the case. I'm sure the actual doctors who do the shit can explain it better and more in detail but I'm sure you get it. You're in college."

"Okay, let's say I do believe that it works, you're not curious at all? You're in here for basically the rest of your life. At some point I'd wanna know what the hell I did to end up in prison." Donnell said.

"I've accepted that whatever it was that I did to end up in here is reason enough for me to be up in here. I don't feel like blocking those memories has changed who I am. I'm at peace. I can remember before, I was always worried, but now I'm at peace. And at my age that's a rare and valuable thing."

Donnell scoffed at her response.

"So, it doesn't bother you that you won't know life outside these walls? You'll never get married. You'll never have.... kids. You don't care about none of that?" He asked in a grating tone.

Ms. Williams was thrown aback by Donnell's sour attitude.

"You don't think you getting a little too emotional for just a research paper for class? Last time you were here you just stood there like some nervous little boy with stage fright or some shit. Could barely get a word out of you."

She was right. Donnell was beginning to lose his composure. He immediately took another deep breath in an attempt to calm himself.

"My bad." He said. "I just have a lot going on today."

Ms. Williams just sighed.

"I do get down sometimes. Lying awake in bed and staring up at the ceiling. Mad at myself for doing whatever it is I did to be in here. I have nothing but time though, so, sometimes I do look back on my life and wonder what we're some of the things that led me to be here."

"And what was it." Donnell asked.

“I don’t know.” She replied and dropping her gaze to the floor in shame. “When I look back on my past, I just see that I was happy. And then I wonder if all of this is a lie. If I’m even supposed to be here. But then I go to therapy, and they remind me that this is where I belong. That this was my choice. And that I’m part of the only handful of prison inmates that was allowed by a judge to have the procedure done.”

“Do you think, if you weren’t locked up and your life turned out differently, you’d have kids?” Donnell had hesitated to ask at first thought, wondering if it was even the right moment to ask such a question, and if asking such a question would reveal too much about him.

“Fuck no.” Ms. Williams answered without any hesitation. “That, I for damn sure couldn’t see myself doing.”

Donnell was devastated when he heard this, but was surprisingly able to keep his stoic demeanor, and successfully hide his pain as Ms. Williams continued to speak.

“Not that I don’t like kids,” She continued, “They’re great, but I wanted to do so much. Accomplish so much. And not that I couldn’t do all of that with kids, but it would’ve been much harder to do so if I had a kid. You get me?”

Donnell just stared in disbelief, unable to empathize, or even accept Ms. Williams stance on children.

“I’m sorry.” She then said after noticing the expression on Donnell’s face. “Do you have kids?”

“I don’t.”

“That’s good. You’re young, handsome, and you seem smart. Even though you can’t complete full sentences. You still got the whole world ahead of you. Don’t waste it. Anybody special in your life?”

Donnell hesitated to answer only to think first on how to properly answer the question.

“I do have a friend.” He answered. “But recent events have made things complicated.”

“Okay. That’s fine. Well, if y’all get through your complications, later on down the line, after you’ve accomplished your goals, is this friend someone you could see yourself having kids within the future?”

“Can we switch the subject from kids to something else please?” Donnell requested in an angered tone.

“Sure. I’m sorry. I didn’t know children were a touchy topic for you.”

“It’s not. I just don’t wanna talk about it.”

“Fine with me.” Ms. Williams replied and backing off the subject without questioning any further. “Is there anything else you wanna ask me for your research? I did kind of jump off subject.”

Donnell sighed as he massaged the temples of his head.

“It’s cool. Just gimme a second.”

It was starting to become too much for Donnell to handle; trying to keep up the appearance of a college student doing research for a paper, keep his mind off the conversation earlier with Lauren, and hold from emotionally breaking down from his current interaction with Ms. Williams.

“I’m sorry. I just have to think of some questions to ask since I left my phone with them. It had my notes.” Donnell said and trying to make the lie sound as convincing as possible.

“Like I said, I have time.”

“In the meantime, you have any questions for me?” Donnell then asked.

“You never did finish telling me what happened with your mother.”

That was it. The straw that broke the camel’s back, and as Donnell stared at Ms. Williams for a moment after she asked the question, trying to fight back the tears that were beginning to well up in his eyes, it hurt Donnell to accept, that as he looked deep into Ms. Williams eyes, it was true, she did not know who he was to her, and he finally said,

“I can’t do this anymore.”

