

Things Men Do...

Women Do The Same

A Novel by Xavia

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"A paperless effort" · Tampa, FL

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Dedicated to all the ladies out there who have felt the sting, the pain, the loss, the rejection, the humiliation, the feeling of I'm not good enough and who still thought these men still don't know.

They do, and until we change we won't find the ones who have changed or who didn't play the game either.

Keep your head up, your soul in the light and your heart strong for it won't be very long till true love finally finds its way to you.

xxxxxx,

Xavia



*Welcome to the first of
three parts of our lives*

If I only knew all the things to say,
I would have already said them.

If I knew all the things that you
meant to me,
you would already know them.

But only if I live in the world of what
if's I would have never known the love
we shared.

All the damage that had been done
is the reason for the web that I spun.

Imperfect and true,
it is how I loved you.

XOXOXO,

Mercedes



Men and intelligence in the same just sentence doesn't work.

Just to be clear, let me state that again for you, "Men and intelligence in the same sentence just doesn't work." If I already know this, then why do I keep letting these fools upset me?

Women got the real dog pound going on in the first place anyway. Men ain't nothing but dawg's and women can keep two or three of them at the same time and they never find out about the other one(s). Now just let them try to do that. Keep a few extra pussycats around and we will find out about it. Don't they know we can smell that other cat as soon as we walk in the door?

Face it ladies, men are dumb. They get so happy that they are getting some from a whole litter that their mouths run and cannot stop. Then they try to come up with that sorry azz tired over used over stated excuse, "It wasn't me baby, I love you." Please. Men and intelligence in the same sentence just doesn't work. And you know what, we ain't much better because how many of us still stick with them. The dog is man's best friend, not women's. Hell we get diamonds as a best friend not some scruffy scroungy rabid dog. But you can you tell my girl Miranda that?

No.

This girl thinks that men are gods. To her, men can do no wrong. Hey, if that is her perspective on things, then fine. Give the sister the right to draw her own conclusions. No problem with that, but I will tell you where the problem is. The problem is when her, men can't do nothing wrong-azz comes running to my house talkin about, I can't believe he did that, said this, slept with her, took this, made me pay for that, etc.,

etc., etc. For some, I guess it just takes a little longer, unlike my other friend Orianna.

Now you see she is in the learning stage of the game. She is to that point now, "If you want to be with me fine, if not, I have got better things to do with my time." I taught her that, thank you very much. I also taught her about the "15-minute" rule, which is a rule all of us needs to know and apply in our life.

The rule is very simple: if your date cannot show up on time and they do not call and say that they are running late within the fifteen minutes of the time that they were supposed to be where they are supposed to be, go about your business. Sure, they get mad when they call up two days later with that oh so sorry excuse, and find out you went out without them. Reality check fellas, we ain't havin it.

Now I know when you fall in love and have had a long relationship with that man you start to worry, one or two slips on the rule is fine, but never let them take you for granted.

Most of these men out here are not going to do nothing for us anyway. Not one damn thang! These women who depend on their man financially make me sick. Call me independent if you will, but when it comes down to it, I have a place to stay when they leave. I have a car to drive of my own. I have a paycheck to buy my clothes, my shoes, get my hair and nails done, go party, travel, and most importantly, live my life. Understand?!

Want another tip, any man who says they want an independent woman and cannot stand women who cannot handle her own is lying! Do you know how many men have told me that they love the fact that I can handle my own business but I find them with the girl who can't even handle a simple task in life like having a cellular phone? A car? A job? A place of their own? I think you are getting the picture. These are the women whose mothers raised them saying let a

man take care of everything; you just physically take care of your man. You can raise your hand now if the man you met who said they preferred you over these type of women got caught cheating on you with one of them.

Now I know you are thinking I must hate the hell out of men, but the truth is I do not. I have closer male friends than female friends. Men are all right on the friend level; it is after that they start trippin. I know this because I have seen the way they treat their girlfriends and wives in comparison to me. How are you going to go do something to break their hearts, then turn around and tell me you would never do that to me because we are too good of friends? Think about that. They would never do that to their boys, but they would do it to you because you are their woman. Hello!

If you start out as friends, then you should always remain as friends, so you can always enjoy one another. Do not possess a woman. Do not be jealous of your woman. Do not hold your woman down. Do not hit your woman. Do not ignore your woman. Do not think any less of your woman than you would of yourself. Most importantly, do not lose a good woman. Reality is that once she is gone, she may never come back.

Respect your woman, enjoy your woman, love your woman, intellectually challenge your woman, encourage your woman, stand behind your woman, and be true to your woman as you would be true to yourself.

Just some advice, take it as you please.

Moreover, to the women out there, you had better apply that advice to your man. You cannot treat somebody bad and expect him to treat you like a queen. You must treat your woman as a queen, to be her king. You must treat your man as a king, to be his queen. Just do not assume it. Assume nothing.

I know you all are wondering about what got me started on men today. Well I am not going to tell you. It is none of your damn business anyway. We women are always trying to get into somebody's business as if we were *Oprah Winfrey* or somebody. As it is, I don't even know why I began to open my mouth. I am just so pissed off with men and their sorry asses.

C'mon Mercedes, breathe. Relax. Let it out.

Okay, of course I will tell you why. How else am I going to deal with this? Isn't that what we women do, talk everything out until it is talked to death. I always say if you talk it then walk it ... yea so much for listening to my own words.

The fine line of it all is that I let one of my male friends get too close. Xavier and I have been friends for over two years now. We go here and there, but nothing serious. Okay, we have kissed once or twice, but never have we ever slept together. Want to ruin a friendship, sleep with the man. Friends with benefits equal one friend with a broken heart and the other getting what they want. Say it ain't so, but you can watch Rachel and Ross on *Friends* if you really want confirmation. One person in the whole friends with benefits thing will always be lying to themselves about what is really going on. Just my personal opinion, take it as you will.

Xavier, Mr. Xavier Lawrence that is, works as a tax lawyer in a downtown firm. He does not have the status that he wants yet, but as a junior partner, he makes enough money to give himself and someone of significance some very nice things. He drives what he considers a sweet BMW 3 series; well at least he thinks it is. I personally prefer the BMW M3 but whatever. He wears tailor made suits because there is nothing cheap on or about that man's body. The man knows all the fine wine and dining spots in Chicago because the firm would have it no other way. He has a huge condominium on the Gold Coast with an awesome view of the downtown area and Lake Michigan. Xavier

is fine as all hell, has a great body, intelligent in law and stupid when it comes to women. Sometimes I tell myself I should grab him for myself, but I know it is too late for that. On the other hand, is it?

Now, Xavier at times can drink a little too much when he is upset and that does not sit well with me at all. Been there, done that, and I ain't going back. Well he must have been upset the night before, because he was tore up from the floor up when he got here.

"Hey X, what up?"

"Hey." He proceeded to walk in and give me a hug. "How you doin with your fine self?"

"I'm good but not as good as you. Were you drinking or spilling all over yourself?"

"I've been drinking, can't you tell? Want to know why because yet another bitch pulled her ish on me again. Damn, what do they want from me anyway? I give them everything they ask for."

"I warned you about that X. What was the fight over this time, the Coach purse not valuable enough?"

"No that was last week." I just rolled my eyes at him. "I go to her apartment to take her out for dinner and a carriage ride. I arrive a little early, because I thought we could get a little sumin – sumin in before she finished getting dressed. Maybe stay undressed for the rest of the night." X had stopped, stared at my print on the wall of an artistically naked man and woman in an erotic pose, and then remembered to go on. "Damn man, had too much of the Jack, jack. Anyway, I get over there early, thinking about how I wanna tear into that azz. You know."

"Yea sure I do X. Every time I see the..." I stopped when he gave me that stare. I do not mess with drunks. Their mood swings are worse than any woman out there on PMS is, so I calmly said, "Sorry, what happened when you got there?"

"That bitch had her ex man over there talking about he decided to come back. Bitch wouldn't even let me

through the door. Her man might get mad at me. Excuse me ho, who am I then, the wallet? That is what I wanted to know. I barged in there looking at this man as if I was crazy. I thought fuck it, grabbed up those stupid azz presents that I gave her and walked back out the door. I am too intelligent to be getting in some fight over a bitch like that. She told me, no wait she swore to me...." X was staggering all over the place, waving his arms as he said all this. It was funny and sad all at the same time. "She wasn't ever going to take that jerk back. They are perfect for each other, no good azzes. I should have taken those fake nails and that weave I bought her on my way out to."

At that point, all I could do is laugh! This man had me rolling. "Go ahead X," trying to control my laughter I said, "take the weave and the nails too. You go boy."

X just looked at me and fell out. Finally, when we both calmed down, I just looked at him and said, "Now X, baby, why are you always buying these women presents right away? You don't even give them a chance to get to know you personally. You just let them get to know your wallet. If you want a woman, a present is nice, but what you give first is what they expect later. Do you understand me? All I am saying is give of you first, and then that is what they will expect later. If they get to know you like I know you, then they won't let those stupid idiots back in when they come with their sorry tired lines. Besides you could be using that money to bet me in pool, so I can go buy that new jacket I want."

"No, you'd be the one out of the cash, because you know damn well I can cream your fine azz over a pool table any day." A different kind of vision of him creaming me over a pool table went through my mind at that point. Stop it Mercedes, you know better.

"Damn, Mercedes, I am sorry I came over here all tore up. You are always here for me, especially when I screw up all the time with these.... These ... well

whatever I should call them. Truthfully, I would rather have my wallet hurt; then let them hurt my heart. Only friends like you and the boys got it like that. Now you guys, you're my heart." See what I mean.

"Well it's late, and I don't know how in the world in your condition you made it over here, but I am not letting it get you back. You can stay over here tonight. You know where everything is at."

Okay so I let him stay the night. I mean seriously, what friend would put a drunk friend back out on the road? The thing is that someone decided since I was in his heart I also should be in his bed. Or rather, I should say that he should be in my bed.

Now X and I have fallen asleep together watching movies and stuff, but as I said, it never went any further. Well, someone thought it should that night and unfortunately so did I.

Before I sent X off to bed, I made sure he took a shower in order to sober up. When he stepped out of the shower with the towel around his waist, I admit to it, I could not help but stare. Damn, what was wrong with her? What was wrong with any of them for that matter? Women are always screaming that they want a brother who is about something and every time they get one, they use and abuse them. What a shame.

I mean yea with X it takes work to get him to open his heart up to you instead of his wallet, but dayum its worth the work. He is worthy of the time, the input, the trust building, the everything. I guess money, presents, and nice places just make it too easy to become involved with the material and not the heart.

While I was zoned in my own little world thinking of how stupid these women are I guess he noticed me staring at him, not that I was, but he closed the bathroom door and came out in my pair of men's Chicago Bulls basketball shorts I had around the house. Hey, don't act like you don't know how comfortable they are.

I said goodnight to him, and a few hours later, he woke me up with sweet seductive kisses that I just could not resist.

"Stop X, you know we're to close for this."

"That's the best way to be, Mercedes. I have wanted this for a long time. I just held back. One night is all I ask for, you can decide from there. I swear to not ever let you down."

"X while I don't doubt that, is this really what you want?"

"No, you are really who I want."

Once I heard those words and felt that warm, strong, muscular body against mine, I could not do anything but relax, forgive myself for disobeying my rules, let down my defenses, and give in. As I said before, I would grab this man for myself if I did not think it was already too late.

In the morning, I felt his warm kisses all over my body again. Damn, he actually stayed the entire night. I mean he has before, but this time was different because last night was our first time together. I mean, he is my friend and has been forever, why would I expect him to leave?

As we lay there, I could not help but wonder what would happen to us when we slipped out of this bed that we created for ourselves last night. It was simply, paradise.

♂ talk show ♀

When my phone rang I let it go to my machine, yea I know about the whole voicemail thing the phone company offers but my machine allows me to listen when I don't feel like talking. Not to mention that I don't want to pick up due to an ex-man that refuses to let go. Yes I know all about caller ID but in order to use it I have to one, remind myself to buy a telephone with caller id capabilities and two, order that service with my telephone company. Having a cellular phone with caller ID as an automatic feature just makes me forget about adding it to my home phone service. "Mercedes it's me, Ori. Pick up the phone if you're there."

"Hello."

"He is still calling you huh? Some men just do not get the picture do they? Maybe you should change your number to an unlisted one, then when you won't need to go and buy that caller id stuff you have been putting off for the past year anyway. Change the number and you will always know who is actually calling because your cell phone has caller ID anyway."

"Yeah, I already thought about that, but there are too many fine brothers out there who may remember to use my number again someday." Okay so yea, that was a little on the pathetic side but so what. "So what's new?"

"Not too much. Speaking of fine brothers, I saw Xavier at the bar the other night getting tore up. Why does he do that? He has all that intelligence and is stupid enough to use alcohol as a stress reliever."

"That's not the only thing he uses."

"And how would you know about this?"

"None ya."

"None ya?"

"None ya business."

"So it's like that?"

"Yeppers, it is."

"Well I wanted to check up on him, but I was on a date and you know how they trip when you want to check up on a male friend. So I thought maybe you heard from him today or last night.

He probably went home and passed out."

"Yea, he did for a little while." Oops!

"Okay, now I know you know something I don't know. Meaning he came to you last night, am I right?"

"I know you're on your cell phone and probably in deep traffic. So where are you going to be at and what time can I meet you there?"

"Well, Ms. Change the Subject, as of now, I am ten minutes from your apartment. So put on the coffee or whatever, and I will see you then. Okay?"

"Okay, bye."

Damn, I know she is going to trip when I tell her about Xavier and me. She had better not even go run her mouth to tell anyone else about this. She should know better by now. The one way to have a best friend is to have so much on them, that they could never use anything against you. Kinda sounds messed up doesn't it? Think about it for a while, why would someone go and run their mouth when they know you can run yours just as well. In the end, you both look like fools and I do not play that.

Orianna and I have known each other for three years now. We are practically like sisters. Every time we go to see the Bears play and that is only when it is warm to semi-cold, we wear matching outfits. Otherwise, we wear our matching outfits while we watch the game from the couch. When we go to clubs, we wear the same temporary tattoo which men really get a kick out of. We talk about everybody, because we know everybody can talk about us. I

guess that is kind of childish, but hey they said I had to be responsible not grow up.

Orianna is a bit more on the wild side than I am. First off, she can take any man, any night of the week, and have anything she wants served to her on a sexual platter. You can live all your sexual fantasies through her, because more than likely she has already done them.

She is my girl though. I trust her with everything I tell her. We both care about each other enough to know not to hurt each other. We are both open-minded and do not criticize one another for our life styles. All that I ask is that a condom be her best friend and that she never puts herself knowingly into any danger. This is Chicago and there are some crazy brothers out there, I do not care how rich they look.

While I waited for her, I poured a glass of wine and thought about the night before. Xavier had called me while I was out. I guess he was for real last night, but I am mad at him or maybe I am made with myself. I always knew he would be the one I couldn't resist and he proved it last night. Now where do we go?

My buzzer rang: it was Ori.

I opened the door and before I could even get a word in she said, "Hi, hello, and all that. I will not let you change the subject on me this time. What happened between Xavier and you last night?"

"Damn. Alright, here give me your coat, pour yourself a glass of wine, and I will be right back." I had to use the bathroom.

"What happened to the coffee?"

"What you can't drink?"

"You know how I am."

"Oh that's right, you start but you cannot stop. What was I thinking?" I laughed and walked into the bathroom. I did my business, looked in the mirror, took a deep breath, and here we go.

"Find something else to drink?"

Giving me the *you will tell me* look she stood there with her arms crossed.

Damn. "Look this is what happened last night. Xavier came over here tore up because his now ex girlfriend went back to her then ex boyfriend and Xavier got upset. It was kinda funny though; he stormed in the apartment grabbed anything that he had bought her and left. Came over here talking about he should have grabbed the nails and the weave to."

"No he didn't."

"Yes he did!"

"That man is so funny!"

"Even though I hate that he drinks that much, he is funny as hell. Anyway, I told him that he should let women to get to know him before his wallet."

"I know that's right. Why does he keep doing that? He is the only man I know that starts buying women presents within the first two weeks of dating them. It's like a woman sleeping with a man on the first date hoping it will keep him coming back. Don't they know it seldom works? What you give first is what they expect later. I have sex with men right away because it is like an addiction; I practically know that they will never come back. I think I actually scare the hell out of men sometimes."

"That is the same thing I told him last night. Well, not the sex part anyway. He told me that he'd rather let a woman hurt his wallet then his heart."

"After Kalani, he has been this way. That girl had to be out of her mind to leave him. I liked her to; she was nice to him and everything. I just don't understand it."

"I know, but everybody has their own life to live."

"Speaking of which how did you live your life with Xavier last night?"

She just gave me that look like she already knew what I was going to say anyway, so I might as well tell her. "After we had are little heart to heart, I told him he

could stay the night. So he took a shower and went to bed." I stopped and stared at my erotica print, maybe that is what inspired him last night. I closed my eyes and tried to go on. Before I could finish, Ori finished it for me.

"Wait, you two slept together last night? Mercedes, I thought you would never sleep with him. Honestly, I am glad you two did. I know how much you care about him, and I really think that he cares about you to. So what happened?"

"Yes, we slept together last night. He came into my bedroom a couple hours later and woke me up. He just asked for this one night and then I could decide from there and more importantly told me that I am the person he wants to be with. I mean it's not like I haven't thought about it or wanted to."

"There it is, if you wanted to, and obviously you did. So was he there in the morning?"

"Yes, he was there."

"Damn, why you sound all depressed for then? Obviously, the man cares for you. Did he call you today?"

"Yes he called today, I wasn't home and he left a message. I didn't call him back yet."

"Are you going to?"

I just gave her that hurt look and said, "I don't know. I am still trying to decide if I am mad at him or at myself for what happened last night. Everything he did felt so right. It was the best first time I ever had in my life, well except for my first time with Visean. We weren't even nervous with each other. It's like we already knew everything we needed to know. Damn. Now where do we go?"

"Where do you go? Go forward with him. First off, Xavier has been one of your best friends for over two years now. Second, you both work in the same field. Third, I think the reason he refuses to get close to these women is that he is already close with you. C'mon

Mercedes, he'd rather let a woman hurt his wallet instead of his heart. You already have his heart, he wanted to show you that last night and you let him. Why do you think he stayed until the morning? How many men have you been with who did that?"

"I don't know."

"Yes you do know. Look, I was never supposed to tell you this but now who cares. Xavier and I were talking one night and he told me the feelings he has for you. Girl, he is in love with you."

I just rolled my eyes at her, "Yeah right".

"No listen. He just never wanted you to know about it. You talk so much about your musician friend Visean; he thinks the two of you are strictly on the friend level. He is, or was, scared that if he told you or tried something that you would stop talking to him. Well I guess he couldn't handle it anymore and tried last night. It's probably killing him that he hasn't heard from you yet. Are you going to call him? You need to let him know something."

Call him? If it were only that simple. "Look, you know my feelings about both of them, but I am just as scared as he is on risking that friendship. How was I to know that all this time he felt the same way I did? Besides, how would a relationship between he and I work out anyway? We both travel and work over 50 hours per week, and neither of us even know how to handle a real social life outside our jobs. Let's not forget that drinking thing would be a real problem with me. After Marcell I never want to go through that ish again. So what are we supposed to do, use each other for sex?"

"I see no problem in that."

I cut my eyes at her, "And you would know all about that, huh!"

"Mercedes, calm down, take a step back and get a good look at things. Xavier didn't use you last night; he was taking a chance. You, the queen of not trusting

men, trusted yourself with him last night. If he did everything right, then there must be some shared feelings between the two of you. Call him and see what he thinks, don't assume anything."

"Didn't I tell you that?" Take a deep breath and think Mercedes. Really think. "Alright, I will call him. After all he called me first, so maybe it won't be so bad."

"Let me know when you do. I am sorry but I do have to go. I want to do a quick retouch on my hair before my meeting tomorrow. This could be the account that could really help me out. Call him and call me if you need me. Just give it a chance and see what happens, okay? Love you. Bye."

"Bye."

She got her coat and left. For the next hour I watched TV and stared at the telephone.

Damn Mercedes just call him, it was your decision too last night. By not calling him, you could be turning nothing into something. The man stayed until the morning. What else do you want him to do? He called you. Just pick up the telephone and call.

Fine, I picked up the phone and prayed for voicemail, but instead got him. "Hello X?"

"Hey Mercedes, hold on let me get off this other line."

"If it's important I..."

"Nothing can be more important than you. Hold on."

Damn, why did he have to say that? I have talked to X a million times and now I am nervous. This is ridiculous; quit acting like a little girl Mercedes. Face the feelings you have for him and go with them for once. You know you will not let yourself mess up.

"Okay, I'm back."

"Hi."

"How are you?"

"Awake and you?"

"A little crazy from what happened last night. Well not crazy, just...I don't know exactly. Look I really feel uncomfortable trying to talk over the phone; can I come over and talk?"

Can he come over and talk? Damn, what do I say? And then I felt it, I was dying to see him again. "No, I think it's pretty late, and I have a client coming in early."

"An hour of your time is all I ask for."

"You have been asking for a lot lately haven't you?" Damn, now why did I go and say that. "I'm sorry X, yeah come on over. I will be waiting on you."

"See you soon."

I hope not too soon. Where is a good traffic jam in this city when you need one?

♂ introductions ♀

Now before I go on and tell you what happened that night, I just thought I should go ahead and introduce myself. Hello I'm Mercedes Dominace and welcome to my world. I am 27 years old; I consider myself intelligent, independent, and sexy.

Okay yea I just smirked after saying that.

I am a want a man not need a man kind of woman. I repeat: want a man, not need a man. Are you listening? Good because there is a difference.

I graduated with my bachelor's degree from Northern Illinois University and started with a well known tax firm in downtown Chicago after graduation.

I work hard, play hard and once I have my mind set to something, just try to stop me. I was married once upon a miserable time and it proved to me there are no such things as fairytales. Actually it also taught me that men and intelligence in the same sentence just doesn't work. You see the reason being is that my x-husband left me for his car.

Yes you read that correctly, he left me for his car. They should be married and have children by now. Okay that didn't exactly bring the right visual to mind but you get my point.

His name is Marcel and I was in love with him for six years. We met in high school, broke up, got back, married, separated, and divorced. He thought his car was everything and he damn near gave it everything. Towards the end, I didn't even exist. He said that his car didn't want commitment and it didn't talk back to him. His car never cussed him out and didn't expect him to have responsibilities.

Though I don't remember being all that bad I completely disagree; anything that you want to be with you requires maintenance and care. You have to

commit to paying for and maintaining your car otherwise your finance company or your engine will talk back to you. Ever get stuck on the side of the road because you knew you should have done something but you didn't and there you are; exactly.

I mean, I am way into my car, which I have named Brat, but I can separate the two. My husband was supposed to love, hold, honor, respect, and cherish me. He was supposed to take care of me when I was sick, bring me up when I was down, and go that extra step for me on a bad day. Brat far out does him in this area. Just the sight of my car on a bad day makes me smile and when I am sick it's like the drivers' seat and the drive some how get smoother.

After he left me, he had nothing. To this day, he still has nothing but that stupid car and the car booties to go with it. For some reason they think that pathetic Toyota of his is hot. But there never has been and never will be an accounting for taste.

On top of all that he was and still may be a problem drinker, which is why I am concerned about Xavier and his drinking habits. Been there, done that, and I ain't goin back.

Marcel never hit me, but he terrorized the hell out of me. Damn, when I think back to all the messed up ish he pulled on me, I just...I don't know. That should be in the past. The worst part of it was that I didn't even know he had a drinking problem to begin with. He hid it very well from me. He drank after I went to bed and while I was out with some of my girlfriends. I don't know if he had another woman, sure I said we can smell that other cat when we walk in the room, but as well as he hid is alcohol from me there is no telling what else he hid from me. I doubt it anyway, I mean with all that money he put into that stupid car there wasn't much left for anyone or anything else. Not even our bills.

I just asked him one day, "Since you don't have the money for the rent, does that mean we are going to

live in the car? Is that why all our money goes into it?" Men and intelligence in the same sentence, just doesn't work. It wasn't even a Honda, what a waste.

After he left me, more like abandoned me; I became more determined to become what he never thought I could be. I stood on my own without anyone's help and watched it kill him slowly. The day I signed those divorce papers was the last day I ever stopped being what I thought I should be and became what I wanted to be. After all, that is part of what destroyed our marriage; I wasn't following my own path.

All of that drama is where I got my attitude on men today. Hey I tell them straight up, "If you want to be with me fine, if not I got better things to do with my time." Most men don't take me seriously at first, but they learn and they do so quickly. I admit I can be a little too hard on them and remind myself to back off, but like a lot of other women out here, I am tired and I am done. Do you want to know how many married men I have been approached by? Get it right fellas, damn. I know the good ones exist and until we get it right within ourselves we won't actually meet one of them. Why would they want to meet us anyway?

Besides all that mess, I consider myself an open-minded person. I am not prejudice (well maybe as far as car manufactures go I am) or a racist. God must have made a rainbow of colors for some reason, so why fight about it. It is another way to waste time. It kills me that we search for other forms of intelligent life, when most of us cannot even handle a difference in skin color. Interracial, or as I say inter-cultural, couples do not bother me. Love does not see any color, only ignorant people do.

To me love is light, and light has no real color. It is bright, warm, and beautiful. So, why make it so ugly? We are all human and its time to consider that. Look at a child. A child knows nothing until you teach it. So

what will you teach yours? The KKK teaches their children to hate, and that is exactly what they do. Parents have power and its time they start using it and stop abusing it.

Another thing about parenting, you women out there trying to hold your baby's life over a man's head in order to make him stay make me ill. Chile what in the hell is wrong with you anyway?!

All you do is neglect that poor child while you fuss, scheme, and fight trying to keep his ass around. Some soul mates are not sent with you when you arrive here. Others may take time to find. Stop trying to make some man stick around because the both of you messed around while searching for your soul mate. You both ended up with a permanent piece of the one that you weren't meant to be with. However, God did give you the piece of him that He meant for you. Let the drama go and give that child what he/she deserves; you.

Look at me, up on my soapbox again. Sorry. Now you know a little bit more about what goes on inside my mind. It can get a little fierce up in there. What has happened to me is what has made me the way I am. All I know is that if I didn't have my friends, I wouldn't have anything at all. Believe me, outside of my family, my friends mean everything in the world to me.

I will admit that I do want that significant other there. That is why my musician friend, you know the one that Orianna talked about, Visean, is perfect for me. He is always either in the studio, at a gig, on tour, or writing new music. In other words, his life is just as full as mine is. He is not family orientated either; he is music orientated. Moreover, he is very me orientated.

Wait. Let me stop. I mean come on he is a musician, and a slightly jealous one at that. Like he has any room to talk, because he doesn't. We get together maybe three or four times a year. He comes to Chicago a lot on tour, so that is a majority of it.

When I actually have time to jet off somewhere for the weekend I do get to see him perform.

Basically it works, we both get to do what we want and there are no constraints. I have met so many famous singers and groups, and have been to so many concerts I can't even begin to tell you.

Visean is with the best producers out right now so his career is really taking off. He buys me presents galore, and treats me like a queen. I mean, it is so great to get a call on a rainy Friday night and have him say, "Rainy nights are not to be spent alone. Go get on a plane and come see me." Hello, I am there and nowhere else. Okay.

He is open, honest, and caring. He communicates and he is not one sided. He talks and offers ideas, insight, and opinions and he isn't gay. Well as far as I know he isn't. Although, there was that one guitar he had in eggshell blue that just really made me wonder. Anyway.

He is the only man I have ever met that when I lay in his arms, I forget everything. For once, I feel like everything is taken care of and I can relax and actually enjoy it. The very *best* part of all is that when I am with him he gives all his attention to me. A man like that is very hard to resist.

Now, as for me sleeping with Xavier the other night, I really don't think that would go over with Visean to well. In fact, I know it will not go over at all. Damn, damn, damn. Mercedes Dominace. Girl, the things you get yourself into. Damn.

Why did Xavier make me feel like that the other night when I slept with him? I mean, here I am waiting to see him, and I don't know why? Why should last night have changed anything between us? When I talk to X, I never did take him seriously, like I was trying to keep my distance from him. I mean, I am there for him, I do care about him, and I do love him but I distance myself from him.

Did I go to sleep in his arms last night with the feeling that everything was ok? Did I have the feeling that this is where I wanted to be? What am I saying? I mean although we were not truly nervous with each other my mind was going at a thousand miles a minute asking me "What the hell was I doing?"

What was it that we shared exactly? Damn, I am probably gettin to deep on the subject of nothin. It was one night; we will probably discuss or maybe not even discuss it when he gets here. I mean, as much as I think to myself that I would grab this man if I had the chance, why am I not thinking that now. What is holding that feeling back or is it even there? Damn, I know the reason but I refuse to believe in it again.

Buzz. Great, he is here, so much for the traffic jam I wanted.

♂ going there ♀

Just as I opened the door, Xavier reached in and grabbed me. I was like hold up, wait one minute, "Fool what are you doin?"

"Get your coat; we are goin for a ride. And I am no fool."

"Xavier," I said as I was being pulled across my apartment towards my jacket, "it's too late to be going for a ride and you know I have to go into work early tomorrow".

"I don't even wanna hear it. Here is your coat, put it on, and lets go." and started dragging me out the door.

Okay, so curiosity got the best of me. "X, you been drinking again? Because if you have there is no way in hell I am letting you drive me anywhere."

He grabbed me by my shoulders and looked me dead in the eyes, "Mercedes, I have not been drinking, I will not for anything in the world do anything that could ever hurt you in any kind of way." Then he gave me those damn sad eyes, I swear. "Please come for a ride with me."

"Okay." Damn, I can be so pathetic.

This man took me along Lake Shore Drive playing Anita Baker all the way. I just stretched out, relaxed, and let her sing to me. X did not say anything. What is this man up to? I sleep with him one night and now he just trippin. Damn. Where are we going to anyway? Look at him just sittin there smiling like the chestier cat. What is he up to? What does he have to say that he couldn't say to me back in my apartment? I mean damn, it was warmer up in there. Hmm, men always have to be up to somethin...wait...oh no he didn't.

We drove around Buckingham Fountain and parked. I love the fountain when it is all lit up and X knows that. Damn.

X just smiled and looked at me and said, "Lets got for a walk."

Okay, so I was speechless. Damn. I know this brother by now and he is very romantic, it is just that I never expected him doing romantic things for me. I mean, damn, we are friends and all, so I just don't expect it.

X got out, walked around the car, and opened my car door, once again showing that he is a one hundred percent gentleman. Right, until six months later and they are through trying to impress your ass.

Mercedes!

We walked hand in hand around the fountain and found a place to sit and talk.

"Mercedes", I just looked at him still speechless. "I don't want you to think that last night was something that I just did because I was drunk, upset, or lonely. I made love to you last night because my feelings for you run deeper than friendship. Since the very first day that you and I met, I was hoping for some kind of relationship. With all that you were going through, I felt it would be better to be there for you in the way you thought it was best for me to be. But now I feel its time to tell you that I really want to be with you."

"You want to be with me? X, we are already friends. I mean last night won't change that or anything like that. It brought us closer, not farther apart if that is what you are worried about." I am doing a good job of avoiding the issue that is glaring me right in my face, am I not?

"Now you know that I wasn't even worried about that, I am saying lets take it up a level." *Up a level? Did he notice my eyes just get bigger, man I hope not.* "You're the one Mercedes, not even Kalani had it over you."

See not intelligent when it comes to women, no matter how good of a friend I am I still do not like being compared to an ex girlfriend. "Kalani and you were good for each other. What that female's problem was I will never know. But you have to understand I can't replace her, I am just me and that is it."

"Mercedes, how do you feel about me? Tell me the truth. I need to know."

Damn! Mmm...Mmm...Mmm! He wants to take it there. Damn! I got up and walked around for a minute.

Girl what are you going to do now. You know how you feel about this man and how you feel about Visean. So what you gonna do?

Do I lie? Do I really tell him that all along I have wanted him for myself? Is that something I am able to handle yet? I mean Visean is perfect because he is not a reality, but Xavier would be. Damn!

Look at him, fine as hell, got it together and wants me and I have wanted him, but right now, I don't know if I want any man. Stupid azz Marcel. Damn him! The last thing I need to do is screw this one up. Fine, he wants to go there; then let's go. I walked over and sat back down next to him.

"Xavier," damn "you and I are so close. I mean I love doing things with you and you know I am always there for you. You have always been there for me. You have brought so much into my life and not asked for anything in return. I love you because you're my heart, but you know how I have been with relationships. I get into one, I get bored, and I go straight to another. I mean if half the brothers out there knew the other half existed, I mean. What can I say? I am so afraid I would treat you like that and the last thing I would ever want to do is hurt you."

"Mercedes, why do you think it is that I always put out my wallet first instead of my heart? Yes, I remember our conversation the other night. Mercedes" he looked

straight into my eyes, "you are the one my heart has been out for, there is no place for it anywhere else. Last night was for real and hopefully a start to something you won't get bored with."

He was staring at me smiling and all I could do was kiss him. Damn. I have said all along that if I had the chance I would take this one for myself and here is my chance.

As we walked back to the car there was not a word spoken between us. When we got back to my apartment, he kissed me on the cheek goodnight and left. Now that is romance.

♂ *then life said* ♀

After he left and I walked into my apartment I saw that I actually have a social life because there were three messages on the machine. I hit the play button and started to undress.

Beep. "Hey sexy, this is Visean." Like I don't know by now. "Like you don't know by now. Anyway, where you at? It's late and your sexy butt doesn't need to be out runnin them streets. I am somewhere, where am I at? Oh yea, I am in New York doing a show with whoever I am with this week, so give me a call at 212-555-2000. I am in room, wait a minute, uh, 1704. I will be here until the morning then its back up to the studio in Minneapolis, so call me when you get in. Okay lover girl? I miss you. Peace and love."

Beep. "Mercedes it's me Miranda, you there? I tried your cell phone but you weren't there either." Lord what happened now? "Girl you won't believe what he did now. He told me to be by his house at eight and he wasn't even there. Did you know that is over a forty-five minute drive for me? Give me a call when you get in okay." When will that chile ever learn?

Beep. "Damn Mercedes, do you have a long enough beep?" Tomorrow I definitely change my telephone number to unlisted. "Everybody must be calling you." Yeah, everyone who is important, so what's your funky azz doin on my machine? "It's late, where you at?" As if it is any of your damn business to know. "I will try again later." No you will not. "You know I miss you and how sorry I am. Call me." Pathetic.

I rewound the tape; got the number Visean had left and called him back.

"Yes, room 1704 please."

On the third ring, he finally picked up. "Bob's massage parlor, can I help you?"

"Yes I would like to have a personal appointment with Visean please."

"Mmm-hmm. Well young lady ya know Visean just doesn't see anybody, so who might you be?"

"I am the one that if Visean makes time for...I will make sure to return the favor" and gave him that sexy laugh.

"Then I am sure I have some definite time available for you. What up Ms. Mercedes?"

"Nothing. What up Mr. Visean?"

"Nothing but wondering where your sexy butt has been at, isn't it past eleven o'clock up there?"

"Yes it is Dad", I said sternly, "I didn't know I had a curfew."

"Curfew? Someone like you doesn't need to be out. I bet you were with one your *friends* again." And you wouldn't be too happy if you knew what me and my *friend* did last night either. "I know you are out there running around with them younger brothers when they know that you don't even have the time for them."

"Oh really, and why is that?"

"Because you should be with me. Ha!"

"Mmm-hmm. You are right about that. New York does sound more fun right now. So how did you play tonight?"

"Oh, it was okay. The sound sucked, but you know how that is." Why does everybody think this? "I have to jet back to the studio in the morning and then meet back up with the band the next day. I am so tired I can't even remember who, what, or when for whatever."

"You poor baby, I don't know how you do it and I thought I worked a lot. You sound like you are getting sick again. You had better take care of that, because the next time I see you I don't want your cold."

"Oh really."

"Yes because there will be too many other things I want." Damn, I cannot believe I am saying this. I slept with X just last night and now I am teasing Visean about sleeping with him. I must be stupid.

"Speaking of seeing each other again", uh-oh, "what are you doing this weekend? Whatever band and I play on the West Coast this weekend and I was wondering if you would want to come out there. We have to play Friday night and then I have until Tuesday off. I thought you could come out and spend Friday with me, and then Saturday we would take off to Maryland to see my family. You still have to meet them. Oh, Mom says hi. You could leave Monday or Tuesday, or Sunday if you really had to. So what do ya think?"

"First, if and I do mean if I say yes to this little escape plan of yours, tell me you're not going to get a call and have to take off to the studio again. I am not spending all this money to come see your stupid azz and then have you take off on me. I may not let you go this time; I may just go ahead and kidnap you."

"Well you go right ahead and do that, but you know Mercedes how it is, that if I get that call I would have to go because once you don't show with these fools you aren't going to be called again. Now about that spending money thang you brought up, who said you were paying a damn thing to come see me anyway? Girl, you know better than that. All you need is your sexy butt on that plane and that is all. I got the rest taken care of." See what I mean. "So call up the airlines cause I don't think them two have anything planned for the weekend or any studio time even booked, and bring your monkey azz out here. Well, there."

"Gee, you have such a way with words, how could I ever say no? So what is all the detailed 411 I need to know before I call the airlines?"

"Unfortunately," you mean as usual, "I don't have all that information right now with me, but just book a flight out there for this Friday and I know we will be at the Hilton. So I will-err-a give you a call tomorrow or the next day with all that detailed 411 you love so much and then I will see you there. Okay? I am really, extremely tired right now and have an early azz flight to catch, so I will talk to you tomorrow. Okay lover girl?"

"Okay..." and I proceeded with my best valley girl impression, "but like there are lots of places on the West Coast I could book a flight to that have Hilton hotels in the city, so like wanna tell me what general vicinity I should be booking for?" After which he began laughing.

"Oh, I didn't tell you that?"

"Nope."

"Oops! Thought I did. Well it is San Francisco...nope wait...it's um San Diego. Yep that's it, San Diego."

"You are sure."

"Yes chile and you need to be in bed. No, I need to be in bed. No, we both need to be in bed. No wait, we need to be together in bed so book that flight."

"Yes Visean we do so I will let the office know tomorrow and see what I can do. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

That man trips me the hell out. He always does this to me. Calls me and tells me that this or that weekend I will be somewhere besides here. I love it. It is what has made our relationship last so long. Meet his family. Hold up! He has been talkin about that forever and a damn day but I have never taken him seriously. I mean, he is a musician. He can't be getting serious on me now, can he? What is up with these men lately? Well, if he wants to take it there, let's go there and see what happens. I seem to be doing lots of that lately anyway.

I called Miranda at her work in order to leave her a voicemail. "Hi Miranda, what is up girl? It is late so I did

not want to call and wake you up. Give me a call at the office tomorrow."

One more call and it's off to bed you go. "Hi Ms. Angela, it's your favorite flying fool Mercedes Dominace again. Chile, this time I am off to San Diego. This Friday, a morning flight with a return on Tuesday from an airport in Maryland. I don't know which airport yet, how about you tell me. Just the lowest fair one will be fine with me. Call me at the office and I'm out."

I got everything set up for the next day and just laid in bed staring up at the ceiling. What am I doing? I mean, seeing other men besides Visean has never been a problem, even when I did sleep with one or two of them. Now I went and slept with Xavier, which was stupid because I knew how our relationship is, well was. Damn. Wait a minute. Why am I even worrying? Visean is a musician, am I really supposed to believe that there isn't a girl in every other city just like me?

Mercedes you know better than that.

Well, Xavier knows about Visean and Visean knew about Xavier up until yesterday. *Exhale.*

And here I go walking along the razors edge.

♂ arrangements ♀

Traffic in this city can be hell except of course when you need it to be. Even though I was practically running into my office, praying my client wasn't behind me or even worse sitting and waiting for me, I made sure to say hello to my assistant Vicki, "Good morning Vicki. How are you?"

Vicki has been my assistant for about two years now which is a blessing because for a while I was going through assistants like Murphy Brown. Then, the planets aligned and there was Vicki; a wonderful woman and assistant who actually knows the meaning of work. I just hope she does well with the high school student I pick for the summer.

Speaking of which that search starts this month. A few months back I convinced the firm that we should have a mentoring program because I always want to see my young sisters and brothers have the chance to come up in the business world. Let these kids see that education is not only important; it can really get you somewhere. Because lord knows the only thing today's media pushes is that drugs and crime get you everywhere. Yes, that is another one of my soap box issues.

"Good morning Ms. Dominace."

"Mercedes."

"Yes, well your client called and said he would be a few minutes late, so by the time you sit down and prepare, he should be here. Will you need anything? All the files I thought you should need are already on your desk. Oh, Miranda called already and said it was important for you to call her back. She said that she would be in her office until four today. Shall I call her back for you?"

"Well first, thank you very much for having things ready. I shouldn't need anything else, but if I do, I will let you know. Don't even bother with Miranda, she is just having one of her 'I can't believe he did that' fits again. Before I forget, Ms. Angela Effington should be calling in with my flight reservations for this Friday. I am planning to go out of town, so please check my calendar and let me know what is up for Friday of this week, and Monday and Tuesday of next week. If possible I may need to reschedule some things. Just take the information down for me and inform her that I will be in touch."

"*Visean again?*"

"Look at you, '*Visean again?*' Yes, and I believe that is my business, so don't let anyone else know that okay? On second thought about Miranda, call and see if she wants to get some pizza over lunch. She knows where and if she has completely lost it, just tell her it is her favorite."

"Not a problem. I believe I just saw your client get off the elevator, shall I send him in right away?"

I sat down at my desk, logged into my computer, turned and said, "Go right ahead".

When lunchtime finally came around I had already decided that this man needed to see Xavier or someone else in that man's field. The IRS was going to nail my client, so unless he could disappear like Jimmy Hoffa, my best advice to him at the end of our session was to go seek legal advice. Creative accounting I can do but it is the one thing I will not do.

After cleaning up the paper mess that tried to look like a paper trail to hidden treasures, I was definitely ready for some pizza. "Vicki, did Miranda want to meet for lunch?"

My mouth just dropped open as Vicki walked through the door with a dozen long stem roses in a beautiful vase.

things men do, women do the same

"These came for you while you were making paper dolls with your client's tax write-offs. I wonder who sent them."

While Vicki was busy giving me that stupid look, I just smiled and said in my dorkiest voice, "Gee, I do not even know who these possibly could be from" and started searching for the card.

Okay, Visean does not send flowers to anyone but after that family trip thing he mentioned last night it could be possible. I mean, that brother doesn't even have time to breathe let alone have flowers delivered.

Xavier. Damn! It could be him. It probably is him.

Wait. What about the man I met last week, but we only had lunch once. No, please do not let them be from my ex. Hmm. I finally found the card and opened it.

Mercedes,
I already gave you my heart,
now I can give you the rest.
Love, Xavier

I just fell back into my chair, "Damn!"

Vicki just gave me that *I know something* look and said, "Miranda will meet you at 12:30 for lunch. Better leave now otherwise you'll be late."

"Any word from Angela yet?"

"No, but maybe she'll call after lunch. Enjoy."

Damn.

I moved the flowers onto a small corner table in my office, grabbed my keys just because I always have to have them with me and headed to meet Miranda for lunch.

"Mercedes! Over here!" Miranda always did have eagle eyes. She will not lose you in a crowd which has really helped out in the past.

As I walked over half in a daze I decided not to even mention the soap opera of Xavier to her, she was clueless when it came to men anyway. "Hey Miranda, how are you doing? Better than last night I hope." I just gave her the *you had better be* look, stepped back and was ready to listen. You see once she gets started, she doesn't stop.

"No I am not. I cannot believe he did this to me. First, because I don't know if I told you this or not, he invited me over for dinner at eight last night because he wanted to cook for me. He had spent some time in New Orleans and claimed that he could cook up some great Cajun dishes so he asked me if I would like to join him. To which I said, no problem. He is cooking, so a 45-minute drive on the expressway ain't nothin. Right?" Cocked her head and looked at me.

In response I did my usual shaking of the head in agreement because there is still more to come from her so saying anything at this point would be useless.

"I get there and there are no lights on in the house. I wait in his driveway for over an *hour* thinking he had just needed something from the store, and guess what?!"

I know better than to try to answer because in 1, 2 ... "He never shows. Well, after an hour I was pissed off and left. Do you know what happened?"

Again I just looked at this half-crazy woman going off at the sky like *what*.

"He had some kinda emergency come up. Didn't even have the nerve to call and tell me. I mean he could of have at least called my cell phone or hell even my home phone and left something on my recorder for when I had gotten home from his stupid azz low income housing development he calls a home. But no, men never do that, they always thinkin about their damn self. Ain't anybody else important to them? Out of sight, out of mind. Then he got upset when I called him the next day talkin about if he has an

emergency I should be more understanding. So you know what I told him?"

By this time, the hostess seated us at our table which was good because her body language was entertaining everyone around us. "I told him that I am a very understanding person, but he needs to be considerate of other people's time. I drive 45 minutes and he ain't even there. I mean he is cute, but he ain't all that. He just thinks he is all that, when he's really all of nothin!" Then she calmly sat back and took a sip of water that the server had put on the table.

After ordering, I just steady looked at her and was ready to slap her silly. Chile gets on my damn nerves. Why didn't she call him before she left to make sure he was even there? Doesn't she know these things? Okay now, slow yourself down and try to shed some light on this blind azz sistah.

"Miranda. First off, why did you not call him before you left your house to make sure he was still there? Doesn't that man have a cell phone like everybody else in this city? Why didn't you dial his ass up when he wasn't there at the house like he said he would be? Why in the hell did you wait around his stupid house longer than fifteen minutes? That is your own fault for not taking off. Always giving these men a chance when what they really need is for you to show them that today, it ain't goin their way. Now don't get mad at me for saying all this to you because you know I love you, but damn you have got to learn sometime. Make that man feel like his emergency wasn't an emergency without you knowing about it."

"Excuse me, but what do you mean by that?"