“Do what?” Ms. Williams asked and completely thrown aback by the claim.

“I tried the other day and that was hard. I thought today would be different, but I can’t sit here and look at you and do this.” Donnell had continued and then rising from the chair.

“Okay, I don’t know what you’re talking about, but nobody is making you do anything. I for sure ain’t ask you to come here, and I don’t know you. So, feel free to leave any time you want.”

“You’re a bitch.”

“What the fuck did you just call me nigga?!” Ms. Williams quickly darted back, with a glare, and a raised eyebrow.

Donnell was surprised himself. He was thinking it, but he did not mean for it to come out. He was completely speechless.

“You know what?” Ms. Williams was so appalled that, she didn’t even wait for an explanation from Donnell, and just yelled out, “Guard!”, and it was only a matter of seconds when the cell door slid open, and the intimidating P-90 entered.

“Wait!” Donnell pleaded. “I didn’t mean it. I was just upset. I’m stressing about the police academy, and the friend I told you about, she’s— “

“Police academy?” Ms. Williams interrupted. “I thought you were doing a research paper for college?”

“I was in college, but—!”

“Was? Look, I don’t know who you are, or what all this was all for, but you gotta go. Guard get his ass out of here please.” She requested.

The moment she made the request, the android started towards Donnell at an amble pace, and then demanded,

“Please exit cell through door at the north of the cell room. Thank you for your cooperation.”

“No! You don’t understand!” Donnell yelled. “It was the only way that I could see you!”

“Please exit cell through door at the north of the cell room. Thank you for your cooperation.”

The security droid was now standing in between the two, directly in front of Donnell, and blocking his view.

“Bruh, get the fuck out of my way!” Donnell furiously yelled. His anger had gotten the best of him, and he was bordering on rage.

This, of course, meant nothing to the security droid who, just stood idle, and waited for Donnell to comply with its orders.

Donnell then took a threatening step forward and was now only a few inches away from android.

“I said move!”

Ms. Williams looked on in surprise because she had never seen anyone be so bold as to step to a P-90 in way that made it seem as if they had the ability to take it down with little.

“Boy, will you just leave before you get hurt.” She exclaimed. “Fuckin’ tilt. This is why you need to stay away from the shit.”

“I told you, I’m not on tilt goddamnit!” Donnell yelled back.

His violent outburst prompted the android to grab Donnell by the arm.

“Let me the fuck go!”

The android ignored the demand and proceeded towards the cell door with a firm grip on Donnell’s left arm.

“I SAID LEMME GO!!”

Although Donnell made his best efforts to plant his feet, he was clearly no match in strength despite his intimidating approach and was being pulled along like a child being dragged by a parent.

“LEMME GO! I’M HER SON!”

The statement seemed to have no effect on Ms. Williams when Donnell yelled it out. She kept her stoic demeanor as she watched Donnell be removed from her cell unwillingly and with force.

“DID YOU HEAR ME?!” Donnell looked back at Ms. Williams. “I’M YOUR SON! YOUR SON!”

Ms. Williams just glared at Donnell with such an intense anger, that Donnell was shocked speechless, and was surprised when she said,

“Get yo lying tilt addicted ass out of cell and don’t you ever come back here.”

2:18 a.m.

“Hell nah! You ain’t put in on this!” EJ exclaimed as he exhaled a cloud of smoke and passing the small glass pipe to Mark.

“Bro, really? You know I had work tonight. And what about all them times I spotted you? Plus, nigga, you already high enough.” Barry darted back.

EJ just grinned. Mark, Tevin, and himself had made it to the park about an hour before Barry and had already had the rotation going. Their pupils and visible veins in their eyes had become the overwhelming baby blue color, a common short-term effect of using the drug, and neither of the three young men showed signs of ceasing their tilt intake any time soon.

“Yo, y’all ever wonder why we don’t see a lot of stars like everybody else? You can only see like three stars at night in LA.” Mark said after taking a hit while gazing at the few specks of glittering lights in the dark sky.

“No. But I am wondering why you slowin’ up the rotation.” Tevin said and snatching the pipe.

“Damn bro, my bad. You ain’t have to snatch it though.”