"I bet if you pulled up to his house, waited around fifteen minutes, just incase he did have to run to the store, left and not called the next day; that man would have called you as soon as he walked in his house."

"Oh you think so?"

"Yes I do. And did you stop to think to call him?"

"Yes."

"Then why didn't you?"

Miranda just looked down at the table and I knew what that meant. "Miranda if you are truly a strong woman then you have to step up and be one. Are you afraid that had you called it would make you look pushy or that you would find out he was up to something and not pick up his phone?"

She just cocked her head and started playing with her water, "I think...I don't know why I didn't try to call him. Maybe it was just shock or I didn't want to be pushy or something. It isn't like we are a couple or anything."

"Pushy? Not a couple? Look if you are saying a 45 minute drive ain't nothing then show him that it really isn't even a factor when it comes to playing you out. Simply giving him that phone call would have been courtesy and more than likely a reality awakening for you if he didn't pick up. You showed up, you waited, and he didn't even call, and now he is upset with you? He's talking about you not being understanding? Then you tell him that you are and he just needs to be considerate of other people's time? Chile, you better wake up and smell the pizza they put in front of your face."

I calmed down, took a deep breath and just looked at her sitting across the table. The eyes that always carry hope in them were now filled with disappointment, I hate that look and that is why I get so furious with her. She doesn't deserve to have that hope jaded, nor faded. "Miranda if there is one thing to remember about these so called men that you, Ori, and I all have to deal with, it is that they like to dump us, not be dumped by us. Okay? If that little episode was his way of letting you know that he does not want you and had you followed what I just told you, he would have been calling you begging for forgiveness for his ignorance. One thing is true, even if they don't

want you, they will always want you back if you try to 86 their ass first."

She sat there speechless. When the pizza arrived we ate and did not speak another word about it and I didn't bring up my situation with Xavier to her. Damn, I hate being this way towards her and I realize that everybody has their own way of living life, but if she isn't going to change, then she needs to quit getting so upset over these fools. When the check came, I apologized for being so abrupt with her, handed the waitress my card and asked Miranda to excuse me.

"It's alright. I understand where you are coming from. You are always so strong with the men in your life; you don't take their garbage. I remember how you stood up to Marcel and swore that you would never let anyone push you down again. I always think about that; I guess I just have that fairytale story stuck in my head, hoping to find my prince, willing to give and do anything to find him and make him mine. Why do they read that stuff to us anyway when we are kids? That is not the men of today."

I just looked at her and said, "I don't think the men in those stories were the men of any day. They were some storywriter's vision just as they are our fantasy. Like the lyrics they write and sing but never live up to."

"Exactly. Well if I ever do meet a prince or whatever he is stuck between from his toad to prince-state of being and we have children, I will not read them those damn fairytales. I won't read them reality either, but you can bet it will be somewhere in-between. Something that at least gives them hope because you never know that prince may be out there, but even then he won't be the one out of the fairytales."

With that, we gave each other a hug and headed back to our offices.

Fairytales were definitely not real, and as children we knew that. We knew there were no castles; no evil witches (besides our schoolteachers); no magic wands;

no glass slippers (but there were clear plastic ones); no magic stars; no fairy godmothers. However, the princesses and princes were real, they were human, they had needs and emotions just like us, and they wanted love and romance just like us.

If you think about this, the only women in those stories who had any power, any strength, who were shown to be on their own were /are cast as "evil", except for that one, the one witch who was the good witch, you know Glenda. All the other female characters were young, beautiful, submissive, waiting for a man to fall in love with them.

If you take this to an extreme little girls were learning not to be strong because if they were they are or they could be considered evil, unloved, ugly, unwanted, and hated by society. Well not to say that the characters that were cast as evil didn't do bad things, but it was for a reason wasn't it? Man that is just straight messed up! Think back to your fairytale stories and you'll see.

As I now stormed into my office, I started thinking about the real world and the way men treated women. No wonder it has taken us so damn long to get anywhere. The whole time we are off fighting these laws and regulations and breaking the rules and glass ceilings, these fools are writing these fairytales telling our little girls that old line about being helpless, cute and all that other garbage. Well okay, the movie *Shrek* at least did bring reality in but in general this is an outrage. No wonder Miranda is the way she is and the way I was.

As I looked around my desk there was a note that Ms. Angela had called back. Visean had also called (he must have found out the details earlier than expected) and left me a voicemail to call him. According to the email I got from Vicki my calendar was in her hands so that I could take off to San Diego.

All systems were a go, unless you consider those red roses a stoplight.

I called Visean first.

"Hello."

"Damn. You are at home. How are you? I just got back and saw your message."

"Yeah, but I gotta head out in a few. I got the details that you were looking for. Ready?"

"Go ahead."

After I got the details, I called Angela to give them to her. Of course, we have to play tag, so I left it all with her voicemail telling her where she could call and to just make it a go. As I looked up, I saw the stoplight on my table; damn, I haven't even called to thank him yet and proceeded to call.

"Yes, Mr. Xavier Lawrence please."

"I am sorry but he is out of the office for the rest of the day. Would you like to leave a message on his voicemail?"

"No thank you."

I called his cell but he had that turned off, so I left him a message and proceeded to call Orianna.

"Yes, Ms. Orianna Jones please."

"Please hold."

"Ms. Jones here, how may I help you?"

"You can help by explaining to me just what it is that I think I am doing with my life lately."

"Um...let me guess, Mercedes right?"

"Duh! Xavier sent me a dozen long stem roses and Visean is buying my ticket to San Diego for this weekend. That weekend will include a stay till Tuesday, in which time I will be meeting his FAMILY!"

"Un-huh!"

"That is all you can say? Un-huh!"

"Yep."

"Goodbye Orianna." and I hung up. A few minutes later, I got a call back.

"Now Ms. Thang before you even try and hang up on me again, calm down. Why in the hell did you accept the offer from Visean to go to San Diego when you just spent the night with Xavier? Don't you know any better than that? Don't you think you should take some time to think things over for yourself and give yourself direction?" *Sounds like lunch, does it not.*

"Don't call me and hang up because your azz is getting into water so deep you can't feel the floor. Just float along if that is what you want to do; you know the line is always there when you want to pull yourself back in. Now I have to go because I have another meeting to attend. Did you get your unlisted telephone number yet? That is what I thought. Take those flowers home with you tonight and take some time to think about just where it is that you want to be and I will call you in the morning. Bye." and hung up.

Damn. That is what friendship is really about.

"Sounds like you're having a fun day."

"Vicki, is there anything you won't say without a smirk?"

"It keeps you guessing."

"*Mmm-hmm.* That is one way of putting it. Well is it about time for me to go before I lose my mind. What is left for today?"

"Well your travel agent called back and everything is fine. She just wants to know who it is she needs to bill this time. She will email the itinerary later on today. In addition, Mr. Herrington requested a meeting with you tomorrow about the Greenburg account; I have you scheduled for 10 a.m. Your only appointments were on Thursday, and that does include the Greenburg lunch meeting, which as we know, always last longer than lunch. I moved those appointments around to suit all parties. This week was not to bad for you after all because today you can use to do all the pre work necessary for all those meetings. On that Monday and Tuesday you plan to be out of town you do have a lot

scheduled but since you have the week and the weekend to catch up you should be fine."

Great the usual hell after a fantasy weekend with Visean, this brother had better be worth it. "So in other words, due to my few days of fun, well maybe not," I am meeting his family, "I am going to have to do the usual catch up to look GREAT in front of everybody routine."

"Yes, that would be correct."

"Okay. Let us do this, look at my calendar for the rest of this upcoming week. Maybe I can schedule in a little of what is cluttering up the week after, so when I get back I am not going to stress. I would rather stress until this Friday, and then have a relaxing weekend followed by a week that isn't from Hell."

"I'll get on it."

By the time five o'clock came, I was ready to go. I really had no right to leave at five, so I let Vicki go and started pulling files up to lighten up the upcoming week. At eight-thirty, I finally switched off my computer and headed for home.

Just this past year, I finally went out and bought a 2001 Honda Prelude. It is so sweet and of course, I had to customize it. All black body, with black interior, I had him on machined polished rims (chromes are gone in a minute around here), the rims have depth and wheels line out the body of the car. I added the stream lighted spoiler, a few engine and exhaust upgrades, and of course the vanity plates that read BADBRAT, because that is exactly what I am, one bad brat from Chi Town. The system is of course loud, but with class not crass. The insurance is high and the security system is *Lo Jack*, so when they take off with it, so do the police to find it.

When I was ready to buy it, all I got was nothin but back talk from my family and friends.

Mamma said, "Your ex husband left you for his car and now you gonna put all your time and money into one. Are you sure that is what you really want?"

"Yes mom it is what I want. I saved for this, unlike Marcel, and I am not throwing every penny that I don't have like Marcel did into this car. You know how long I have waited and how hard I have worked for this."

Miranda said, "All these stories about people being car jacked and you want to go put a loaded gun to your head. Especially the way you have to customize everything, you can never be like the rest, you just have to be different."

I just looked at her and said, "You know I am a sucker for danger. Why be normal when you can be noticed."

"Yea, everyone will notice your dead face on the news as the next car jack victim."

I am not feeling the love here.

Oriana said, "First of all you live downtown. Second, I know your stupid azz will not settle for on the street parking and you know how expensive it is for garage parking in your building. And last, do you realize how many serious men you could pick up in that car?" Both of us just rolled out. At least she understood that I wanted my car and that was that.

Xavier said, "My Beamer will always be the very best in Chicago, why run a race just to come in second place. Save your money."

I just looked at that man like I know you just did not go there. "Chile, I know you didn't wanna go there with your tired azz car, with those sorry azz rims, and no play stereo system. You should let me hook that car up so you could at least run the damn race that you talkin about. Okay? Don't be jealous just cause you already know my Prelude will out sweet your precious Beamer any damn day of the entire week." Ladies you know that I had that sweet evil smile across my face telling

him not to take it any further unless he planned to do battle.

Visean said, "Hmm, I don't which will look better, the car or you. Don't have too many of your *friends* in that car with you. And don't be goin and tryin to pick up anyone new ones with it either."

Whatever. "Yes Visean, I know."

So as I drove home in my car that everybody and their mamma had something to say about, I tuned into WGCI and tuned everybody else out. I headed toward I-94 and decided to clear my head with a relaxing drive, yea right. Once I hit the Dan Ryan it is over, this is playtime for me. First, my Prelude is a stick shift, in other words, I have control of the power, and I love it! I love to play highway checkers; I learned it when I was younger. It is easy, pick out a car way up ahead of you and that is the "king car". In other words, do what you have to do to pass the "king car" to be crowned. I know it sounds dangerous but it really releases stress. Sometimes you win, sometimes you don't. Damn Sunday drivers. Either way it is fun.

Once I was crowned, did you really expect anything else, I hit 57 and decided to drive to 159th Street and then turn back for home. The exit ramp that heads up Cicero towards Oak Forest is the mini-bomb with all its curves. GCI was off the hook as usual so I kept it on instead of playing a CD. I went up to the light and had first position. Now see this is a good thing. As you head up 159th Street from Pulaski towards Cicero there is a forest preserve area on your right and empty property on your left for over maybe a quarter of a mile until you come up on another light. This translates into no entrances, no hiding places for cops, this means time to hit it!

I looked over to my right and in the lane next to me was a younger kid with a factory sports car. Could this be any easier? He just looked at me. The cross street had no one coming, so no surprise vehicles were going

to be in our path should he accept the challenge. We both turned our heads to the light and waited. I can get him. The light turned green and I jetted, homeboy was still spinning tires. Hello you can't hook up on roadway pavement, you have to roll out, grip and then slam the gas. He caught up to me as I slammed second gear. I looked in my mirror and saw that he was on my back quarter panel. I hit 7,000 rpm and proceeded to slam into third. I caught Brat at 6,000 rpm, got off the gas, dumped the clutch into fourth, then back on the gas quick, and pushed him back up to 7,000 rpm. I looked in my mirror and homeboy was now eating exhaust. I slammed fifth and stepped off the gas. We both caught the next light with cars straggling in behind us. I looked over and mouthed, "You got beat by a girl." With that, the light turned green, homeboy chirped out, and I proceeded with my U-turn. Ah, it is all about the gears baby.

As I headed back, my mind began to slow back down and concentrate on the drama that was becoming my life.

Okay girl, first what do you think of your night with Xavier? I mean, it was all that, but what will be the consequences and why did you tell him how you really feel about him that night? How in the hell are you going to explain going away next weekend?

Explain? Explain what? Explain nothin. I am not married to any of these fools. I don't see a ring on this finger. Just cuz you sleep with me does not mean you own me. I am the only one in my life paying my bills, making my way. None these fools, not Visean, not X, not anybody is doing that for me but me, so skip the excuse. If I am out of town, them I'm out. They want the play by play, then put a camera out on me cause that is the only way you gonna get that type of information.

Yea right Mercedes, what are you really gonna do?

Okay, Visean and I have been together for a while and everything is going great. Now he wants me to meet his family. He may be a musician, but everybody settles with somebody at one time or another. I mean, Visean may not even be trying to get closer. Maybe he just wants me to feel more comfortable around him by getting to know his family. After his dad had that heart attack he has been bringing up his family more and more. Besides, I talk with his mom on the telephone and it would be nice to meet her in person. I mean damn, what is wrong with getting to know a man's family? Visean loves music first, so I shouldn't even worry about being seriously in his picture anyway.

Girl you are getting good at moving around the issues that are just staring you right in the face are you not?

I am not avoiding anything. Visean has been married and divorced, has who knows how many children across the world, he is nine years older than I am, and his career is just taking off. This chile does not need anything serious on him right now. I mean we already admitted that we do love each other and know it's there and now we can go on with things. That is just it; I cannot just go on with things, can I? Damn him.

If I started seeing X seriously then I would have to say goodbye to Visean, and I don't want to do that. Visean has something that X does not.

What him not ever being there?

No. Visean just makes me shine when I am with him; he makes me feel like nothing can happen to me while I am with him. He takes care of me and I never worry about anything when I am with him. Visean fills the empty spaces and takes away the pain, which is something X cannot do. Yet, have I ever really given X the chance to do so? I mean the entire time I have spent with him has been on a friendship basis, so how

am I supposed to compare when I never let him in. Damn.

Lets face it, I have played so many men this year that I must not want a serious boyfriend and I probably hide behind Visean as an excuse because he is safe for me. He cannot be a serious part of my life unless I give up my life. Visean is a non-reality. X on the other hand is a whole other story because he is a reality.

Here he is, right in Chicago. Finally, I could have a relationship that is not long distance. We have been friends for forever and a damn day, and that is the best way to start. I always told myself he had it going on and I always thought about us getting more serious.

Then what is the problem?

The problem is that he is here, that he can be serious, and that I am truly afraid of anything that means commitment. No matter if it is X, Visean, or whoever else may be in my life, commitment makes me walk just like a wanna be man. Damn.

The last thing I ever want to do is hurt Xavier. He means so much to me because he has been there when I needed him. He deserves more and I should at least try to give him that because I know I want to give him more. Here I am always going off about how when sisters get a good brother they screw it all up and I am about to do the same thing. Damn.

Just then a track that Visean is on played on the radio and all I could do was smile and forget about everyone else except Visean and his guitar. That magic he has keeps me there with him. It makes me scared to venture anywhere else because I do not want to lose it. No matter where that man may be at in the world, his music reminds me that he is right here in my heart. Maybe I should just wait until after my trip and then decide where to go with all this.

As I pulled into my parking garage, I thought about a line in a book I had read by Toni Morrison, it was from *The Bluest Eye*, "Love is only as good as the lover". No

things men do, women do the same

wonder I was so much in love with Visean and so scared of finding love with Xavier.

♂ my day ♀

"Good morning Vicki. Ready for another fun filled day?" It was only a Tuesday morning so I figured that is one day closer to the weekend, so why couldn't it be fun?

"Well hello and I am ready for the day, but are you? I took home your schedule and tried rearranging it so you wouldn't have such a mess next week; and you know what?"

"No. What?"

"I was successful."

"Why am I not surprised?" There is her damn smirk again. "And the damage report is?"

"From today until Thursday, if you stay in this office, chained to that computer until eight or nine o'clock each night, you should be in the office until only eight o'clock each night the week you get back."

"You're kidding me right." Please let this woman be joking, it couldn't be all that bad; we are already past the hell of tax season. My workload hasn't even been that much behind to pull those hours. I wasn't expecting any new clientele until a few weeks from now. Damn, why can't Visean plan these trips after June?

"Well yesterday in the midst of all the happenings around here I forgot to mention that Mr. Wallace stopped by and dropped off two new client files." There is her damn smirk again. "So with this added on top of your already fun week, your schedule is currently correct."

"You didn't tell Mr. Wallace that I am leaving town did you?" I am planning to let the office know I would be out of town but let's just say even in post-tax season they aren't too crazy about their employees going anywhere. If you want to escape you have to be

sneaky and surprise them. Not nice I know but oh well. Now is the time where we have to get our extended filings done, while my load wasn't all that big, I did have some major work going on.

"Of course not, but look," she said smiling staring down the hall, "here he comes now."

As I turned around, I saw Mr. Bernie Wallace giving me that phony money making I know I am somebody grin. He has a caramel complexion, is about 6'1, and is birdman in weight. A basketball player with his height had more weight and muscle on him than this brother but he thinks he is all that and a bag of chips. Nice to have those thoughts I guess.

"Good morning Miss Dominace. Good morning Vicki. Mercedes may I see you in your office please."

Look at him, standing there giving that stupid azz grin. "Of course" I noticed he was looking me over. Dayum, here we go again.

As we walked into my office, he shut the door. *Great.* For a couple of months now this man has been after me. I am not the one to call sexual harassment because men will always be men and no law is going to change that. As long as he stays behind the line I draw, we will be fine. If you cross that line, I will be filing a law suit or at least bring it to someone's attention higher up. "Can I offer you some coffee?"

"Only if you'd have it with me over a nice desert."

Whatever. "You never quit do you?" *Insert here a stupid laugh and smile.* "So what did you need to see me about? Vicki informed that you dropped off two new clients for me yesterday afternoon. I just came in and haven't had the chance to look them over yet. How deep are they?"

I have to keep his mind on business. That is the object of this game. For those of you who don't know, I have a strict policy of not dating any employees that I work with. I do not care how high up or how low down on the ladder they are I won't allow myself to get

involved. Break ups with me are hell. I have this certain way of doing what men do to me, ignore somebody until they get the picture that I am no longer in the picture. Terrible of me really, but oh well I learned it from the men in my past, so why not. Birdman here hasn't accepted my rule yet.

"Why should I quit, when I have everything a man could ask for standing right in front of me?"

Why is this man looking at me as if I am the next menu item served on his plate? Did I mention that Bernie here is out of my age range and married? "And I am sure Connie," he is married to a white lady "would agree with you too." There, throw the wife's name in and that should make him come around.

"Well I don't know about that, but what I do know is about those new clients I dropped off for you."

See how easy that was to do and not one lawyer involved.

"They are fairly easy, just some depreciation work, nothing that a few hours of computer work cannot handle. I know you have a heavy load starting up, so I passed the other two onto Irene. How is that Greenburg account going?"

Hmm, maybe I can take those two cases with me and do work on them while Visean is at rehearsal. "Well so far so good, for as good as it can get. They are in for some real red tape. It would be easier if they weren't trying to deduct without the proper receipts. That house sale is what is really throwing some interesting figures in there as well. I will have more detail at our meeting this morning. Also, I am to meet with Mr. Herrington on his matters later next week."

"Great, well I just thought I would keep in touch with everyone to find out how things are going. After tax day can be just as hellish as tax season itself, as I am sure you know. But we're nearing the end of it all and I just like to check to see if everybody is okay and not on fire from overloaded circuits."

"Thank you for checking in on me. Things are heavy, but like you said it is almost over."

"Sure you won't have that coffee with me?"

"But I just offered you some."

"See you later this morning Miss Dominace."

After he left, I looked at the two new files and decided that he was right. They were easy enough to take with me and complete on the trip. Last night when I got in, I passed out and realized that Xavier didn't even return my message. I remember calling him to thank him, right? Maybe he was just busy. As I said, both of our work lives are a living hell at times. His workload really cranks up near the end of tax season. People start freaking out that the IRS is going to come and take everything they own away from them. That is when they head Xavier's way to kill off the lion before it hunts them down. His workload calms down by November, but it doesn't ever really stop. At least with my job I can look forward to some down time after June. I will have to call him later.

After making a few phone calls, I found out that my trip to San Diego and then home from Maryland was costing Visean a total of \$579. He is taking care of the flight plan in-between, well I'll have to remind him to do that. Not to bad with the price wars going on right now. The thing is my flight out there was at 8:30 Friday morning. Man I'll have to get up early to fight traffic, make it through security and all the rest. At least I will be back by 7:30 Tuesday night Chicago time. Well I will just sleep on the plane and sleep while he is at rehearsal. No, I have the cases to do while he is at rehearsal. Did I say I liked my life? Yea right!

Okay. Saturday I will definitely sleep, cuz I do not want to be a crabby azz bitch when I meet his family.

Sleep? Woman you know way better than that.

Visean and sleep are not two words that go together. He stays up all night and sleeps all day. Musician's life you know. Well then, I will just have to

work all night, if he stays off me. Like I would really want him to do that and sleep with him all day. I am not even going to plan this; I will just have to get this done. I have done this before and can do this again. His ass had better be worth it. I just hope that he really has time off again. I still cannot believe that this time I will actually meet his family. We will just wait and see what happens and then make some decisions.

Damn, I forgot to call the phone company.

* * *

Dammed alarm clock, just hit one wrong button and bam it's completely shut off. Thank the world that I packed last night. If I hadn't spent so much damn time in the office and actually got some sleep this week I wouldn't have hit the alarm clock 5,000 times! Okay, twenty minutes to dress and then I am out of here. The concert isn't until later tonight so my Hoya's outfit will be just fine. Why does this always happen?

Okay, it does happen so move along. Don't forget your laptop, briefcase, and don't forget your cell phone. If you want to get away with this successfully, don't forget your cell phone and dear lord don't forget the cell phone charger. I just hope that I don't have trouble transmitting these two cases back to the office when I am done with them. Snikes, I have to call Visean.

"Room 1806 please." I didn't have time to call him last night when I got in.

"Yes ma'am and the name on the room please."

"Visean Scott."

"I am sorry Miss that name is not under that room."

What? "Do have a room listing for the band that is staying there? Visean should be on that list under that room number, he left it for me last night on my machine. I am not sure who he would be rooming with on this road trip."

"I am sorry Miss but there is no list for the band and to connect you to the room I need the name."

"Okay. Try, Robert. I am not sure of his last name and you don't have a band room list? Freakin' great! Visean travels with several different bands and rooms with different people all the time." I cannot believe this. Out of all the times that I have called hotels, this is the first that is acting like I am trying to get hold of the President of the United States.

"I am sorry, that name is not registered under that room either."

"Okay. Look, I really need to speak with room 1806 because I am about to catch a flight out there to be with him and I want to make sure the band hasn't changed their plans before I leave."

"I am sorry, but I cannot connect you to that room without that party's name first. One moment, I will get you the manager."

Great! First, I almost oversleep, now I only have nearly under an hour to make it to the damn airport, thankfully it is 5 something in the morning, I still have a chance to beat traffic and now Visean has suddenly become the most secretive man on the planet earth. The final touch being the idiot turned off his cell phone so I can't get hold of him that way, not that the ringing would wake him up anyway.

"Hello, front desk. This is Robert may I help you?"

"Yes, my name is Mercedes Dominace and I am trying to contact a registered guest of yours. The problem is that his name is not on the room and I don't know whom he is rooming with on this trip. Look, he did call me last night and left the room number of 1806 on my machine. The thing is that I am about to take a flight out there to see him and I wanted to let him know I am on my way."

"Okay, you said his name is not on the room."

"Yes, he is the lead guitar player with a band that is staying in your hotel and I don't know who he'd be

rooming with because he plays with several different bands. Plus, his roommate is moving to a different room when I arrive so we can have our own room. I asked if the band had left a rooming list and according to your front desk person, they did not. Is there anyway I can somehow connect with him?"

"We do have a band staying in the hotel; do you know what concert in town they are doing?"

What is this, twenty questions? "Yes, its tonight, and it is a reunion concert, there are some very big names performing there tonight. I know I will be there at six, because I am going with Visean Scott to the sound check."

"That name again...."

"Visean Scott."

"I am sorry for all the problems you have had, I do know the band you are talking about and I do see his name registered. And while I am jealous about you going to the sound check and getting in free because that concert sold out weeks ago I will go ahead and connect you anyway. Sorry for the inconvenience."

"Oh that sucks, well maybe I can ask when I get there if they know of any extra tickets?"

"Thank you ma'am but I am already scheduled for work later that night and sleep is something that I need to function. One moment please while I connect you."

"Thank you." Oh how I hate when I do that because I know I have no right to extend that type of gratitude to anyone. Bad Mercedes, bad.

Finally, by the fourth ring Visean picked up. "Get your lazy azz out of bed. Do you know the hell I just went through just to try to talk to you? What made you so important that your room can't be rung unless someone knows the name on the registration card?"

"Good morning to you too sexy. Aren't you supposed to be on a plane or something?"

"Good morning Visean, yes I am supposed to be on my way to the plane if you tell me that things are still as planned."

"Chile, get your monkey azz to the airport and I will see you this afternoon."

"No problem, just make sure your ass is up when I get there."

"Bye baby."

"Bye Visean."

As I raced to the airport and ran to the terminal after a long security check, I couldn't help but think why this always happens. No matter how much I plan, I am always making it by the very last minute to go and see him.

As I boarded the plane, I thought of Xavier, we had talked this week but not too much. I didn't really give an explanation to him of my whereabouts for the weekend, I just told him I would get hold of him when I got back. I made Oriana promise not to tell him I was going to see Visean. I told Miranda that I was out on business so that way if she saw Xavier she wouldn't let slip who I am with. Especially because she already told me that she was worried about the relationship between Visean and I have. She seems to think that it prevents me from becoming very serious about someone else. If she only knew.

Ori is the one that I can trust to watch me go through this and that I pray will give me some guidance.

"So you are really going to go see him and his family? Have you mentioned this to X yet?"

"No. Look Ori, if X finds out that Visean wants me to go and meet his family he'll probably walk away and not speak to me again. I'm not out to dog him, but Visean is a very special part of my life."

"Girl, you're playing with fire. What happened between you and X that made you decide to go on this trip after all?"

Damn. What do I tell her? I don't know my damn self what I am doing. There were no promises made to either man by me. I don't have to be faithful to anyone; I don't see anyone being faithful to me.

Work wasn't what was bothering me this week and making me lose sleep: it was this damn trip. This used to be fun, now it is nothing but stress.

Why did I sleep with Xavier? Why did I admit my feelings to him that night in the park? I wanted to cross that line and go there and now I'm there. Damn. "Nothing happened between X and I to make me go on this trip. I can't even begin to tell you all the stuff I am doing to try and even make this trip enjoyable. Work is driving me crazy and I am spending more time in my office than in my own bed at night. I just hope Visean is worth all this."

"Worth all this? Wait a minute, the way you are making this sound is that you hope that this trip brings Visean and you closer. And with him wanting you to meet his family and all...Mercedes how deep are you in with Visean?"

I am in love with him. Damn. This is stupid because it is a non-reality relationship. Hell yeah I can be in love with him. It is the perfect fantasy ride. I am in love with his magic, the way his music makes me smile and how every time we get together it doesn't feel more than a day has passed when in reality it may have been months. I am in love with him because he fills all of my voids and makes me feel like I have nothing to prove while I am with him. This is all non-reality; neither he nor I know what will happen in the real world. We haven't even spent more than four days together; we could end up hating each other. All I do know is that it is something and that I am willing to find out exactly what that something is.

What would happen if we brought this relationship to the real world? Would we fail as miserably as my marriage did? Is it better to keep up the fantasy, be

happy, and dodge the reality of it all for as long as possible? Why rock the boat in calm waters? Besides, he is a musician. Damn. "Oriana, I don't think I am ready to admit my feelings about Visean. It is all so unreal. I never thought someone would come along and treat me like this. This man flies me everywhere just to see me. He makes me feel so special and I am not ready to give that up. And I don't think either of us is ready to explore the true feelings that are really in this relationship."

"I just hope that when you two are ready to explore the relationship that other hearts aren't on the line."

Huh! With my life, Lord knows they will be.

As soon as we were in the air, I opened my laptop, sunk into my tax world, and forgot about the rest of the world, real or not. After all California has cities known for making dreams come true and maybe that will happen for me...even though truthfully I don't know exactly what those dreams are.

♂ backstage pass ♀

As we prepared to land in San Diego, I realized I hadn't finished as much work as I had hoped. Unfortunately to finish what I had started I needed files from the server at work. Oh well, when I get to a connection at the hotel I can access them. At least with California being two hours behind I will have more time to get work done, unless of course I get jet lag. No problem, I can do anything.

Yea right, I wonder how long that theory is going to last.

That man had better be at least out of bed and dressed by now, Lord knows I don't have time to crawl back into bed, even if it is with him. I wonder if he will meet me at the airport this time. Probably not, it's such a hassle to meet anyone at the airport these days. Oh well, I will just get my hug and kiss when I get to his room.

Speaking of room numbers, pray to God that you brought the hotel information with you. I put it in my laptop bag right? Damn, I am nervous as usual; will this ever end? I've flown how many times to see this man now?

It is always a great weekend. The memories stay with me as if they were yesterday. I cannot wait to see him. He had just better be out of bed and dressed by now. Lazy azz musician thinks the whole world can sleep during the day and play all night. Yea right!

I found the shuttle that took me to his hotel and found my way down the halls without hindrance from the front desk; Lord knows after my phone call with them this morning they were not going to be of help. As I approached his room I heard the usual loud music practically blasting down the hallway and knew I had headed in the right direction. Ok so maybe I don't look

so fantastic in my Hoya's outfit, but this man should want to see me no matter what I look like. I know they must have somewhere around here that can do something with my hair. That will take two hours alone. Damn. One day I am just going to go ahead and get my braids done, our office doesn't even have a hair policy anyway. Some of the other employees wear them, so why can't I?

Ok Mercedes, enough with the nervousness, just breathe and knock on the door.

As I knocked on the door a sudden flash of Xavier's face appeared in my mind. Stop it Mercedes. Just wait and see that everything is about to be all right.

Visean just opened the door with this huge smile on his face. I just looked at him with a smile just as big as his, "Fool, how do you know who you are smiling at?"

"Girl please, I knew it was you when I heard that tiny little knock at the door. You ain't got no weight on ya, so how you supposed to knock louder? You better just get your little behind in here."

"Damn, you mean as bad as your hearing is, you, Mr. Visean 'Guitar playing' Scott, could hear my little azz knock over that loud ass stereo system. And we know that the only reason that stereo system is as loud as it is, is because old people like yourself need things turned up, tuned up, held up and warmed up."

"Look at you, ain't nothin but a hucklebuck comin all up in my room talkin a bunch a nothing. Don't even give me a kiss, hug, nothing; just walk over to the stereo system and turn it down cuz your young tender ears can't take a little volume. You better get your butt over here and say hello to me before I make you get your monkey azz back on that plane and go back to that cold azz city from which you came."

"Walk over there and give you a hug and kiss? Excuse me, but who just worked a week of unstoppable hell, got no sleep, almost overslept, skirted through security to board a plane that I was almost late

for because somebody thinks that he is the President of the United States and needs to be kept a secret when staying at a hotel. I fly all the way out here still working just so I could spend a li'l, hear me, a li'l amount of time with a man I hardly ever see and only remember because I hear your monkey azz on the damn radio all day long. Now tell me this, who should be walking to who? Especially when your azz got up, got dressed, but didn't even bother to meet me at my plane. You made me carry all this luggage, including this heavy azz laptop bag, all the way over to the hotel. You didn't even bother to meet me at the front desk or anything." I just stood there with my arms crossed, rolling my eyes, and fighting back my smile looking at him. "Wanting me to walk all the way over there...."

Visean, walked over, grabbed me, and gave me this huge kiss. I win. "See I knew I could get what I wanted."

"Girl, you better stop that noise. I am sorry I didn't meet you to help you with all your stuff, but I just finished getting dressed when you walked in here."

"UN-huh...sure you did. Excuses and nothing but more excuses. Musicians." I just couldn't stop smiling while I looked at him. I can't let go of this feeling that comes over me when I am with him. This weekend may be my chance to find out where exactly Visean and I are headed.

"Girl, you better stop smiling at me like that; I can't take my hands off you already. You keep that up and I will make sure I keep that smile on you for the rest of the day."

"You just go ahead with your bad self but you know I won't be the only one smiling."

"Okay, get your hands off me. I know your li'l azz ain't had time to eat."

"I ate." Okay, so I ate a little of whatever the hell that thing was on the plane, but still I ate.

"Un- huh. Now you know that I have taken enough flights in my lifetime to know that whatever they served you on the plane was not enough to be considered eating. So let's go down the pier and get something to eat. The band was telling me about a little joint that has some good food. Your picky azz should be able to find something down there."

"Me? Picky? Excuse me, I don't think so."

"Chile take a look around this room, did you even bother to notice the candy bars I have awaiting for you since you're a chocoholic."

"No, because it is hidden behind all the pop cans and alcohol bottles in the room cuz someone must be an alcoholic. But, um, so ya know, I have all the chocolate I need standing right in front of me; now let me peel off this wrapper so I can get a taste."

"Chile you are so sweet, but you are not getting out of eating. When my mother sees you she is going to stuff you like a bird."

"You really want me to meet your family don't you?"

"Is that a problem?"

Is that a problem? No, it is not a problem; yes of course it is a problem! It is only the scariest thing in my life. Okay, so I am not one of those women who get all gaga over meeting a man's family. How are they going to approach me? What do I tell them the relationship between their son and me is anyway? Just who am I to him anyway and for that matter who is he to me? What happens if there are other women in his life that are like me, will his parents' just look at me like "Oh, it's just Viseans' flavor of the week"? What happens if I'm not just the flavor of the week, what if they know more about him and I than I do? What if I do act all nonchalant about us and they think I am another cold-hearted bitch out for this man's money and fame? Damn. "No it's not a problem, but I think before we head out that way there are some things we need to discuss."

"Then let's discuss them on the way. Come chile, let's come."

I smiled and put my arm in his while trying to figure out the best way to approach the questions I had about us. I remember the conversation we had some time ago when we admitted to the feelings we have for each other, we admitted that they were stronger than friendship. We both admitted that we were in love but that our lifestyles wouldn't allow much moving room. I wasn't willing to pick up and move to a completely new city for someone who spent 70 to 80% of his time out on the road touring or in other states recording just to be closer to him. Only 20 - 30% (can you tell I am an accountant) of his time is at home, and since it is the best place for him to network on the music scene, he wasn't ever at the house. At the end of that discussion we ended up with as much time together as we do right now.

Due to the emotions and dreams involved of a possible life together, we just couldn't deny what we share and let whatever this may be or is, go. Could he possibly be taking the steps to making those dreams come true? Then again, maybe I'm the one dreaming of a life not meant to be.

As we walked along the pier, I felt his hand in mine, I looked at the beautiful ocean, and I never wanted this to end. This is what I wanted. This feeling of peace and security he gives to me. This is all I have ever wanted out of anyone.

Visean brings out everything that is right out in me. He walks through my walls, makes me believe, and sheds light into my darkened visions of men and life. Yet my mind still states that this is all non-reality, all a passionate fantasy that when I am with him I can make anything happen and come true. A fairytale that I can write, I can live, and that when the book closes I am left with the dream. I can just go on with life and say that is all it was, a fairytale, and there are no such things as

fairytale. There is only the reality of life and the men I have dealt with my entire life. The reality that no one has truly loved me, only possessed, obsessed, or only played with, but never have they loved me completely.

So what am I doing here walking with this person I believe to be all a fantasy. There just has to be something more, something to make this become reality.

I squeezed his hand, stopped at a bench, and asked if we could sit down for a moment.

"Are you alright? Your not getting sick from not eating are you?"

"No Visean, I'm fine." Go on Mercedes just go there. "Visean, this is so beautiful out here. You have brought me to so many beautiful places."

"Oh really. Well don't you think it is about time that you started taking me to some beautiful places?"

Take him to some beautiful places? This chile has been all around the world, what beautiful place hasn't he been to? "Now you see Visean, this is where you start showing your age. You should know that you're getting old because you know you have probably been to every beautiful place this entire planet has to offer, unlike myself and yet you ask when will I take you to some beautiful places. That, Visean, is a sure sign of age." So much for going there, maybe later we will have time.

"That would be true, except for the old part that is. You see, I may have been around this entire planet and while it is true that I have been to almost every beautiful place it has to offer, the fact is I haven't been there with you."

I just looked at this crazy man like you don't have to impress me, you already have me. You have me more than you know. Don't start lying to me now. "I think the only reason that you think these places would be

more beautiful is because I would be paying the costs of the trip and that I would be on the beach in a bikini."

"Bikini, yea I could see you in one of them. But you know, a lot of those beautiful places have nude beaches, so you, uh, wouldn't need to even bring a bikini."

"Visean, dream on baby. You've seen my beautiful body many times in private. Now why do you think we should share it with the general public? Who, may I remind you, on nude beaches are usually over the age of 50 or so. Now I may need to remind you that you are quickly approaching that dear age yourself. And you are the only near 50 human being I ever want to see me in the nude. Understand?"

"You just think that you can come down here and start in...."

Watch this, "Eww, ouch, uh...hunger pain. Didn't you say that we were on our way to go and eat something? I mean, look at me, I am just skin and bones and been working all week just to come and see you, I really should eat. I mean you said it yourself that you know what they serve on airplanes. I think we should really go and eat. Ready?"

"You just go ahead and think this conversation is over, cause it isn't. You are stuck with me in a hotel, on a plane, and in my parent's home for the rest of our time together; therefore, we will be finishing up this conversation. C'mon lover girl, we need to go eat."

"Yes we do and I am not stuck with you; I can hop on any plane out of anywhere at anytime to get out of any conversation with you."

He just stopped and grabbed me from behind and started holding me while walking down the pier, "Look woman, you wanna talk all that noise about kidnapping someone, but maybe you've been kidnapped and didn't even know it."

"Umm...really. So what are you going to do with me? Feed me, fly me around, and make love to me? I mean what kind of kidnapper are you?"

"This kind." He turned around and gave me a big passionate wet and sloppy kiss.

"Yuck. Jeez. We're about to eat and now I look like I've been drooling all over myself. Somebody got a towel around here?" Ha! I love playing with him, this just can't be real, and this can't stop. I don't want this to end. Man, I really hope this weekend is for real.

"Oh, so now you have problems with the way I kiss huh? Never had those before."

"You know you do not kiss like that, you're just trying to be silly."

"Girl hush, you know I kiss like that all the time. Have your mouth covered with drool. Who else has been kissing you that made you forget the way I kiss? One of your friends?"

Okay, kissing would not be the only thing I did with my friend that night. Damn. C'mon Mercedes, there is no ring on your finger and you don't know where this trip is leading to, don't mess it up, just continue playing around. Besides, you know how jealous this man gets. "Un-huh, sure I did. I only think and dream about you every day and night, but you're right I don't remember how you kiss me. I am getting old like yourself and I may have forgotten how you kiss or could it be that you are losing your touch along with your youth?"

"Chile, ain't no such thing. Shall we eat?"

"We shall."

Thank the Lord that the restaurant is casual dining, I hate being over/underdressed. People can be so critical. You know how people talk, especially when they're somewhere thinking that it is all uppity and you walk in like it is the local sports bar. Oh well, let them talk.

When we got back to the room he received a call to tell him that it was time for rehearsal. He then

proceeded to call Myron to tell him who to add to the guest list, I was not surprised in the least when he mentioned two other female names. Shoot, why should I be stressed? Were they flown by Visean all the way from Chicago just to be at the concert tonight? Were they sitting in his hotel room getting ready for his concert? Were they leaving the day after to go and meet his parents? Like I said, why should I trip? He is a musician. Lord knows the number of female friends around the world this man has, and that is what they obviously are. The only one that should be tripping about friends is him, and that is only if he knew about the moment Xavier and I had.

Speaking of tripping, there was this one time at an after party in Atlanta that a female approached me after I had kissed Visean on the cheek and left to get a drink. As I approached the bar she stopped and asked me who I was? I just looked at her and said very politely, "Hello, my name is Mercedes. Do I know you from somewhere?"

She just looked at me and said very rudely, "I didn't ask you for your name, I asked who you are."

I just looked at her, like okay, no intelligent life on that planet because didn't I just give you that answer? Before I could say anything to straighten out the situation, she started going off. "I asked you who you are to be thinkin that you could just give Visean the kiss that you just gave him and walk away like nothing should be said to you by anybody in this room."

I just looked at this woman. She had her nerve standing there in her little skanky outfit tryin me. She must be one of the after party ho's. Then a thought of better intelligence hit me and said, "Wait, let's see if we can get this female to tell me exactly who she is to Visean." Shoot, this was only my third time seeing the man, who was I to assume that this female wasn't a family member, relative, friend, business associate, or more than likely an insane psycho bootie female

following him around. By the way, just incase you wanted to know, the last description was my guess. So I again politely said to this woman because I refuse to lower myself to anyone's level, "What would be wrong with the kiss I just gave to him? Are you his girlfriend or something?"

Now the intelligence level really started showing. "Bitch, you need not worry about who I am. You better start worrying about what you are going to do to get out of here before I slap you for that kiss you just laid on Visean!"

As I was looking at the psycho woman, who was now attracting attention from everyone in the room, Visean walked up, put his arm around me, gave me a kiss on the cheek and said, "Is there anything wrong baby?"

I just looked at him and with better judgment said, "Well I was unable to get the drink I was going for." That should piss her off. Let her know that to Visean and I, she is invisible.

"Oh really, well then let us go get you that drink." With that he grabbed my hand and started walking us towards the bar. But psycho woman was none to happy about that as she started yelling at the top of her lungs. "Visean, I know you ain't about to walk away with that ho on your arm! Who the hell do you think you are to be walking away with some trash like that?" I squeezed his hand tighter because this female was working my last nerve and I am trying to remain calm, after all the man is walking away with me. Actions speak louder than words and she was hearing them loud and clear. "That bitch ain't no good for you. Actin like she has every right to be around you, when you know you should be with me. Or was I just good enough to be with for only one night? You didn't have any complaints then."

Okay, he is a musician, those things happen, but I do not appreciate this. Especially when everyone is

looking like a fight from the *Jerry Springer* show is about to go on right here and right now. This is obviously the reason he is with me. I will continue to show why he is with me by holding my temper back and repeating to myself that she is a psycho, immature, low intelligence, hood rat, female skank, who is not worth my time nor my breath. Now I was really squeezing his hand, with a *I am trying to keep a mature level here* look on my face. He turned around to this overly loud female, who now had three security guards standing in front of her, walked over and said in a very low toned voice, in order to not lower his self to her level either. He smoothly said to her, "Look Dymond, I have never spent any night alone with you other than when you repeatedly show up to these after parties or somehow get backstage to my concerts. Mercedes has been very polite and mature and you have no right to embarrass her in any way. If you ever grow up you will see that women like Mercedes are the only kind real men, like myself, want to be with. Now if you will excuse me, I am going to have security escort you out and help her get her drink that you so rudely interrupted her from getting."

Okay, at this point, I think that my mouth was on the floor. The way he defended me was incredible. I had only known Visean for such a short period of time and here he was defending me and calling her out her name in an intelligible fashion, in order not embarrass either one of us. At that point, I started praying that Visean was the man for me.

As they escorted her down the stairs with her still going off in response to his calm and well-spoken answer, I turned to her and smiled. Bitch, and bitches like her, when will you ever learn?

After he left to meet up with everyone, I straightened up the room because he can be so messy, unpacked, plugged in, worked, showered, did

my hair, makeup, and relaxed. When Visean got back, I got dressed and we were out the door.

Thank the world the artists he works with are cool about company. This one man used to trip about anybody being around him. It was like who are you? I used to have to take a taxi to the concert and wait for the ticket at the press box and that was after another hour or two of sound check. Tonight I get to ride on the bus; man those things are fully stocked with things you wouldn't even believe.

After we got to the concert hall, I got my ticket, my back stage pass, found out where to meet him after the show, kissed Visean for good luck, and went to find my seat. I love to see all the different people who come to concerts. Music truly can bring people together. For one or two hours, we can all agree on something, music. We can all laugh, sing, dance, have fun, and not worry about what exists on the outside of the concert hall. If we only knew how to take that energy and bring it with us. Although, not all concerts can bring such a positive energy with them as most rap concerts are so filled with negative energy; bad things are bound to happen.

As the lights went down, I immediately started looking for Visean. I knew where he would be playing because the guitar stand I gave him for his birthday was out on the stage. That thing was indestructible and the design was so deep, I knew he had to have it. I felt like a piece of me was always with him on stage. Damn am I pathetic or what?

Okay, so I am, but it makes me happy.

When I saw Visean walk out I just laughed, he always looks so cool, like "yea, its me, I'm here." Man, he even looks sexier on stage. I am so proud of him, he is so happy, and that does nothing but make me happy. I know my career makes me happy, it pays well and I love the work, but seeing him up there just lets me know there is another level that I have yet to reach.

The concert went great. His solos sounded perfect, but I know when I tell him that he will tell me some note, riff, or something that went wrong, but the crowd and I enjoyed what we heard. The first time I saw Visean play after meeting him, he was so nervous he kept missing his cues. Of course, I didn't know until I saw him off stage that night. It was so cute. I didn't know I had it like that.

These women at these concerts trip me out. Some are always trying to get backstage and meet somebody. The little scandalous dresses these fools are wearing are sometimes scary. Trying to look all cute and stuff, when they look like video trash. Please. A beautiful suit or a nicely cut dress catches a real man's eye. Like Visean stated to that psycho woman in Atlanta, he is a real man and that is what I have been praying that he truly is every night after that one.