Instead of taking a hit himself, Tevin passed the pipe to Barry, who eagerly received it, and then Tevin, without warning, suddenly dropped to the ground and began to perform pushups.

“I love how this shit gets me goin’!” He shouted as he started up and down.

EJ, who was the first to see Tevin do this, bursted into laughter, and said,

“Bruh, get yo dumb ass off the ground. it’s three in the damn morning and yo ass act’n like you at Gold’s Gym or some shit.”

“Bro, where the bitches at though?” Barry asked and holding the smoke in his lungs.

“On Fig like they always are.” Mark chuckled.

“EJ...what... happened...to.... that one...chick. You was.... fuckin’ wit?” Tevin asked while we’ll into his workout.

EJ just sighed and shook his head at the sight of Tevin still doing his pushups.

“What chick?”

“The one.... you met....at...that party.” Tevin replied.

EJ contemplated for a moment.

“Oh, the one at that party. I think her name was Teresa. Yeah, she was wild.”

“Wild?” Mark asked. “Shit, well, what’s up wit her and her homegirls?”

“You think if you hit her up now, she’d be wit it?” Barry questioned and passing the pipe to

EJ

El took a hit and said,

“Nah.” He then exhaled. “She probably sleep now and she wild, but she ain’t wild like that now that I think about it. She was all fidgeting when I took her wit me to go get a gram.”

“That’s whack.” Mark replied.

“So...no.... pussy?”

“Bro! Will you get yo ass up off the ground please!?” EJ demanded.

“Yeah, you low key freakin’ me out.” Mark added.

Tevin sighed as he rose from the ground, was met with the offering of the pipe, and he snatched it from EJ.

“Y’all just couldn’t let me get a workout in, huh?” He groaned.

“Have y’all heard from Skip? I tried to hit that nigga up yesterday.” Barry asked.

“Bruh, Skip and Meech ain’t never around when you need them. They the worst drug dealers ever bruh.” EJ claimed.

“Wait, y’all haven’t heard?” Mark asked the group.

“Heard what?” Tevin asked and then passing the pipe to Mark.

“Word on the streets is them niggas got hit at they trap house.” Mark revealed.

“That’s cap” Barry responded.

“Real talk.” Tevin said. “Who would be stupid enough to fuck wit someone from P-Nutt squad?”

“I don’t know. But they say it was brutal. Body parts severed. Like on some Yakuza shit.” Mark answered.

“Why wasn’t it all over the news then? And who is they? Where is this shit coming from? Who’s your source nigga?” EJ asked

“Just from niggas in the loop. You know how word get around the hood. And how am I supposed to know why they didn’t put it on the news? Maybe because it’s too fucked up and they don’t wanna cause panic.” Mark claimed.

“That’s bullshit. They talkin’ bout ol’ boy who destroyed them P-90 units. How does that not cause panic. We were made to believe them things are indestructible.” Tevin said.

“I don’t believe whoever that nigga is actually destroyed’em. They were probably just faulty. Niggas ain’t out here killing robots bruh.” Barry said.

“Who is that?” Mark suddenly asked while squinting and trying to make out who or what he was seeing.

All four men directed their attention to the east side of the park where in the distance they could see a dark androgynous figure slowly approaching with a limp.

“A yo that’s a female I think, y’all.” Barry said.

All four men’s eyes widened with excitement and rather than wait for her to reach them, they hastily made there way over to her like predators to prey. Unfortunately, unbeknownst to them, this wounded female was no prey.

“Damn y’all. She bad, right? EJ said with a smirk as all four of them surrounded her. “You pretty far up on Fig. ain’tchu? What happened? A trick was a little too rough?”

Nihari sighed in irritation as the men laughed. It was obvious from the tears and rips in her clothes that she had been in a fight that she seemed to have barely escaped with her life.

“Look, I really don’t have time for this. Just get out of my way.” She said and cradling her left arm with her right hand.

“You know, if you’re in pain we mos def got a remedy for that.” Mark said and pointing at his blue pupils.

Nihari stared at Mark with disgust. Then at the others with the same look as she saw all their pupils were blue.

“What the fuck is wrong with y’all eyes?”

Nihari, of course, was aware of the drug tilt, but she had never done it herself, nor had known anyone who did it, and so, she had no idea of the side effects.