As I walked to the meeting place, I noticed a few other people following me, they could be family, or friends of other members no doubt. Like I said, why should I worry? Visean brought me here and we are leaving together, sleeping together, and visiting his family together. As we walked backstage, Visean was still in the dressing room getting ready. Slow azz.

Myron walked out, saw me, and told me that Visean would be out in a few minutes. Just then I overheard one of the females speak that had walked back with us. "Now who is she that he is going to give her updates on Visean?"

The girl that was with her looked over and said, "Who her?"

Oh now what? Well, those girls must be the female names I heard him add to the guest list. Hmm. Visean has some interesting looking friends. One of the girls was Asian, pretty, but nothing spectacular. The other, a White girl, was dressed like she was going to a dinner on the first class floor of the Titanic rather than a concert. Oh well, the dress is gorgeous, but

overdressed for this occasion. Well, why trip until they approach me.

As they were looking at me whispering amongst themselves, probably about me, Visean walked out of the dressing room. He was walking towards me, when one of the girls yelled out, "Visean!"

He turned around and said, "Hey girl, how you doin?" Walked over grabbed my hand and proceeded to walk us over to them. If looks could kill...I would need a casket. Well no need to trip, after all he obviously isn't trying to hide anything from them.

"Michelle and Ravon, this is Mercedes. These two have been my California connection for a couple of years now. Mercedes this is Michelle [the White girl] and Ravon [the Asian girl]. Mercedes her has been someone very special to me over the past couple of years." See what I mean. "Michelle and Ravon have been together for what, 6 years now?"

Together? Oh, no problem there. I wonder if anyone ever thinks of them as an interracial couple, fascinating. "Hello," I said very politely.

"Hi," they said carelessly.

Ravon spoke up immediately, "Visean, you played great tonight and thank you again for the tickets. What have you been up to lately? You don't ever call us anymore. Shoot, if we didn't call you we don't think that we would ever hear from you. Is it your career keeping you busy or this new interest of yours keeping you busy?"

New interest? Jeez, first I have to worry about his parents just thinking of me that way and now I am going to have to put up with his friends thinking of me that way? Oh what do they all know anyway: hell I don't even know. Be nice Mercedes, "Well I am glad to know I am not the only one thinking that if I don't call him he wouldn't remember who I am" and looked at Visean with that evil grin.

Visean just looked at me like "Girl you better watch it." and turned to them and said, "Just cause a man is busy, "

"And don't forget about getting old." I interjected.

"I am not getting that old. Just cause a man is busy, like I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted," and reached over and pinched me lightly, "doesn't mean I forget my friends." Giving me a very serious look said, "Especially those I feel are very close to me."

What are you up to Visean? What are you up to?

Just as Ravon was about to speak again to get his attention away from me, Myron walked out and announced that Visean was to be on the bus to go to the after party.

"Mercedes, I think everyone is out of the dressing room, why don't you go in get your stuff, mine is already to go, and I will be right in."

"Okay. Michelle, Ravon, it was very nice to meet you both."

At this point, these two just looked at me like I had some nerve. What is it with his friends? Well maybe they are just over protective. These two are a couple, why they are trippin on me is beyond me. Oh well, they aren't about to walk in the dressing room, walk on the tour bus, and then walk into the after party with Visean. As I walked away, they carelessly said goodbye.

Whatever.

As I collected my stuff, I munched on the leftover goodies, everything from chips and salsa to caramel covered apple slices was in the room this time. I heard about some stars being so fussy that they only allowed blue salsa chips to be served in their rooms. Please, give me a break. I grabbed a bottle of water, re-fixed my hair, touched up my makeup, and sat down and waited for Visean. After a few minutes, he walked in.

"Child, can you believe that concert tonight? Before you even comment on it, I did not play wonderfully. They would not let me have my amp as

loud as I needed it to be, I missed cues, and before I even keep goin on let's get the HELL out of here."

"Okay, so are we on our way to the after party."

"Wait," walked over to me and gave me a huge hug and a kiss, "hello, I hope you had a good time. Yes we have to go to the after party, cause we have no other way to get back since we are both getting a ride back on the bus. Well wait, we are taking a van to the after party and then back to the hotel. Unless, we cut out a little early so we could get some private time to ourselves. If you understand me?"

"Understand you? Let me tell you this." I ran my hands down the front of his suit jacket. "I understand you very clearly. Now shall we go? I would like to get back to the hotel and enjoy our time alone before we head off to your parents."

"Umm-Umm-Umm, girl lets go so then we can go and get it on."

The after party was the usual, everybody talking and drinking. Kind of like an office party, you know when everybody has a little too much to drink in them and think it is their time to tell the boss the bare naked truth about how to run the business. I was tired and starting to feel the jet lag kick in.

"Look woman just because my friends are a little suspicious of who I have around me doesn't mean that they don't like you. Michelle and Ravon have never liked anyone that I have had around me. Child, it could be my own mother standing there next to me and they would still be suspicious of her. And don't let that fool DJ think he can tell you anything about me and what I do, cause he don't know nothin either."

"When did you see me talking to DJ tonight? After I went to get a drink I couldn't even get near you again." We have been having this discussion ever since we left from the after party. Unfortunately, there were so many people there we were unable to leave early, along with the fact that they played an

extended set or two. It was now 3:30 in the morning and we were just getting back to the hotel.

"Girl, you could've got near me if you wanted to, just tell those people to move out of your way. You just have to quit being so nice at those functions: use some attitude to get what you want. You know none of those people want you around me because they're trying to get near me, for whatever reason. So just get your sister girl *get out of my way before I make your income taxes your worst nightmare* attitude out and get back to where you should be."

"And where should I be exactly?"

He walked towards me, took me in his arms, kissed me gently, while he started unbuttoning my suit, and whispered in my ear, "Right here with me lover girl."

We made love the rest of the morning.

♂ airplanes ♀

Damn, not again. "Girl, you almost ready? We need to get the hell out of here and get our monkey azzez to the airport."

"Ready? Visean, I am the one waiting on you. Want me to go down to the desk and start checking out?"

"Umm, yea, you do that. Take some cash off the night stand for the incidentals and I'll be right down. Did you call for a bellhop yet?"

"Yes like 5 minutes ago, want me to call again before I leave?"

"Yes. No. Wait. Go to the desk, find a bellhop, send him up, check us out, and I'll be down with him. I still gotta get some of this stuff over to Myron so that it can be shipped back to Minneapolis. How much time we got before our plane leaves?"

"We have to make it there in the next 30 minutes to make it for the two hour check in time."

"Right, we aren't going to make that."

I gave him a kiss on the cheek and said, "I will see you downstairs."

As I grabbed my stuff and walked downstairs I saw the bellhop approaching the room, "He is ready, just knock on the door." He just flashed me this *how did I know* look and so I smiled politely back. Last night was wonderful. But damn am I tired. I haven't got half of what I need done on this trip and now I know I am going to crash on the plane and get nothing done at all. Damn! Plus, we haven't even approached the subject of why I am finally meeting his parents, who I am exactly to him, who they think I am to him...ugh there my head goes spinning again. As I got off the elevator, I saw Myron standing in the lobby.

"Good morning, where is Visean?"

By just looking at me, you could tell why Visean and I were late getting ready to go. "Hi Myron. Visean is up in the room. Is there any chance you could head up there and grab the stuff he wanted sent back with you? We are really running late."

He just looked at me and laughed, "Please, when is Visean not running late. At least this time he has a good looking reason."

You have to be kidding me. Well, I did have it going on in that suit last night, but as for now, whatever. "Thank you Myron, see you next time."

As I was checking out, I noticed a nicely dressed man looking at me. At first glance, I thought it was Xavier and caught my breath. The man just smiled and started to approach. Damn, now what. As I finished with the desk clerk, I had sensed the man was very close and was awaiting me to finish my business with her. As I re-gathered my things, I noticed what time it was and hoped Visean was getting his ass down here in a hurry. I asked the desk clerk where a phone was so that I could call and check if he was on his way down. Fortunately, the hotel phone was the opposite way of the man who started to approach me. As I turned my back and walked away, someone grabbed my arm lightly.

"Excuse me Miss."

Okay, I am from Chicago, we are in a nice classy hotel, so who does this man think he is that he can just walk up and touch me? Easy Mercedes. I turned to him and gave him that look of I am not the one you want to mess with right now, or ever for that matter.

"Oh, I am sorry. Did I startle you? You just look familiar. Were you at that concert last night? I noticed you sitting in the row ahead of me and I thought to myself 'what is a beautiful woman like that doing at a concert all by herself.' After the show, you just disappeared and now here you are standing right here in front of me, still alone."

Okay, what in the hell do I say to this man? First, I didn't notice him last night at the concert. Second, I am too dang tired to even be trying to deal with this right now. And finally, didn't he hear me scream "Go baby" every time Visean had a solo?

"Silence, oh, I am sorry. Here I am talking to you and I haven't even introduced myself. Hello, my name is Marcus."

"Hello Marcus, my name is Mercedes and yes I was at that concert last night and no I..."

"Hey lover girl, we ready to go." Visean was next to me with guitar case and bag in hand.

"I can see you were not alone. Sorry if I have taken your time." Looked at Visean and said, "You're a lucky man; I wouldn't leave this woman alone in too many places if I were you."

"I can see that." But before Visean could ask who for what, Marcus nodded his head and walked away.

"I see that I shouldn't leave a beautiful woman like yourself alone. Is this how much trouble you get into when I am not around you?"

"I was just walking over to call you to make sure you were on your way down. I was also going to tell you that Myron should have seen you already, and that we now have ten minutes to make out check in time and we haven't even called for a cab yet. Look we don't even have time to discuss who that man was, let's go and get a cab before we are even later."

"Okay, like I said, you're stuck with me this entire trip, so while we are walking you can explain who that man was. Now did you get us all ready to go? Wait, why aren't we taking the hotel shuttle to the airport?"

"They don't leave in time."

"Oh, well then we better go hail a cab because that can take awhile."

I just popped my head at him, "Did I not just say that? Chile, we are both so damn tired we had better get to the airport fast before we forget where we are

going. Do you have the tickets? More importantly you have one for me too right?"

"See how tired you are; you think I'm tired but isn't it you that has the tickets, including your own."

"Oops."

We waited on a cab for only about five minutes and headed for the airport. Thankfully, the airport was so close that we would make it in no time at all. I got the tickets ready, looked over at Visean who was already asleep. Men.

Both of us fell asleep on the first leg of the flight. We woke up in time to hear that we were landing in Chicago's O'Hare airport. Visean looked over at me and said, "Here is your chance to leave me now and get out of meeting my parents" and smiled.

"We need to talk about that."

"I know" and fell back asleep.

I woke him up, handed him some of the carry on luggage and got us to our next terminal. Jeez, why does O'Hare have to be so big and our next terminal so damn far away. After boarding our next flight, I got ready to ask some serious questions, I was not about to let him fall back asleep quite yet.

When the attendant came by I ordered coffee for the both of us and looked over at Visean who was staring out the window. "Why is it that you never let me have the window seat."

"Isn't this our first trip where we are actually on the same flight together?"

"Yes."

"Then how can you say that I never let you have the window when this is our first flight together?"

"Good point. Visean, who do your parents think I am."

"Oh I don't know, some psycho fan from Chicago that I am too scared to get rid of."

"Nice try, but try again."

"Mercedes, they know that you are a woman that I have met and for the past couple of years now I have not stopped talking about how special you are. So who they think you are to me exactly, I don't know. They just know about you and have been asking forever and a damn day to meet you.

Don't worry, they are not going to treat you like the first girl I brought home and introduced as my girlfriend or look you over like you are the woman that I am going to marry. Just relax, you've talked to them on the phone before, and believe me I don't let everybody talk to them, so things will be fine."

"So they're not going to look at me and go, 'oh this must be our son's flavor of the month' or 'so this is the one who is trying to get all that my baby got' or 'she is only with Visean because he is a musician and she just using him to get with the bigger named stars.'"

"Are you trying to do all that?"

"No."

"Then why are you thinking that way? Hey, did you get any sleep last night? I know your fine ass didn't cause you were crawling all over me last night, so we both need to get some sleep. Mercedes, I swear everything is going to be fine. It is only for a day and a half, and then you will be back on your way home where you will be safe; okay baby girl?"

Safe back at home, without you.

Mercedes stop.

Safe back at home? I still have to try to deal with Xavier and his questions about where I have been at when I get back. What happens if he wants to sleep with me again? Will I want to sleep with him? What am I getting myself into by meeting his parents? I mean, what am I doing? I felt like I was in a spinning room full of questions that with just one answer would make it slow down or at least stop.

Visean is hardly a reality, but this feels so right and so damn real. After the trip, who knows how long it will be

before I get to be with him like this again. It may be months before we see each other.

Maybe for once I have to quit hiding behind this "safe, I can't get hurt relationship" and take on a real one. The type I would have with X. Still, does X make me feel the way Visean does? Why should I get so involved into only one of these men anyway? How do I know that either X or Visean could handle anything beyond friendship? Maybe it is just me who feels this way.

Hmm, well then I will just keep going until I decide that I have had enough or till one of these fools can convince me that I will be the only one and they will love me and only me.

When our coffee arrived Visean was already asleep, so I apologized for not needing the coffee any longer and looked at Visean. It is amazing for how busy this mans' life is how his face is so peaceful when he is sleeping.

I said a silent prayer while watching him sleep and then fell asleep against him. The next time we woke up, we were getting ready to land and meet his parents...God help me.

♂ the meeting ♀

Meeting his parents was not going to be as easy for me as meeting a major client for the first time. When it comes to work I walk in, the introductions are done, yada, yada, yada, blah, blah, blah, and a couple hours later I either walk away with the account or walk away knowing that it was one I didn't want anyway. However, this is not even close is it? I don't just walk in, I don't just waltz my way through the questions, and I can't walk out feeling good no matter what the outcome. This time it is not a *major* client, this time I am going after something personal with someone who I never thought would bring me this far in a relationship and I don't want to screw this up!

Visean must have caught me thinking as we found our way to our rental car because he grabbed my hand as if to say, "It'll be alright." Damn.

As we drove towards his parents' home, Visean tried to give me the ultimate history of his partial life growing up there. He told me and showed me everything from parks he used to play in, the store he saw his first guitar in that he knew he wanted to play, to where he first met his first girlfriend (like I needed to know that), the first place he played in a band and so on. We were driving more in circles than we were towards his house from what I could tell. At least he is open, but it is getting late, and as nervous as I am right now I would rather meet his family while they are still awake and not about to get ready for bed.

He must have known I was thinking that to, "Damn, look at the time, now what time is it that they go to bed?"

"Visean, don't even go there. How far away are we from your parents' house anyway?"

"Oh, I see, first you're nervous about having to meet them, now you can't wait to run through the door. I am that boring huh? Well uh, sorry my life hasn't been so interesting to you but I find it to be quite fascinating, and since I am driving and you don't know where the hell we're at, I guess you'll just be sitting there and listening to an old person like myself tell his stories about the old days."

I threw up my hands and said, "Finally you admit your age, must be the stories you're telling me that finally reminded you of just how old you really are."

"Un-huh. Guess we didn't spend enough time in California so that you could experience how young I really am."

"Well we could've explored that issue some more if we hadn't been stuck at that after party for so long."

"I see somebody didn't get enough sleep on the plane."

"You need to stop, because I was knocked out right next to you." I took a deep breath in and exhaled, "I am just nervous, we really didn't discuss much about this trip, and I do have a lot of questions: questions that I would rather not have your parents answer for me."

"Questions like what?"

Questions like what? Chile, please; the questions I have would make your head spin. Questions like who am I to you. What brought about this trip anyway? Why now? What have you told them? What do they say? What do they think? Okay, I know he can't answer that one. Finally, what in the hell is next for us after this trip? "Visean," I grabbed his hand because I was about to go there again, "what do see for us in our future? That is what I need to know before I meet them."

He just stared out the window looking at different sites he must have known as we drove by them. "Mercedes, I don't know how to honestly answer that question." *Great.* "I don't think you could either."

Maybe. "But I do think it is time we start checking out the possibilities." *Possibly.* "For now, I know what we have works, but as for the future, I just can't answer that and I know it would help you if I could." *Tell me about it.*

At least when I am going in front of a client for the first time, I have the background and know the basic outline of the future partnership. I need that basic outline to get through this and I don't think Visean is getting that. "Visean we have already discussed where we live, our life styles, careers, etc. and we decided that it would be hard on both of us to change all that."

"So that was it. That discussion was never to be brought up again? Things can't ever change? Don't go closed minded on me now Mercedes. What we have is something that should always be open to discussion."

"If you only knew."

"Oh, really." *Oops, did I say that aloud.* "Well uh, what would you like to discuss?"

"The fact that I am here. Visean, do you even know what your about to do?"

"Yea, make a left at this next light to get to my parents house." Then just shot me that look.

Umph. "Okay member of the male species let me clue you in on how this is going to go down with the female species in the class of your mother. First, here you are bringing me home, to her home. You are bringing me all these miles just to introduce the voice with the face. What goes through the female mother mind, 'Who is this woman with my baby?' and followed by the question that never ends, 'What does Ms. Thang want with my baby?'"

"You know, for not being a mother you're pretty good at this."

"Excuse me, but did I say I was finished?" He just looked at me. "Okay. While those are the first two

questions to be answered, there are the 101 other questions that will be asked. These questions will not only be directly fired at me, but also at you in order to help confirm the answers she already has to those questions."

"Even the never answered question that you mentioned?"

"Visean, don't be cute. Look, what is that you see for us?"

"First of all youngin, quit worrying. It's going to be alright, so relax. She knows I consistently talk about you. Mercedes this, Mercedes that, and she wants to meet you in person to find out just how special you really are." *Pause, it must be getting through his skull.* "Huh, well girl, maybe we should be worried."

"Un-huh. You know what. The simple fact is that I love you Visean, if you only knew how much." Dammit! Well let's go. I am at the craps table, dice in hand, and I'm letting it ride. Release the dice. "A song comes on the radio that you play guitar on and all of a sudden a bad day isn't so bad. Your calls at three in the morning make it worth going back to sleep, even though I can't fall asleep due to the huge smile that you leave me with."

"Huh, I only thought I left you with that smile while in bed with you."

"Nope. You leave it in my heart all the time. I know those other women across the world be checking you out and I know that you have female friends, just as I have male friends, but it doesn't matter."

"Oh really? Why is that?"

"Because you call me and you fly me to see you. It's me who you leave and come back to the hotel room with. It's me you look for in the audience and it's me you have stood up for at the after parties."

"That was a trip, what was her name?"

"Dymond."

"You say it like I say it. Somehow she found out my home number and has been leaving consistent messages. Did I tell you that? Am I supposed to tell you that? Guess I am going to have to change my number, *again*."

"Just as long as I get the number change, you can do anything you like."

"Girl you know you don't have to worry about that, even though you probably will because you worry about everything. Especially the reason I am taking you to my home, well my parents home, to meet everyone."

"That is where I left off; it's me who is in this car right now on the way to meet your family."

"Don't worry Mercedes."

"I am sorry for tripping out but I am just amazed by all this and at the same time, it scares me a little. I know you love me, so I am going to pull a lot of strength from that love."

"Girl you pull all you want, because to me you are a very special woman Mercedes. You deserve a lot more than what I can give you. You deserve to be held every night. You deserve someone to come home to on a bad day, as well as a good one. You should have someone there to share your responsibilities with; even with your independent ass is the way it is. You deserve more time than I can or could ever give you. We don't see each other often enough and due to my schedule, we don't even talk enough. It's a wonder we can say we know each other at all. I bet if we spent seven uninterrupted days together, we would get so tired of each other we'd leave by the fifth day."

"I don't see that happening, but I know I'd be kicking your butt back out on the road by the eighth day. If you really do believe that I deserve all that, then why keep tripping on my male friends?"

"First of all, you wouldn't be kicking me back out on the road because I'd be trying to leave and you'd be all attached to my leg begging me not to go. And second of all, since you want to bring up your male friends, just because I *said* you deserved all that doesn't mean I want someone there giving that to you. That is selfish of me isn't it? I mean, Mercedes, you deserve someone, but you're not 24/7, that is why I don't mind being selfish with you. You couldn't even handle one of them punks being around you 24/7 anyway."

"You're right I am not a 24/7 girl and you are definitely not a 24/7 guy. Okay. I can assure myself in saying that is the 'top' thing that drove me nuts in my marriage. Everyday, Marcel came home and I like my space, my own time, and my own stuff. Not that I am not saying that I don't look forward to the day when I can share my life again with somebody. I mean I am and then again, I am not. But you," and the number on the dice is about to land, "would be the ideal man for me." Oh boy, no facial expression. Why am I saying this when I know Xavier is probably planning our future together right now because of that night? Was that night for me only a one-time thing? Is this man right now, right here a non-reality fantasy that I want to be true or would reality set in and destroy/distort everything we know and love about each other?

"Ideal man for you huh, Mercedes you don't know what you need. I don't know what you need. I'd like to think I know, but I don't, all I can do is try and keep hoping you'll give a brother like me a chance."

"Hold up. A chance? If I'm not giving you a chance then what hell do you call this trip?" Chances? What in the hell is this fool talking about? Here I am, in a car, on his way to his parents home...wait a minute; does he mean a real chance, a real change for both of us. What do you want Visean, what do you really want? Tell me.

"Yes you give me a chance, maybe I meant to say to keep giving me chances like you are now. I require a lot things other relationships don't. So far you're the only, hear me, hello, listen, the only woman I have met that has given me those things I need, you have respected the time and commitment my job requires that takes time away from being with you. So I am very glad to hear that this topic of us, and whatever may be or become of us, is still is open for discussion."

The dice show a seven with no point on the line. The line wins. "Yes, it still is and I will always give you a chance if you allow me to. Don't you think I have a fear of your female friends?"

"Yes I am sure you do and because we are here, this conversation will be carried on throughout the weekend." He then leaned over and kissed me gently on the cheek.

As we removed our luggage, I noticed how beautiful the house was, Almond colored brick with dark wood trimming. It was an older house with a big beautiful yard. There was new *Lexus IS300* in the driveway, with a sporty new *Infiniti G35* parked next to it, and an older model *Nissan Sentra* parked behind it. Well too bad they aren't Honda lovers; there goes one topic of conversation I could have easily switched to.

"My cousin Alexandra must be here. That's her Nissan. Notice I said Nissan, not Honda. That girl loves her car, like you love yours. So don't the two of you get into any arguments about Nissan versus Honda okay. Cause when it comes to arguing a point with her, not even God himself could help you win that argument. Alexandra is sweet but not even I would mess with her."

Great, another female here to judge me. Why? "Well there goes one of my topic ideas."

Visean put his arms around my waist and pulled me near and whispered, "I can always give you some more topics to work on."

"Eww really..."

"Look at the two of you already. Hello! If you hadn't noticed the door to the house is this way."

Who the hell is that?

"Alex, since the age of I don't know what, you've always been interrupting me during the worst times. Girl, don't you see this beautiful woman in my arms and I were about to share a beautiful moment together?"

"Visean please, your horny ass wouldn't know a beautiful moment if one was happening right in front of your face. Who you trying to impress?" and walked over and gave Visean a hug and me one of those *I am going to find out who you are* looks.

"Alex, this is Mercedes. Mercedes this is Alexandra. We call her Alex for short since her name sounds like royalty and we don't want her head getting any bigger than it already is."

"Hi Alexandra, it is very nice to meet you." Alex, yea right, she'd probably kill me for saying that and she was definitely someone I wasn't going to mess around with. Girlfriend was refined, like her name, but everything about her, from her weight, her clothes, her fingernails, and her jewelry, down to the girl's shoes said attitude. She wasn't ghetto, she wasn't a hood rat either, but girlfriend definitely presented herself as not to be messed with. I wonder if she has a man.

"Nice to finally meet you. Auntie Clarice be talking about my cousins new interest all the time." *New interest? Damn.* "Oh, I am sorry, I didn't mean it like that." *Sure you didn't.*

Well this is the real beginning of what I am sure there is more of. Damn. What the hell am I even doing here? Xavier would never put me through this until we both knew where we were going. Maybe he is the one who has the real head on his shoulders about the structure and significance of our relationship, well the next part of the relationship anyway. If there is gong to be a next part? Am I really questioning if there will be? Do I want it to be? Am I that terrified right now, that I

will run, jump, and hide behind anything/anyone? "Please, no offense taken. I wasn't aware that Visean's mom mentioned me to other family members."

Yea right, was she not a mother? What mother doesn't talk about their children's interests? Shoot, my own mother gave myself and her new cellular phones with a camera for no other reason than just to try and put faces with the many men I always be talking about. She said it would help her keep track. I know you all must be laughing because I was to. Not my mom, she was dead serious. It was kind-a-fun though, taking pictures of those men, just for fun and then sending them to her.

Sometimes I would catch a real fine man, of course not with his woman, if he had one, walking down the street and take his picture so I could tell my mom a story about him. Then of course I would tell her that I was just joking. Do you know she would upload them, print them out, put them in a book and then take out a pen and put down at the bottom of the picture, another one of Mercedes fantasy men? My mom is a trip.

What she didn't know was that those pictures really did lead to some interesting stories. Some of those men were so flattered, if men could ever really be that, they would ask me for my number or for a date sometime. Chile, if I only had the time to sit here and think back. I guess I was because Visean had his lips moving and I wasn't hearing a damn thing and next thing I knew he and his cousin were walking towards the front door. What did he just say? Damn, okay just follow and smile?

Five steps, four steps, three steps, two steps, and one step...welcome to the Scott home. Okay, I'm in. I'm here, now what? Why is it so dim in here? Look at all the dark cherry wood finishing. Man I love this. One day Visean and I got started on talking about places we would like to live and what our dream place would

look like, well not ours. You know his and mine. Separate, not together. Well maybe someday. Wait? Did I just say that? Damn. Well what would be so bad about that, I am here standing in his parent's home after all. Anyway, I told him about my dream of owning a loft like the one in the movie *Ghost*. Not in New York, to busy and too many people. I just wanted the loft, not the city. All the wood finish in the apartment, those warehouse windows, dream, dream, and dream some more. The wood finish in this house was a little to dark for me though; I like light, not Frank Black's rental house from the second season of *Millennium*. Did I mention I was a fan? See here I am trying to hide in my own thoughts again, cause his lips are moving with his eyes deadlocked on me, and I'm not even hearing a sound. Wake up Mercedes.

"Mercedes why you standing in the doorway like you can't move? You okay? Girl didn't I tell you not to be nervous. Here I am walking through the house trying to find people running my mouth off to you, and when I look behind me, you're not there."

"Huh."

"Huh? Hello, are you there? Girl, would you just calm yourself down? Now c'mon and let me show you this house and maybe, just maybe, we will find some of its occupants along the way."

"Visean, if they're sleeping you're not going to wake them up right?"

"Well Alex just went upstairs to get mom and she said dad is in the den. When I walked in there to introduce the person I thought was behind me, he wasn't there so I don't know where he's at. But if he is asleep, yes I will let him sleep because unlike me he is kind of cranky when he wakes up, you should be glad I didn't take on that trait."

"Cranky? Chile please, you are as mean as the devil when you wake up after coming back from the dead."

As he grabbed me and pulled me in close all I could think is no, not here, not now, not in your parents home. He whispered in my ear, "Well girl, you are the only one who brings me back from the dead, because you sure do bring all of me back to life. I never even liked having sex, uh, making love in the morning until I met you." As he proceeded to kiss me softly on my ear I could hear someone walking down the stairs and gently pulled away. "Don't be so nervous, I'm an old ass man not some 17 year old horny teenager."

"Yes you are." Okay breathe, you're going to be fine. We proceeded to walk over to the staircase only to find it was Alexandra walking back down.

"Aunti Clarice is upstairs making up your rooms." *Our rooms?* "She invited you two up. I am out for the night, see you two soon."

"Pops up there too?"

"No, I told you he was in the den. Wasn't he in there?"

"Well uh, not when I went and looked. Wonder where he went? Well, shall we proceed?"

Okay Mercedes, smile, nod your head, do something, it ain't all that bad. If this woman was going to be all fierce about meeting you, then chile she would have been waiting in the foyer waiting for you two to walk in. Okay, he is squeezing my hand and here we go.

"Come chile, let's come."

We said goodbye to Alex and headed upstairs. As we walked up, I noticed all the family photos on the wall. "Visean, was this you as a baby?"

"I don't know, is he cute?"

"Yes."

"Then it must be me, I was not an ugly baby."

"So what happened to you when you grew up?"

"Ah ha, very funny. You must like something you see, because you're here."

"Please, the only thing that keeps me around is your guitar."

Mercedes!

Damn. Why in the hell did I just say that? You know you are joking, he knows that you are joking, but does anybody in the house who may have just heard you say that know you are joking? Pray.

"Yea go ahead and try claiming that, I know better. Girl you are stuck with me the rest of your life, like it or not."

"That doesn't sound like a bad thing to me."

"Well its not. Hey there is a light on in that room, let's check in there. By the way, I get my room, no girls allowed; you can stay in the guest room."

"No girls allowed? Whatever."

As we walked in the room, I could tell it was his room as his parents had virtually left it untouched. There was a futon couch that was made into a bed, a desk with blank music pages all over it, a few guitar stands with some antique looking guitars and framed pictures of guitar players everywhere. Here is another opportunity to learn more about this man.

"Huh, I thought she'd be in here. Rule number one; never leave a light on in a room that you are not in. Pops throws a fit, so somebody in trouble."

"Who's in trouble?"

I looked up and saw Clarice Scott enter the room.

"Obviously you are mom because you left a light on and you're not here. Hello!"

As they hugged you could see the peace he brought to her on her face. It wasn't too often that Visean was able to visit home or anyone else for that matter. You could tell that the closeness between mother and son had remained. I just hope she knows that I am not a threat to taking that closeness away. I don't even know if I am someone in his life to be considered a threat to anyone. She was a very lovely woman who looked strong. Her hair was done in a very

beautiful goddess braid, and her face was soft like his. As she looked over at me, I could only wonder how she was sizing me up.

"Well introduce me to the voice Visean."

"Well mom I would have liked to but you see on the way here we had a stop in Chicago and Mercedes was so nervous that she ran from me and drove home. So I had to find someone on short notice to fill in for her...."

"Visean always with the stories, hello Mrs. Scott, how nice to finally meet you." As I held out my hand to shake it she just looked at me and laughed.

"Girl, come here and give me a hug. We've talked enough on the phone that you don't have to be so formal. It is so very nice to finally meet you in person. I have to like anyone who calls Visean on those wild stories he always seems to want to tell."

"Stories? Mom. Hello. I seriously don't know this woman standing next to me. She was just trying to help me out. Mercedes left me in Chicago, this is Mary or somebody. Baby, what's your name again?"

"Boy you need to stop. Look at you, have you lost more weight? I swear Mercedes, the more time this man stays on the road, the more weight he loses. Catered, hotel, and fast food is no way for any man to eat all the time. If I could get him home more often, I could get him back to a good weight. Father and I miss cooking for you."

"And I miss eating it. Okay, so this is Mercedes but incase you weren't thrilled with her I thought I would tell you that story to get her off the hook. The girl has been nervous since we left California this morning. I thought I brought a statue home the way she wouldn't move from the front door."

Go ahead Visean and give me that stupid look. Men, damn, now why'd he have to go and say something so stupid like that? I swear I should smack this man upside his head. Yes, duh, I have been

nervous, but don't go blurting it out like its syndicated news. "Yes, Mrs. Scott..."

"Please, you can call me Clarice. And I remember the first time I went to visit Sean's parents, that's Mr. Scott, I was so nervous I didn't know what to say or do. I didn't even know that we were that serious but I knew after I met his parents how serious we were." Then she shot us that mother's wishful look. Well that's a good sign. Isn't it?

So this runs in the family huh? Well that is good to know. "Well I will promise to try and relax. I am sorry that we are so late getting in."

"Well that is nothing new with Visean. When he comes to visit, he usually shows up later than this. Always trying to catch up with his friends instead of visiting his family first."

"Well this time, I wasn't introducing her to my friends." *Like that ever goes well and dammit why didn't I realize I was going to meet not only family but more of Visean's friends.* "I was showing her around telling her about how it was when I grew up here. That is another thing she was worried about, that we'd get in too late. I am starting to see a connection between you two that is starting to scare me."

As Clarice held mine and Visean's hand she said, "Well I don't want either of you two to be nervous while you are here. Father has a lot planned for you Visean starting tomorrow and that will give Mercedes and me time to talk face to face."

Okay, don't faint, think positive, it hasn't been that bad so far.

"Oh really, well what does Pop have planned for me tomorrow? Alex said he was in the den but when I looked he wasn't in there."

"I don't know why she thought he was off in the den, he came up to bed about a half hour ago and I don't know what he has planned for you tomorrow. You know how it is when it comes to your father. Starts

saying one thing and then goes off on five hundred others and can't remember the first thought he had. So I guess you'll know tomorrow. I'll wake him up later; you know how cranky he gets."

Oh, so that is where Visean gets it from. The man starts with, I have to make a phone call to I don't even know what, and then sits down and goes, what was I going to do? At first, he was scared talking about the Alzheimer's disease, but after I described to him what he had just done, he realized that it wasn't a disease, it was just his life. From having to call one band member, to his agent, the studio, the accountant, and so on and so on, he can never remember where he starts and ends at, let alone where to pick up at. It's really funny to watch though, but I wouldn't tell him that. Nope, I would rather laugh at him and let him figure out what is so funny.

"Well then it sounds like I have an early day tomorrow. So um err um uh, how about we all get some sleep, cause Mercedes and I were stuck" and shot me that look, "at the after party last night and didn't get all that much sleep. And since I live my entire life on jet lag, I am okay for now, but I wouldn't want to see her without getting some serious sleep before tomorrow morning."

"Thank you for the encouraging words dear. He is right; these time zone changes are really getting the best of me. I hope you don't find it rude of us to cut this night off early, so we can get some sleep."

"Mercedes, you don't have to be so proper with me. If you're tired, you're tired. Visean, go downstairs and get your bags and I'll take Mercedes to the guest room and show her where everything is at."

"Umm, okay, but I will need a conveyer belt for all the luggage she brought with her."

"All the luggage I brought? Visean, I only brought two bags along with my laptop. You're the one that needs to learn how to pack. Clarice, have you seen

how this man packs his bags? The man acts like the width, depth, length, and weight capacity of a single bag are nonexistent. I remember walking to his plane one time in Chicago, and do you know it took both of us to carry his one bag to the plane?"

"Oh I know. Don't let this clean room of his fool you. This room had so much clutter in it, but every time this man visits home, it keeps getting cleaner and cleaner and his bags heavier and heavier. I keep telling him that we can pack it up and ship it all, but he just refuses. He'd rather lug it all over the road with him until he gets back to Minneapolis. I know the airlines have got to be charging him for being over the maximum weight limit on his bags when he flies."

"Yea Visean, just how often do you have to pay for all that extra weight you put on those bags of yours?"

Now Visean was the one standing there like a statue. I could only imagine what was going through this man's mind. He looked like he just stepped into a huge sand trap and no matter what golf club or stroke he used he couldn't get out and kept digging his ball deeper and deeper. How was I to know that it would be so easy to talk with his mother? I still had his dad to worry about, but so far, things aren't so bad. I am sure she hasn't pulled out her heavy artillery questions on me yet either, but I don't feel like I should run and hide and pray that Father Time speeds the hours up until our departure either. Poor Visean, look at him just standing there, one man vs. two women. Don't worry baby, tomorrow you'll have your dad to back you up. Or will you? After all your parents have been married so long, he probably knows its better to take the woman's side of things and just let there be peace. Ha!

Okay, I am feeling way too confident; it is definitely time for bed. "Visean, if you need help with all of my three bags compared to the five bags that you brought with you, I'll be more than happy to help you out."

"No you won't Mercedes, my son is a man, and I taught him his manners. Now go Visean, get downstairs and bring Mercedes up her bags. She is tired and needs her sleep. We have a lot planned and I want her awake for them. That is partially the reason you two will be sleeping in separate rooms."

As Visean broke out his statue state, he nodded at both of us, walked by me and said, "You were worried, huh, now I am the one who is worried."

Clarice walked me down to the guest room. It was cute; it also had a futon couch that went down into a bed and some exercise equipment in it. There were a few pictures of Visean when he was growing up, mostly with his guitar. "Visean attended a special high school dedicated to the arts. Did he ever mention that to you?"

"Yes he did. With as little time that we have to talk, I try to corner him with questions when we do get together."

"That man is so busy doing what makes him happy."

"I can see how happy he is on stage. That is one of the best things about him; he is the one person I know who has found true happiness in what they do. I really hope to find that in my own work one day."

"What was it you do again?"

"I work as a tax accountant for Bartle & Reed."

"You don't look like someone who is very boring to me. Why taxes?"

"I don't know. Its kind of mean to say this, but I just love it when clients come in thinking that I know some magic loop hole to make their deductions larger than what they really are or their refunds somehow increase instantly. Lord knows that there are loopholes in the tax laws, but I can't create miracles where there are none to be had. I have a friend who is a tax lawyer, Xavier, when I can't help them dig themselves out, I usually send them his way."

"Mom, don't be listening to Mercedes talk about her friends. You can help me explain to her that she has me and doesn't need nobody else."

"Visean, with as many female friends you have out on the road, don't tell this young lady not to have the same. It's all about trust, if you don't have that, then you have nothing."

I quickly took my eyes off Visean and looked at the floor. Trust; without that, you have nothing. Here I am in Visean's home and I have the nerve to bring up X.

Don't be so hard on yourself Mercedes. You were talking about work, X fits into that topic very well. She asked and you answered. Relax.

"Mercedes, you look very tired. I am going to finish Visean's room and let him show you around to the bathroom and anything else you might need. I am so glad that you are here."

"Thank you, it's nice to finally meet you and be here."

"Girl don't thank me, thank Visean for finally finding the time for his family and someone else besides all those artists he works with. Goodnight. Visean, I'll see you before you go to bed."

"Alright mom."

Visean walked over and closed the door behind her. No, don't do this now. Okay, I'll be strong and resist him. Maybe he just wants to talk. Besides he is an old ass man and it should be alright to have the door shut with a woman my age.

"See its not that bad is it? I told you that you worry."

"She is very nice Visean, but she won't be so nice if she sees that door shut for to long."

"Mmm, well like you said before we never did learn how to have a quickie. I will tell you this though; I have a very special surprise planned for us Monday night. We won't be sleeping apart for long. Trust me on that."

"Sounds good to me."

As we hugged all I could think of was how stupid I was to sleep with Xavier. This really could be it for Visean and I and my one night could possibly ruin all that. Damn.

Come on Mercedes, this is all nice because you are here with him right now, but when do you exactly think the next time you're going to see him after this is. You're going to get all hyped up thinking that this is somehow going to bring you even closer, and that he will want to see you more often and then bam, its nine to ten months later and you two still haven't seen each other because this artist wanted him on tour and then the studio booked him when he got back and then this artist needed to do private sessions and this or that band needed his help with live gigs at bars around town. Enjoy this moment in time, and then get worried if something actually does happen. At least Xavier will be there to fill the nights in between.

That is so not right, but God is it ever true. Besides it's not like either of those two have asked to see me and only me. Or is that what X was trying to get at the other night? Oops. Oh well. Have to deal with that later.

As I looked into his eyes, my mind went blank; the peaceful feeling he gives me swept over me and all I could think about was how good it was to be in his arms. "Good night Visean. I am really tired and I really do need to get some sleep."

"I know baby. Go ahead and get undressed, I'll be back to tuck you in. The bathroom is down on the left. I'll be in my room talking to my mom if you need me."

"Alright. Good night."

As he walked out of the room, I almost wanted to stop him and tell him how much I love him. What would be the point? He already knows. I already know. And if I keep pushing it, it will be just that much harder to get over when in nine months from now I still won't have seen him.

I unpacked and got into my silk over sized pajama's I got from *Victoria's Secret*. I decided that these would be appropriate enough to wear without any complications being brought to the household. I definitely needed to wash my hair tomorrow. Here I was on the East coast, the very best of braiding shops were out this way and I can't even get the nerve up to get my hair done. Wonder if Visean likes braids anyway. Well I know one thing for sure, after a night in bed with him my hair wouldn't look bad. Ha.

I walked down to the bathroom, washed up, and headed back down the hallway. Visean and his mom were in his room laughing. It's so peaceful here. Weird. Quiet to. How am I supposed to sleep without the noise of the city and my Chicago wind to put me to sleep? I returned to my room and turned out the light.

A half hour went by and I still couldn't sleep. I love futons but I am just too nervous or something. I should have brought my natural sleeping pills with me. The door cracked open and in walked Visean. "Told you I'd be in to tuck you in."

He was in his blue silk boxers, dag this man is way too sexy to be approaching me in those in his parent's house. I am only a damn woman, how am I going to resist all that walking my way? He pulled the covers down, scooted me over, lay down next to me, and held me in his arms. "As tough as it is to be this near you, I am here to hold you until you fall asleep."

"Thank you Visean. I love you."

"I love you too baby, now go to sleep."

As I let out a deep sigh and felt his chest against my head, all I could do is feel the peace that surrounded us. Don't ever let me go Visean. Don't ever let me go.

♂ family ♀

I woke up alone. Well, I had to expect that he would have to return to his room sometime last night. It felt so good to fall asleep in his arms. I never really thought about it until now, he just held me until I fell asleep. He didn't even try anything. He didn't try to tease me, he just held me. Damn, there is a lot that can be said for that.

Some of my friends swear that our whole relationship is based off sex. They claim that we don't see each other, we get together, sex each other, and leave; how could there be anything bad about the relationship? It was great sex and nothing else to deal with. I always told them they were wrong. I mean please, how many cities does this man go to and have friends in, or how he says it, *friends* in? Yet, he still calls me when he can, brings me out to see him, and now I am sitting in his parents' home. I don't see how, after this, they can say that this is all still based on sex. If it was, that man would have no respect for his parent's home. He'd just be trying to get at me. He wouldn't have come in here and held me until I fell asleep last night and then leave without trying to get some if it was all about sex. I am so glad to know that all the times I stuck up for us that I was right.

What time is it anyway? Knowing Visean his ass is still asleep. Wonder if his dad can wake him up any easier than I can? That man was not kidding when he said that I can bring him back from the dead. He just sleeps and sleeps and sleeps. He'd sleep for a week straight without getting up if he had the time to. I got up from the bed, put my robe on, and walked down to his room. The door was open and Visean was gone. Great, my first day in this house and I get to play hide and seek with the man. I walked down to the

bathroom but he wasn't in there either which wasn't surprising since his room had its own private bath.

After taking care of business, I decided to head downstairs or should I? I mean, would it be rude if I headed straight into the shower without seeing who is up first? Or should I go around see who is up and say hello? Maybe Visean is downstairs having breakfast? Wait, did I just say that? Yea right.

I looked in the mirror and ouch my hair needs attention. Okay, it definitely has to be washed. I guess I could put it into a braid for now. Braid or not to braid; that is the question.

Girl I don't know what you are so afraid of. I mean damn, what would your job really do to you? As long as they look professional, you shouldn't have any problems. You are out on the East Coast, so it ain't like you're going to have some ghetto job done. And with the week you have coming up after this little get away, girl please, go get your hair braided.

Okay, first of all, just because I decide to put my hair into braids doesn't mean I am going to be able to get an appointment. I mean, look at the waiting periods when I called around Chicago when I had the notion to braid my hair before; it was a month or so before I could get in. Well on the other hand, maybe his mom knows somebody that could do it from there home for a little extra cash this weekend. Hmm, dare I ask? Would that be rude or a compliment to say that I like her goddess braid so much that I was thinking of having my hair done while I was out this way? What I should really do is wait to see what they have planned for me today, since it looks like it may be just me and Clarice. Or me, Clarice and Alex?

Okay, let's not go there. Alex is nice and all okay but last night I was nervous and I am sure that I was so nervous I was not reading everyone correctly. Plus, I was expecting the worst to be surprised by the best; if that makes any sense.

I made sure that my pajama top was buttoned up and my robe tightly tied around my waist before I headed downstairs. On my way down I stopped to get a closer look at some of the pictures on the wall.

"Visean was so skinny back then wasn't he?"

Oh my God! It's her...breathe. Exhale. Now go. "I never even knew that he could be that weight. I just thought he was naturally his size. I haven't seen that much of a weight change in the entire time I have known him."

"Well Visean has done some things in his past that we aren't very proud of that have caused that weight change."

"Yes I know, he has confided in me about some of his past dealings that weren't so glamorous. So is Visean here? I checked his room but he wasn't in there."

"No, he and his father left early this morning. So how did you sleep?"

"Very good, I love futons, they are so comfortable to sleep on."

"Sean and I have a regular mattress in our room; Visean is the one who really likes the futons to sleep on. Since they're so inexpensive and practical we decided to get one for the guest room also."

"I enjoy them because you can change the covers on them to change the style in your home. It is so much easier and less expensive than buying new furniture every time you want a change of atmosphere."

"Sounds like you change your mind a lot about the way things should be."

"Well, um, some things yea. While I am no interior decorator, I do like to keep up on the trends, so the futons are practical for me. I've promised myself since I was a kid that I would always keep current and not grow..."

Oh jeez, old. Mercedes, I know you were not about to say "old." Girl, are you out your damn mind?

"Not grow what dear?"

Cover your ass Mercedes, "Not grow into a person who doesn't accept new things in life and who is afraid to try them out." Okay please don't let me have a cheesy grin on my face.

"I thought last night you and I agreed that you wouldn't be nervous while you were here."

Busted! "I'm sorry, uh, I am trying not to be, well at least I think I am." Hopefully that came out sounding innocent.

"Well why? I am not out to get you. In fact, neither of us is out to get you. If I didn't like you, I wouldn't have Visean invite you into our home for the weekend. Honestly, I'd hope that we would get to know each other better this weekend. We always have such good conversations on the phone; I thought it would be even better face to face."

"You're right and I do apologize. It is just that every time Visean introduces me to his friends out on the road, and in no way am I saying that I thought I would have the same experience here, they just look at me and stick their noses up at me. Like I am not good enough or just act like I am one of Visean's, I don't know groupies or something. It can be very hard."