“Same thing that could happen to yours, if you act right.” Tevin said and inching closer to Nihari.

“If I act right?”

“Yeah, you obviously need to sit down and relax. How about we take you back to my spot where you can rest yourself and we can have some fun.” Barry said in a devious tone.

“You down for that Amtrak, right?” Mark asked.

"Of course, she is." EJ answered. "Only the freaks come out at night. Ain't that right, girl?"

"That's right." Tevin chuckled. "It's okay though, ain't nobody around, we can do it right here."

"Bro, I am not fuckin' no prostitute in public." Barry said.

"It's like three in the morning bro. Who's gonna come out here and see us? Ain't nobody taking walks in the park this damn early." Tevin said.

"Shit. I don't mind. I'm high as fuck anyway." Mark said.

"It's settled then." EJ announced. He then turned his attention towards Nihari, inched more into her personal space, and placed his hand on her shoulder. "See? We're reasonable. You don't even have to go anywhere with us. We can get down right here and now." He said to Nihari, "I'm sure you've done your thing in public before. Alleyways and shit. Why don't—" EJ suddenly stopped and with an impromptu surprised expression on his face. He then slowly lifted his arm, as if it had become too heavy, placed his palm on the back of his head, and before he could even react Mark yelled out,

"Bro, what the fuck!?! Is that a fuckin' ninja star coming out the back of your head?!?"

"How the fuck!?" Barry then yelled out in total shock.

"Where did that shit come from!?" Tevin asked and frantically looking around the immediate area.

"I don't know. Get that shit out!" Barry yelled.

"I told y'all to leave. Now it's too late." Nihari sighed.

The moment she said this, the throwing star, in the blink of an eye, grew five times in size, resembling a buzz saw, and splitting EJ's head down the center as his lifeless body collapsed to the ground.

Barry seeing this, immediately turned and ran in the opposite direction. Mark and Tevin were stuck in complete shock until Tevin turned to Nihari and grabbed her by the arm.

"Bitch! What did you do!?" He hollered, but in that very moment a loud buzzing sound whisked passed them, and Tevin's arm fell hard to the ground sliced clean at the elbow.

Tevin's eyes widened as he stared helplessly at his body part lying on the ground and after a second, Tevin began to scream at the top of lungs.

Nihari then took a large step to the side, which she did just in time, and was able to dodge the blade of the sword that would have otherwise pierced straight through her. Instead, it found its way inside Tevin's mouth and exited through the back of his throat.

Mark, for a moment, was frozen in place as he looked on with a gaping expression at, what he was even reluctant to admit to himself, the ninja holding the hilt of the sword that impelled Tevin. He then turned to run but only got a few feet when he ran face first into what felt like a brick wall with breast. He looked up to see another ninja, larger and much bigger in size than him, and blocking his

path of escape. Before Mark could react, the the ninja immediately grabbed him by the neck, lifted him off ground, and began strangling him. It was only a few seconds later and Nihari heard a snap. Marks dead body then dropped to the floor.

Barry had gotten a good distance away from everything, and was moving at a frantic pace, but somehow tripped on an unknown object and fell to the ground. Nihari shook her head in pity as she watched Barry gradually rose from the ground only to have his head sliced off by the same buzzing sound that took Tevin's arm.

All the killers stood frozen in the last position they were in like statues until they heard,
"Chui!"

The ninjas then stood at attention like army soldiers, removed their black face coverings, and revealing their identities. Beautiful females. These were the infamous Angels of Death, or at least a few.

"How many innocent people are going to have to die because of your insubordination Nihari!?"

Nihari sighed and turned around to the voice and the buzzing sound that had become lower in volume.

"I wouldn't necessarily put those idiots in the category of innocent." She replied.

Strutting towards Nihari, in the same all black as her subordinates, holding out the palm of her hand, where a twelve-inch circular saw blade spun violently while it hovered just inches above it, and with a smirk was Qeeta. Equally matched in skill to Nihari, but higher in rank among the AoD's, Qeeta was at one point the closest thing to a friend Nihari had growing up.

"It's time to stop all of this nonsense, NeeNee. It's time for you to come home and face the consequences of your actions." She said. "Don't make this anymore harder than it needs to be. You know I will kill you if I have too."