"Honey you have to understand that those people that claim to be my son's friends and claim to be looking out for his best interests are really looking out for themselves. Now I know they are not all that way, he has some very nice friends who keep in touch with me and he has those friends who want nothing more than something from him. Don't you worry; Visean will put them in their place if they act up on you."

She wasn't lying there; he did stick up to Dymond that night. "You're right. One night, at an after party, a female rudely approached me starting a scene which he quickly ended."

"Her name wasn't Dymond was it?"

"Oh Lord, please don't tell me she had the nerve to create trouble with you."

"Girl that woman doesn't have the good sense God gave her. She has called here a few times, but I quickly put an end to that when he told me who she was and that she was in no way a friend of his."

"Well just for the record, I am nothing like that."

With raised eyebrows she said to me, "You don't think I know that already?"

I just smiled at her, "Yea, I already know that."

"Good. Now tell me where do you live in Chicago and move over so I can sit down."

"Here on the stairs? Wouldn't you like to move somewhere else?"

"No, here is fine, this is where the beginning of the pictures are at anyway. So answer my question where do you live in Chicago?"

This is good. This is better than good and this is scary. She is so relaxed with me. What is she up to? She isn't looking to settle Visean down with somebody is she? Is she just really this friendly, God I hope so. "Well I live on the Gold Coast of Chicago. I love it. I have a view of both the city and Lake Michigan. It's beautiful at night to watch the lights burn in the city and the boats pass by. It was a little rough falling asleep last night because it is so quiet here; I almost forgot what that was like."

"A city girl huh?"

"Yep. Ever since I was little I wanted to live along Lake Michigan. The people, the wind, the view, the rush, the whole culture is what attracted me. I swore that I would make enough money so that one day I could live down there comfortably. I met my goal."

"Do you set a lot of goals for yourself?"

God please don't let this be going where I think it is going. Visean is not a goal; he is a blessing. "Yes ma'am I do. I think it is a very important part when trying to grow as a person. You have to visualize where

you want to be and set your mind and your goals to get you there."

With slit eyes, a smile and arms folded she came in with the killer question, "So what do you think of Visean and your relationship? Where do you see that going?"

Breathe! C'mon inhale, now exhale; now relax. "I thought you said you weren't out to make me nervous."

"I am not, but I am his mother and I would like to know."

"You and my mom should get together because she asks the same question about us."

"And what answer do you give her?"

I just started laughing, skip it, here we go. What in the hell do I have to lose anyway? "The answer that I give to my mom is that I would love to know myself where Visean and I are going. The reason behind that answer is simply because he and I never have the time to fully discuss an answer to that question. In fact, I tried to corner him with it on our way here and his reply was that our future is always open for discussion."

"Sounds like my son, he never did like to give a straight answer. So I'll try and get one out of you, what do you want to see in your future?"

"Quite frankly, I've been married and he has been married and from the conversations we do have on that subject, neither one of us is looking for a spouse."

"Looks like I am going to have to tell you the way I told Visean, marriage is wonderful when you are married to the right person. That person is the person that God has meant for you to be with. Until that happens, everything else will lead up to it leaving a sour taste in your mouth so that you will know what sweetness really tastes like and you won't ever want to let go of that."

"Did you find that with Mr. Scott?"

"Now what kind of question is that?"

"Please don't take this the wrong way, but I've seen so many families, so many kids from one parents homes and then there are those, the kids that came from homes that the parents stuck it out for the sake of the children and from what I have seen, those are the children that don't know how to love. Visean knows how to love, so I know that is not the case, but how did you recognize that sweetness? How did you know Mr. Scott was the one?"

"Honey you just know."

"You sound like my mom. Which of course is good, but I was never comfortable with all the legal constrictions that marriage puts on a woman."

"Like what?"

"You are no longer, Mercedes Dominace to a company when you go to do things. You are Mercedes so and so, where is your husband? The man of the house is the determining factor in purchases, credit, banking, etc. I mean, women have come a long way, but men were never too concerned about how far we could go because they knew what was still in place to keep us where they want us. There are still glass ceilings for me to crash through at work and I am single."

"You young people, always trying to break through those glass ceilings. That is good, I am not saying it is bad, but you have to learn you're not fighting alone. God is on your side and a good man will be too. I know Visean has fought some battles before for those he has really cared about, he'll help you too, just ask. My son is looking for an equal, a fighter, someone who doesn't need him around all the time, needing and wanting for everything, he has no time for that type of woman."

"Funny, he happened to mention that on the way over here. He said that I am the only one that has stuck around. Is that true?" Let's see if mom is going to

stay out of her son's business or if she is honestly concerned about our relationship.

"All I can say, and this is the truth and I have no reason to lie to you, is that he has not stopped talking about you since day one. So I know you must be someone special. He is always concerned about you and constantly regrets not being there when he should have been. Now if there is anyone else, because you know he has many friends around the world, they must not be as special as you because I only hear a sound bite about them and a whole book about you."

She's on my side, hmm. "Mrs. Scott, I mean Clarice. I just want you to know that Visean has been a blessing in my life and I don't ever intend to do anything to hurt him."

Okay, I just said that to his mother. I've got to be kidding myself.

Mercedes who knows what the future brings. You have been honest until the X incident.

Incident? I am sure X would love to hear that I think of our night, our first night together, as an incident.

Just let things go and see what happens.

"Well that is good. I am always afraid Visean is going to bring home one of those road women. Someone who could give a damn less about him, only his career and the benefits she can reap from it, like that Dymond girl." *Well if that is all she is trying to compare me with I've got no problems at all.* "But I must admit you're different, like I said he hasn't stopped talking about you since the day he met you. He always talks about how he wishes he could do more for you, even though you probably wouldn't let him."

"Visean knows that I am a very independent woman. I need an equal, not a part in the person I am with."

"Well then it sounds like I better give you a chance, because my son can flow, but he also sets goals like

you do and as you can see from what he has accomplished, there is no stopping him."

God I wish I could let out this deep sigh of relief but I can't look totally frightened. She extended her hand out to me and asked, "You drink coffee? Or are you into that modern fad coffee thing all these young city people are into?"

"Can't have it. I can only drink decaffeinated. All that special coffee house coffee stuff has caffeine and I'm too afraid to even try it without; I would be bouncing off the walls like an eight year old on a sugar high."

"Now that would be a sight to see. C'mon, I think I have some coffee you can drink somewhere in that kitchen of mine. Are you hungry?"

"Yes. Believe it or not I do eat, Visean just claims that I don't."

"As little as you are, I wouldn't believe it either."

Well she didn't waste much time getting down to ground zero with me did she? I wasn't lying to her to save my face. I don't know what the future holds for Visean and I and the last time I tried to plan my future with Marcel, boy was I in for a rude awakening. So from that point on I learned there were certain things in my future that were best left up to the man up above. Although I know my experience was to be learned from. I learned how strong I really was inside and that I'm damn independent for a needy no good man...oops there I go again with the negative energy. It is just so easy when I think back to that jerk. Unh! One thing I can definitely say from hindsight, my ex-husband was a loser, with a capital L! Ladies, take your hand, make an L with your fingers, place it on your forehead, and say it with me, "Loser!" Never again.

If it wasn't for someone like Visean, I wouldn't know how it feels to be truly loved by someone, who will still let you be your own person without tearing your ass

down. Such a rare find, but he doesn't have time, God even his mom even knows that.

"Here we go. Will this coffee work for you or would you like some juice?"

"Juice would actually be better, more vitamins."

"Good point. So, Visean really hasn't told me much about you. Like I said he mentions you all the time, and when we have had the opportunity to talk we weren't able to get a good conversation going due to the limited time we had to spend on the phone. So if you wouldn't mind, I really like to learn more about you. Tell me about yourself and don't worry about me trying to judge you, that's the Lord's responsibility."

Thank you Lord for that. Take a deep breath, relax, and go through this like an interview, you can do it, just be yourself. "Okay. Let's see. You already know what I do for a living, where I live, and the type of lifestyle I like, meaning I like the city life. Both of my parents live in the suburbs of Chicago, they've been married forever and a day, which is an inspiration to me, even though I am divorced."

"Now I am not going to go back on the subject of marriage not being the most horrible experience and way to live your life, but I would like to know what sour taste got in your mouth."

"Basically the man left me for his car."

"Excuse me?"

"Yep." I said laughing. "The man who I thought would love me forever turned out to love his car more than his wife. I have heard of men in love with their cars before but this man was way in love. He told me that the car didn't want things from him and all this nonsense. Besides all of that, he was a very abusive man. Not physically, but he was always trying to tear me down mentally. I fought really hard to break free of that, even after the divorce."

"Looks like you've made it."

"Yes with a lot of therapy for my soul. I refused to take the medications, there were times, but Visean stood strong and told me no way. Like I said your son has been a real blessing in my life."

"And like I told you, Visean will help fight when he really cares for someone."

"Agreed." Yea, he'll fight, when he is around.

Mercedes, you know you do not need that man around 24/7, so quit trippin. I mean, what are you going to do when you get back and have to deal with X 24/7. Can you? Will you? Do you want to? A real relationship and it won't be long before X starts thinking you to should step it up a notch and move in together or something.

Okay, let's do myself a favor and not think that far ahead, I have still have this weekend and this trip to deal with.

"Well Visean's divorce story isn't that much different. His wife deceived him into believing that she could change who she really was. People don't change, only when something comes along in their life to make them want to change, and unfortunately my son wasn't it for her and then it was to late for her."

"He never told me what happened; he is just so turned off by marriage, I thought maybe that is why he likes me so much."

"Well Visean doesn't talk about it too much. He just tells people it didn't work, but I will tell you this, he was committed to her, never cheated once and you know in his line of business that's not hard to do. So what I want to tell you is that if my son says he is serious about you and that there is no one else, believe him because there won't be."

"Thank you, I'll remember that."

"Now, the men will be out most of the day. You know every time he comes home they disappear and come home with nothing to show what they've done all day. One time I'm going to follow them, just to see

what they do all day. So with them gone, I figured we could get into some trouble of our own, so we are going shopping."

"Always sounds good to me. I'll just go take a shower and figure out something to do with this hair of mine."

"Ever thought of braiding it?"

"Ha. How did you know I was thinking about that?"

"Actually I didn't, I was just wondering."

"I've thought about it but I don't know how my office would react to me wearing them because I meet with clients."

"Well there are many styles of braids that I am sure are office appropriate. I have the perfect style for you, I'll go get the magazine and show you the picture."

I can't believe this; Visean will freak when he hears how good we are getting along. No he won't. He already knew this. He'll just say I told you so and that I should have believed him. Another reason he can point out how true it is that I worry too damn much. Joy.

I wonder what his dad and he are up to today. Hope he didn't wake up too early; hate to think of him running around on such little sleep. Wait I am talking about Visean right? Ha, he'll be fine. I wonder what kind of surprise he has planned for us Monday. Hmm, well it will be good not to be sleeping alone.

Oh like you were sleeping alone before this little trip.

Okay time to stop with the guilty conscious; I mean men pull this all the time so why should you start to have one now?

Because I should be better than a male pulling this, I shouldn't be trying to pull this at all. Has either one asked for a commitment yet?

No.

Then relax.

"Here is the picture honey. What do you think?"

things men do, women do the same

"Wow, those are beautiful, very professional looking to. I like the fact that they can be put up. "

"Yes this type of braid is very easy to tie up into different styles. You know, my stylist might have some time if you'd like to get yours done."

"As much as I would love to say yes, I'd rather spend my time here getting to know everyone. Visean mentioned that we are going somewhere on Monday and I'd hate to push things."

"Okay, then take this with you and maybe one of those stylists in Chicago can do your hair for you."

"Thank you. Well I better get showered and dressed so we can get on with some serious shopping."

"Yes it will be some serious shopping today, Visean left something for you on the counter, why don't you take a look."

As I walked up to the counter, I saw the envelope with my name on it. I opened it and there was \$500 with a note:

Mercedes,

I know your independent azz is going to be upset when you see this but just hold off with your cursing so my mom doesn't hear it. I want you to take this and shop for something very special and very beautiful for our upcoming get away. Don't even think about paying me back!

Now go!!!!

Love, Visean

GRRRR...here I am trying to prove that I am not some low life gold digger hootchie momma and he goes and does this. Thanks a lot Visean!

Okay, Clarice is staring at me, damn. "Uh, did he tell you he was leaving this for me?"

"Yes he did and he told me that I better make sure you spend it today."

"Look, Clarice...."

"No, not another word. No go upstairs and get showered and dressed so we can hit the stores."

"So you're okay with this?"

"My son is his own man, I trust what he does. So get going so we can get back before those two old fools get back."

"Okay, I just need to check my messages."

"Sure honey, I'll just go upstairs and finish getting ready."

I don't believe this. Not for one minute am I going to believe this. Great two new messages, one is probably Ori cussing me out for being here.

"Hey girl this is X, why is your cell phone turned off? I've been trying you since Friday afternoon. Where did you go again?" *Oh no.* "Well where ever you are at get back soon so that we can continue what we started." *Joy.*

Continue what we started, great. Sure start something here, start something there, no problem. Please, when will anyone ever finish something with me anyway?

"Mercedes, this is mom, are you home?" *No, I told you that.* "Oh that's right you're out of town with your musician friend. Alright, give me a call when you get back so that I know you're okay." *What do you think he is going to do to me, I told you I was meeting his family.* "Love you."

I walked upstairs to get ready, smiling at Visean's pictures. Then X's voice started in my head. Continue what we started, what about what I am starting here? What am I starting here?

Girl don't start this trip, I mean his mom has been very positive so there are no problems right. She didn't

even have a problem with him leaving you all that money.

Wonder what he wants me to buy that is all that special anyway. What is he planning? And how in the world am I supposed to buy something sexy with his mother there? I mean, am I supposed to walk into some lingerie shop and buy something kinky and sexy and ask his mom what she thinks? Hello!

Okay maybe Victoria's, they have some very nice things that are sensual and not embarrassing. Yea, this is good, I walk around the house in these oversized non-offensive silk pajamas, and then walk into Victoria's, with his mother behind me and pick up some little slinky number. There has to be a way around this.

I showered, I dressed, I walked downstairs, and there was Alex, waiting to go shopping with us. Wonderful.

Mercedes, stop.

"Hey Alex, how are you?" Positive energy, even though she gives off so much negative energy or maybe that is just me reading it wrong.

"Fine. You look like you are ready to shop. I heard Visean left you with some ammunition for today."

Wonderful, she knows. "Yes he did, even though he knows he is in trouble for it."

"I'm sure."

You had better be you little...positive, smile, Mercedes. "Clarice ready yet?"

"I'm right here." Walking in from the kitchen, she looked at the two of us sensing the tension. "I asked Alex her mother to join us today. Lauren couldn't make it but will join us for dinner tonight. You girls ready?"

"Lets go." Why do I feel like I am being teamed up on? Okay, calm yourself. What you should be concentrating on is how to make this trip as short as possible so that you can get back here and get some work done. Otherwise the week from hell that you tried so hard to avoid when you got back will become a strong reality. If Monday is going to be a special day

for you and Visean, then you can count out getting any work done at all. And since you took an afternoon flight back to Chicago and don't get in until the evening, you won't have much time to get anything done then either. In addition, that message said that X is awaiting your arrival to continue what was started which means he is not going to let up on you either. Damn, here I am off in my own little world again and there they are walking out the door.

"Mercedes are you coming?"

"Oh, uh, yea I just forgot the present Visean left for me this morning on the counter. I'll be right there." I can't believe that he left me this. Monday, when we are alone, I am going to kill him. For now, smile, pick up the envelope, and walk towards the door and try to remain conscious the rest of the day.

♂ excuse me ♀

Man am I going to kill Visean when he walks his oversized, overgrown butt back into this house and comes to me with that baby crap. I was so nicely informed today by his mother, and oh so lovely cousin, that dinner will not only include his aunt and cousin, but also his two best friends and their wives. No wait. Okay. You haven't heard the best part yet, also the good Reverend Lovely. Kill me! What in the hell have I gotten myself into?

I've been framed, set up, and I don't even understand why. This was supposed to be this simple little trip, I see him perform in California, I come out here and meet his family, maybe a few friends, try and get some work done, and then boom, I am back home. But no, that is not what is happening is it?

No, instead I come out here to find out he has some little getaway on top of this getaway planned. Then his family throws in that there is a dinner planned for him, us, whatever, which includes a Reverend named Lovely? The man is not proposing to me! We aren't even a real couple by anyone's terms and we are having a dinner party, or rather they are having a dinner party at an exclusive restaurant for us, not him, us, tonight! Do you even want to know the reason I was given when I so politely asked what the occasion was to bring so many people together for dinner? Do you!

Clarice just looked at me and smiled, that mothers smile, that *I know something you don't* mothers smile, while Alex just tilted her head to the side and gave the disapproving *I don't believe it either* look. Clarice said, "It is just so rare to have Visean in town that we really wanted everyone to see him together in one nice gathering. Now, let's keep looking for that special

outfit. Oh, look at that shop over there; it has your name written all over it."

I need Ori. I need to talk to Ori. I need to kill Ori for not stopping me from coming here. Some friend she is. What I need to figure out is what is going to happen tonight and I need her input. Forget Miranda, she'd never get it anyway. She'd be all excited talkin about how Visean is going to marry me and take me away from Chicago to Minneapolis and buy me a house and how I'll want to have kids with him...stop!

God, Mercedes stop. Relax, release, and breathe. Breathe! Breathe!!!

Okay, I'm breathing. I'm breathing. I'm breathing. I'm walking; I am walking a hole into this carpet.

Chile just slow down.

Slow down? The Reverend is going to be there and I want to slow down? I need to run. I can't call Ori, cause if anyone hears me going off over the phone, its over. It is so over.

Mercedes, think. Visean doesn't want to remarry does he?

No.

He hasn't even brought up you two moving in together has he?

No.

Okay, so whatever he and his mother schemed up and his cousin doesn't approve of can't be all that bad, can it?

No.

Okay. Now breathe, relax, and get ready. And you are not going to kill him. Instead you're going to open your mind, let in positive energy, rid yourself of any worry or doubt and look forward to an enjoyable, sociable evening.

Pray for me people. Seriously, pray!

All in all today wasn't all that bad. They have great shops around here and I was able to find something very special for tonight and Monday night. *Victoria's*

Secret did have something sensual and very okay to buy in front of his mother. This little two-piece gray silk with soft floral dark gray print pajama set was perfect. I bought a lovely suit and dress from one boutique, and if you can believe it, I even found shoes to match both.

I thought they were going to lose it when I had us stop in the sports store so I could pick up a baseball short set. Nothing to do with the weekend of course, I had to have it and I paid for it myself. I also picked up a basketball jersey for Visean. Why I don't know, he'll only lose it in some hotel somewhere. All the same, I love knowing he'll be wearing it. Pathetic of me, but oh well.

Speaking of which, when we walked out of the sports store we ran into one of Visean's old girlfriends.

"Clarice, is that you? Hey Alex, how you doing?"

Okay, Alex hates me, well alright may not hate, but she was all so friendly with whoever this woman was because her body language changed significantly.

Clarice hugged this woman and said, "Daunice, is that you? Hey girl how you been?"

"Good. How is Visean? Is he finally in town?"

"Yes, in fact he brought someone with him whom I'd like you to meet. Daunice, this is Mercedes. Mercedes, this is Daunice an old friend of Visean's."

"Hello very nice to meet you." I once again stuck out my hand and there was the same damn look every single one of friends or how he says it, *friend's*, gives to me. Is anybody else noticing this? Hello. Look here it is. What's the deal? Women, ugh!

"Hello."

Well at least she shook my hand.

All of a sudden, Alex was full of words, "Mercedes is from Chicago. Visean brought her out here to introduce her to the family. She'll be here till Tuesday."

Thank you Alex, just incase the woman needs to know my bio should I just tell it all now or should I email it to her later?

"Well how nice. So how long have you known Visean?"

See; please let someone see it, the folded arms, the slit eyes, the thrown out hip, and the hidden sarcasm in the voice. Stay peaceful, "Visean and I have been dating quite a few years. Its' been a long distance relationship, but we manage."

"Well Visean does know how to manage things."

Okay, that is enough for me. Let's go!

Clarice must have sensed what I could see and ended the conversation. "Well we have a special dinner tonight and we have some shopping left to do. It was nice to see you again."

"Tell Visean when he is in town next time and not so busy to give me a call. My number hasn't changed, I am sure he'll remember it."

"Well I will, but you know my son, he keeps busy."

What was that? No, wait. C'mon, where is the instant replay camera when you are so badly in need of one. Did Clarice just stick up for me? Yes! Yes, she did. That serves that Dawn or whatever her name is right for being like that to me and saying something like that to me. Ha! Tell him to call me when he is not so busy, well she told you now didn't she.

Let me tell you, I had to hold my smile in then, but now I don't have to now, ha!

"What's that cheesy grin all about?"

"Hey you. You just get in?"

"Mmm-hmm." Visean walked over and gave me a big hug and kiss. Damn I love being in this man's arms.

"You know you're in trouble don't you?"

"Trouble? Ain't no such thing girl."

"Oh I beg to differ."

"And what is it that I did now?"

"You know what you did."

"Must be that memory thang again, cause I haven't a clue to what you're talkin' about."

"Chile don't play that memory loss thing with me, I felt very uncomfortable taking that money from you in front of your mother today and let's not even go there with Alex finding out about it."

"Money, what money?"

"Five hundred dollars and you got the nerve to ask what money?"

"Five hundred dollars? I gave to you, five hundred dollars."

"Don't...."

"Did you know that I was looking through my wallet this afternoon, while Pops and I were out, and noticed that five hundred dollars was missing out of my wallet."

"Like you...."

"No wait, and here you are telling me. You're telling me right. No wait, accusing me right?"

"Right."

"That I left you five hundred dollars today to go shopping."

"Yes."

"I got to go use the phone."

"Why?"

"Cause you a thief girl. Taking money out of man's wallet like that and in his parents home, have you no shame?"

"What? Chile I have the note...."

"Um-huh." He grabbed me and started kissing my neck. "You little thief you, you know what I should do to you."

No but my body sure does. Dayum, why can't we be somewhere else? Umph!

"See there you go, going limp in my arms again being all sexy take me and stuff. Don't you know we are in my parents' house, better get off me."

"But you grabbed me."

"So, that ain't got nothin' to do with it. So did you do what I told you to do today?"

"Yes."

"Um, can't wait to see what you bought."

Watch this. "Wanna see?"

"Yea, let me see what you think is in style."

"What I think is in style? Are you trying to insinuate that I have no style or something?"

Nothing. "Visean. Hello? Oh I see how it is, just stand there with that stupid smile then; we'll see how special Monday night is for you."

"Girl, just take off your clothes and stand there naked and you are in style enough for me."

"Nice try at a recovery, but the penalty flag was already thrown."

"Well I am sure I can find a way to persuade the umpire in some kind of way."

"Umpire is baseball dear, they don't use flags. Penalty flags are thrown by referees."

"I knew that."

"Un-huh, the price will be high but I am sure you can handle it."

"See you need to stop. Now show me what you bought."

"Well first of all I bought you this."

"No. Wait. Were you supposed to buy for me? No, you were not supposed to buy for me. You see, if I had wanted something, I would have taken my money, which became your money to spend on yourself, and bought something for myself therefore keeping the money as my money. Did you not know that."

"Yes I know that. That is why I bought it with my money and not your money."

"Did I tell you to buy me something? Did I ask you to buy me something?"

"Visean, do you like it or not?"

"Yea, this is sweet. But you know I hate this team don't you."

"Excuse me? Hate a Chi Town team? Okay, I am going now."

"Girl get over here, I love it. In fact, I love it so much I am not even going to wear it on the road so I don't leave it in some hotel."

"Good. After I bought that we ran into an old girlfriend of yours."

"Oh yea, who?"

"Dawn, Dawnie, Daunice or something."

"Daunice. How she doin'?"

"Fine, she talked to your mom mostly."

"Did my mom introduce you?"

"Yes."

"Good."

"Un-huh sure."

"Woman, don't start with me. That girl ain't about nothin, she like that Dymond girl except with a little more class maybe. I ain't got no time for her. Hopefully my moms remembered that."

"Yes she did. When Dawn or whatever tried to ask your mom to call when I wasn't with you, your mom politely dismissed her."

"See and you were worried."

"Okay, go ahead and lay the whole thing on me about how much I worry about nothin for nothin and how I should know by now, that after all these years know that you and I are stuck with each other for life, no matter the circumstances, time, or distance between us."

"I see you finally do listen to me."

"I won't ever stop."

"Well maybe you should at some point, cause sooner or later I am bound to say something that will probably screw this whole thing up."

You? Huh, I am the one that already did something to screw this whole thing up. In all fairness, I did sleep with X before this little trip of ours was even planned. I mean, who knew? "For once I may be the one to screw this thing up."

"Chile, you can do no such thing cause you are too sweet."

"Huh, good and evil is more like it."

"Well you just be good and evil mixed together cause all I know is that we have been through hell and we ain't out yet. We got a long way to go."

"Lovely, I'll be really looking forward to it."

"So what did you buy for tonight? You still haven't produced any proof that you have any style yet."

"Well maybe I am not going to show you and just dress and then come downstairs and if you are embarrassed by what I bought to wear, too bad and way too sad for you."

"Woman please. What did you buy for tonight?"

"This." I pulled out the simple black dress that I picked up from the boutique that had my name written all over it.

"Wait. You think that you are going to wear that to dinner tonight?"

"What would be the problem with this? Your mother approved. Even Alex approved, and getting that woman to approve of anything seems damn near impossible."

"Girl I have no problem with it but my question is how did you know what I was wearing tonight because we now match each other."

"Excuse me?"

"Well since I am such a busy man I had to pull one of my stage outfits and bring it with me for tonight. And the outfit I picked out matches the outfit you picked out. So you see...how did we achieve that when we did not know what each other were wearing?"

"Hmm, interesting."

"See baby, you and I, we just belong together."

"Yes we do." I walked up to him, took him in my arms, and planted a very sexy sweet kiss on his lips. My hands began running up and down his back as I moved up to his neck.

"Girl, if you don't stop now, we are going to start doing something that we shouldn't be doing in my mama's house."

"Want to grab a room real quick." Of course I was only kidding.

"Umm, girl, work that thing you do on me where I'd have to say yes but I can't. So get your monkey azz dressed and meet me downstairs."

"Fine, leave me like this." I started to lead his hand between my thighs so he knew exactly what he does to me. I was also just doing it for fun...well maybe not.

"Alright now. Get dressed and we'll take care of that, later."

"Love you Visean. Thank you again for today."

"If I could Mercedes, I would give you a reason to thank me everyday."

Damn.

I got dressed and ready in almost record time. I guess it is easier when you don't have a closet to keep running back to. I walked downstairs in my new dress and all eyes were on me. I scanned the room for Visean, he wasn't there, but everyone else was. As I moved to the last stair, Visean walked up and held out his hand. I exhaled as I felt his hand in mine then he whispered in my ear, "I won't ever let you go."

"See I told you that Visean can't keep his hands off somebody, even in a room full of people."

Gee, I can only wonder who that lovely comment was from. Hmm... Alex maybe? Damn, I am so smart because I am right again. Okay. Don't give her the look of dread because that sister would enjoy it way too much and I am not about to give her that kind of pleasure. I will however give her this; I looked at Alex, turned to Visean and planted a kiss on his cheek. Alex, girl, not even you could screw this up for me and sooner or later, you will find out that I am the one and I am for real. Understand!

"Everybody. Hey is everybody in here?"

Oh no. Why is the man asking if everybody is in here? I mean the only time a man tries to call attention in a room is when he has an announcement of some sort. A major announcement. Oh my....

Mercedes! Stop. Now breathe girl, breathe! Since not everyone in this room has met you he is just going to introduce, so relax.

The room responded with a, "Yeah."

His dad added, "Damn, I know the boy can't hear but I didn't know he was losing his sight to. Must be all those damn stage lights."

Oh my God. Yes people, at this point I still hadn't met his father. I found the voice, saw the face, and started to pray.

"Now Visean get over here and introduce me to this young lady. She been up in this house overnight and I still ain't met her yet."

"Well before I do pops I have an announcement to make."

That's it! Damn!

When I woke up, yes girl I passed the hell out, the whole room was standing around me. I must have fallen against Visean because I wasn't in any kind of pain. Mrs. Scott was over me telling me to wake up, that everything was going to be okay. Mr. Scott was joking around telling the guests that he was such an important man that he overwhelmed me. Visean was holding my hand and my head; "It's okay baby, are you alright? C'mon, baby wake up. There you go, you okay?"

"Huh?"

Mrs. Scott announced I was awake, which is nice because I am so out of it, I have no idea or memory what the hell just happened and I don't know why everybody is around me. I stared into Visean's eyes and remembered "...everybody I have an announcement to make." Do you know I passed right back out?

This time I woke up in Visean's room, laid out on the bed, with a cold cloth on my forehead. Dammit, the dinner reservations.

"Visean."

"Yes baby I am right here. Girl are you okay?"

"Dinner. I am so sorry. Let's go." I tried to rise but felt dizzy again. No, no body, not this time, lay your azz back down.

"Girl don't be trying to pass out on me again. Just lay there. Everybody went on ahead to dinner, we'll go in a few."

"What's the announcement Visean? What were you going to tell everyone?"

"Girl is that what this is about?"

I just shook my head yes and regretted it. C'mon, Mercedes pull your damn self together. Do you think all the guys who have pulled this same b.s. on you have passed out when they did something that was more than they thought they would do.

"Mercedes, the only announcement that I was going to make tonight was that I want to make our relationship more real. I had wanted to do that in front of everyone so that you would know that I was for real. Cause you know when I go back out on the..."

"Wait."

"Was I finished talking yet? I don't remember being finished yet."

"Visean, what do you mean by more real?"

"Well I had planned this before our little conversation here, that is why I told you that our future should always be open for discussion. Remember?"

"Yes."

"Mercedes, I love you and I brought you out here to introduce my family and friends to you so that would know that I am for real about you. In my industry, no one believes you when you say you have met the one, so I brought you out here to do that." *The one?* "The dinner was for them to see that and for me to tell you

that I want to be a larger part of your life in front of everyone so that you know that I am for real."

"So why the good Reverend Lovely, Visean?"

"Girl, if you can't say something to make people believe you in front of one of God's men, then who can you say it in front of."

See Mercedes, the man just loves you and is doing whatever it takes to let you know that this is becoming real.

Becoming real? Real. As in a real relationship? Why now? Why after I slept with X? I mean who do I chose. Earlier it was easy, Visean goes back out on the road, months pass by and then hey, maybe we get together. No commitment, no sweat. Now we are talking about something real, X is talking about something real, and I am talking about not passing out again!

"Visean, honey I need a minute alone. Will that be okay?"

Visean got up, bent over and kissed my forehead, "I love you Mercedes, I just hope I haven't waited to long to do this" and left the room.

Did he wait to long?

Mercedes will you please get real for a moment chile. C'mon, why in the hell are you even trippin over this? Huh? I mean for real, so what Visean wants something more real and will even make his statement about his commitment to the relationship to his family, friends and yes, even the good Reverend. So what! Girl, wake up. Get up and go. Go to the damn dinner, hear the damn announcement and be proud, enjoy and relax, know that you are loved for once. Everything, every instance is nothing but a moment in time anyway. Why not take advantage of this moment in time. It is just a moment, and then you'll go home and see how much of a moment it really was. Cause you know when you get home the reality will come back. The same old routine will restart itself again and you will have the freedom that Visean gives you to do

things men do, women do the same

what you want with, who you want, as long as you don't bring it to his face.

Could I be wrong this time? Well, only one way to find out.

♂ dinner ♀

On the way to the restaurant Visean had the radio low, my window cracked, and kept checking my forehead every few minutes like I was some child with a fever. Well damn, why shouldn't he? I acted like one. I mean passing out. Really, what is up with that? For all I knew the next words out of his mouth were, "Everybody, I would like you to meet Mercedes. Mercedes this is everybody and you can mix and mingle on your own to find out exactly who they are because I don't have that good of a memory to be telling you who exactly everyone is."

Visean would have probably had the room cracking up with a million of his jokes and stories while his father would have introduced himself to me with a similar warm welcome like his mother did. Instead of finding out, what did I do? I pass out like an over anxious desperate wanna be sumthin bride on some sorry azz excuse for a reality TV show, "Marry me now, in front of a million people, or it is over." Do not even let me get near started on my soapbox about that degradation of not only women but the holy union of marriage. By now you all know I am not about marriage, so you know it really must bother me down deep to speak up about it.

We pulled into the parking lot of a very quaint and private looking restaurant, "This is nice Visean; I can't wait to see the inside."

"Girl this place has been hidden away for years. The romance set up in this joint is off the hook. Now I could see your monkey azz passing out if we were coming here alone but with all the family and friends I have with me tonight, you would think that you wouldn't jump the gun about something that obviously scares the living hell out of you!"

"I am sorry Visean."

"Mercedes." He turned my face towards his and spoke to me while holding it so gently, "Why does it scare the hell out of you?"

"I am scared that this is real for now, but will be nothing but a moment in time later on. Just like everything else in life."

"A moment in time huh?"

Damn, I said it. I meant it. I have to face it. "Yes Visean, a moment in time. That is my fear."

"So what do I need to do to prove that fear is empty?"

"Don't ever let me go. Not even for a moment in time. No disappearing acts. No excuses. Just love me and don't ever let me go."

"I love you Mercedes, but I don't know if I can do that yet."

"Then you must understand where I am coming from?"

"Not exactly, but I am still going to try and make you believe in me."

"It isn't that I don't believe in you Visean. It is just that..."

"It is just that every time we get to spend a few days together it is months until the next. That is why I understand when you are out dating all these other dudes that be chasing you all the time. I have a list of them, would you like for me to read you their names?"

"No Visean, I don't want you to read the list of names. I don't want you to have any of their names. Most days I wish only one name existed and then other days I wish no names existed on that list."

"I know."

"One step at a time, right?"

"Yea, but I am still out to prove that one step at a time doesn't equal your theory of a moment in time."

Damn, I never thought of it like that.

We walked into the restaurant and were met by a tall elegant blonde hostess who directed us to a very private room where our party was awaiting our arrival. They must have filled her in because she asked how I was doing with a look of concern on her face.

The restaurant was immaculate and antique. The walls were a deep mahogany with candles lit everywhere. The tables were small, with elegant antique chairs. The fireplace majestic, like the one that may have been in the houses of the wealthy in the early 20th century, and a quartet played quietly in the far right corner to fill the air with music. The private room was lead into by two French doors; the table was set like the Queen of England herself was going to join us for dinner with her court set around her.

Visean was right, had I seen all this and it only being him and myself, then yes my passing out would have been understood, but with the family there, it was more of a celebration of things yet to come. If I let them come, which knowing me, I won't.

Visean's mother, father and a new woman quickly approached me, "Mercedes, are you okay?"

"I cannot believe I passed out. I am so sorry especially because you and I haven't even been introduced yet."

"Pops this is Mercedes, and Mercedes this is pops."

"Is it okay to be introduced this time? Are you feeling well enough? Meeting me is rather overpowering."

Now I know where Visean gets his ability to make me smile, "I am so very sorry. I just thought...then I passed out."

"And exactly what was it young lady that my son had you thinking?"

"C'mon pops you know better to ask a question like that, unless you've figured out a way to read a woman's mind. Man let me in on that joint cause I could sure use it."

"Visean, your father doesn't have a clue how to read anybody's mind, let alone his own. Mercedes I would also like for you to meet my sister Lauren, Alexandra's mother."

"Hi, it is so nice to finally meet you."

She opened her arms and gave me a hug and softly said, "It's going to be fine, Visean is a good man and we're not all that scary."

I looked at her with a soft smile on my face to express my gratitude for understanding.

Mr. Scott came back in and said, "That is okay, it must have been something good. After all, it ain't all Springer up in my house. Now back in the day when Visean was younger and just starting to get popular..."

"Sean, don't tell her that. Come on dear, sit, we have a lot of introductions to get through."

I saw Mr. Scott give Visean that look of *we are going to talk later son, no matter if you like it or not*. Visean must have avoided the topic of me while they were out. Wonder where they went?

We walked towards the table and Clarice called the attention of everyone present. "Everyone, this is Mercedes, the young lady we've been waiting for." The table responded with smiles and hellos.

First I was introduced to the good Reverend Lovely who was already on his second glass of Scotch according to the empty glass that was already at the table. Okay this is the man of God I was so freaked out about? "Young lady, are you okay?"

"Just overwhelmed I guess. I didn't know this weekend was going to include all this. I am just taken by surprise."

"Well as long as I have known Visean you should get used to it. The man does not know how to give all the details. I've learned to just to go with the flow, cause with him, you don't know if you are going with the flow of the river or the current of the ocean."

I just smiled at the man talking not knowing who the hell he was.

The lady next to him chimed in next, "By the way, I am Victoria and the man who just spoke without introducing himself first is my husband Tommy."

"Thank you, nice to meet you both."

Tommy just blushed and said, "Oops sorry."

Victoria added, "You're welcome and don't let this fool sitting next to me fool you, he is no better girl. This man, this man, this man."

"How long have you been married?"

In unison they answered, "Too long."

Scare me, but if you aren't happy then why not divorce.

Hello! Mercedes quit it, that was cute how they answered that, now stop being evil.

"Okay Tommy, you say that and I say that but the truth be known we couldn't live without one another."

See Mercedes.

"I know that's right. These two here, are as rare as it gets when it comes to Black love. Seems like nobody can even try and stay together anymore. He got money, she got money, the lawyer gets the money, and the two are just able to walk away." As she spoke she looked around the table at all couples, like a reminder to us all that love in and of itself is the only thing that carries us through. "Hi Mercedes, I'm Janessea."

I in return stated, "Nice to meet you and Black love isn't the only love that is suffering these days, all races fall under that category."

Oh Lord, here comes that challenged look and I don't even know her. What did I start now? "I don't entirely agree with that. Yes all races are getting hit hard by this fast paced, want you now, leave you later society, but Black love has been on the extinct list more than once. Every time we get it off the list we somehow get put it back on. With the increasing

number of brothers in jail, drug dealing, joining gangs, trying to beat Magic Johnson's bedroom record, it's a losing battle. And dare I venture to say that the biggest factor of putting it back on the extinct list, no offense to Visean, is our music. Why is it that White folks can sing bubble gum wrapper songs and have tons of fame and fortune thrown at them...."

Alexandra interrupted, "Lets not even get into the current Barbie and Ken doll syndrome the industry is going through right now."

"Amen to that, pull my string, hear me sing." I voiced in.

Janessea continued, "Exactly. Black folks are always trying to break out in the industry with sex, violence, and the glamour of money and expect to be just as big as the White stars. This is incredibly stupid. How can anyone expect to buy into that stuff and make them huge when the rate of AIDS in our community is increasing every year in almost deafening silence?"

This time Tommy's wife, Victoria, added in, "Mmm-hmm. And that rate ain't nothing now, wait till these brothers out there runnin around start getting tested. It will look like a virus outbreak."

Damn, every time someone brings up the issue of HIV and AIDS I instantly start to worry about Orianna. I mean, yes, she does use protection, but for real when you add up the number of partners she has had and the number of "Oops, it broke" how safe is she? Man, I just hope someone up there is looking out for my girl.

Alexandra sharply stated, "I can totally agree on that. Just a few years ago the sports magazines and talk shows were talking about the NBA welfare system."

Immediately a new voice spoke up at the mention of sports, "Hey, let's not even go there. Hi Mercedes, I'm Justin the fiancé of this very bright and very well spoken women sitting next to me Janessea." *Aww that was just cute.* "Some of those women were scheming

from the basketball floor to the hotel door by using discarded condoms to get pregnant."

Janessea immediately cut in, "Yes those women were truly disgusting to go that far, but still what is happening to women to make them think they honestly want that kind of life. Did you hear the amount of child support these women get per month? Some of them will never have to work a job the rest of their life, cause one child doesn't even cost that much to support per month."

Alex cut in this time, "I know that's right. The NBA isn't the only ones out there getting hit hard by these so called women; remember that rap star whose ex wanted more money every time his value increased. What really kills me is how a woman can go to court and demand more money based on the lifestyle she claims their child has been accustomed to."

Tommy cut in next, "What is that about? He made it, not her, now he is supposed to support her like she did and she is still with him? Sisters wonder why brothers aren't trying to hear the wedding ring."

Lauren who had been quiet the entire time except when she had given me a much warmer welcome than her daughter had, just shook her head throughout the ongoing conversation. She looked like a woman that had known all too well the devious and hurtful things men and women could do to each other in or out of a relationship: maybe that is where her daughter got all her attitude from.

The good reverend's turn had finally come around again to speak. "Now bothers and sisters tonight we are gathered to enjoy the company of the Scott family, as their son has finally returned home with enough time to actually sit down with us at this dinner tonight. Not only has he found the time to visit with family and friends, he has also brought along his lovely girlfriend Mercedes, to introduce to us all. Now I will agree that

we have some how begun to touch on the issues that are affecting our community..."

I readily glanced at his nearly empty glass of scotch and began to wonder was he in fear of us addressing that topic next.

Mercedes, stop it! You are so bad girl. That is only the man's second glass. You need to stop. He could be drinking water or something the rest of the night with dinner.

Yea right, a grown man asking for a glass of pop to finish off dinner after downing a couple of glasses of scotch, I would like to see that happen. Let's make a bet how many glasses he'll have had when dinner is finished. I know I shouldn't even begin to go there because I don't even want to get started with how many drinks Visean throws down in one night.

I won't even go into guessing how many X had to drink before he came over and slept with me in that bed of mine that night. Great that is what I need to start thinking about again.

No I should be thinking about...wait a minute, did the good Reverend say girlfriend? Oh my, he did. Everybody here thinks I am Visean's girlfriend? Well what else would they think? I did fly from Chicago to California to here to be with the man. I am staying at his house. I am being introduced to his friends and family. I am sitting at this table freakin' out my one, yes just one night, with X. One night, that was it, the next night was just a simple kiss, ok followed by gifts, but...

"So Mercedes," Dammit, somebody is talking to me again and I am off in my own little world, "how is the weather in Chicago? Is it starting to warm up at all?" Who asked me that?

"Now that is a silly question to ask Justin." Good, now I knew who it was, but why did she interrupt? Did I have a blank look on my face again? Janessea and I are not getting off on a good start. "The weather in Chi Town is no different than it is out here. Now Mercedes,

what I would like to know is how you hooked up with Visean."

Mercedes, come back to reality, answer her question. C'mon brain think.

Joy. Okay we feared the mother and father line of fire questioning, here comes round two. Smile. "Visean and I meeting? Jeez, it was all; well it was all very, umm, interesting. Visean honey, why don't you start us off." Yeah tell them how I picked you up out of nowhere. Keep smiling. I am not a hootchie, I am no ho, I am not a gold digger and there is really nothing wrong in the way we met. Right?

"Baby girl you know if I could remember that, none of these people at this table would have to ask you that question."

"Whatever Visean. See he just doesn't want to show how thoughtful he really is. See if he can fool you all into thinking that he forgets things all the time, then you can't get mad at him when he claims to have forgotten something that he shouldn't have forgotten in the first place."

Tommy just looked over at Visean shaking his head with that *you're caught* grin, "Visean my man, she knows you already."

"Yea son, she got you down pat. I thought you two didn't spend a lot of time together."

Sister girl Alex joined in, "Please, a man isn't nothing but a man, you just don't realize how early in the game we can figure y'all out."

That was Alex! Un-huh. Home girl just got in on my side of things. Dag, tonight might not be so bad after all. Wait a minute, how many glasses of wine did she down before I got here?

Mercedes!

Janessea said, "That's true, it doesn't take a woman long, but thankfully it makes it a hell of a lot easier to deal with them in the long run."

All the women agreed at this point, while the men looked around in disbelief. Well since things were already stirred up I might as well keep things going, "Alright, to begin with we met in my hometown of Chicago. I was shopping for a CD...."

"Man she was lost in that CD section. When I found her looking over there, I thought to myself look at this chile, she probably doesn't even have a clue as to what good music is!"

"Excuse me I happen to remember...."

"Excuse me Mercedes, did you not ask me to tell the story? I think everyone at this table does remember you requesting me to tell the story."

"And excuse me Mr. Visean." Yes, I had a big cheesy grin on my face. "But did you not state to this same group of people, dining with us at this table, that you couldn't remember that moment otherwise you would have told them previously and therefore they would not have to be asking us how we met."

"Dag son, she even sounds like you."

Justin shot in, "She got you down pat Visean."

Tommy added, "Give it up now Visean, this woman has got your number in all area codes."

Visean just looked at me like thank you so much, I don't believe this, did I not invite you to dinner, so how did this turn on me.

Just then the waitress walked in to take our orders, with all the conversation that had been going on it took everyone a little while to look over the menu and order. Once she left the room, Visean looked around the table to make sure he had once again everyone's attention. The man loves attention but this night is about meeting me so, "Now if I may continue telling your parents and guests how we met?"

"Oh you can tell it Ms. Mercedes, but I will be interjecting with the details that you probably don't remember in the proper context."

Justin shouted out, "Oh man look out now, my boy is trying to come at us all intelligent."

"Yea man, he must be still watching all the educational channels at night in those hotels he be staying at." To which everyone at the table started laughing.

I just smiled and looked around the table, "Now, like I said, I was shopping for some new music when this man came up out of nowhere and took the CD I was looking at right out of my hand."

Visean's parents and aunt shot him this shocked look.

"What? Did I not state earlier that this woman didn't look like she had a clue what good music is? I was just trying to see what it is that she was looking at."

"Mmm-hmm, and the part that he probably wants me to leave out is what CD he placed in my hand after he took the one I was already looking at."

Clarice jumped in, "Visean, you didn't."

Pop jumped right on in after her, "I know my boy, he did."

Both of them just shook their heads.

The table now looked confused, so I clued them in to what his parents already knew. "He placed his new CD into my hands and said, 'Girl the guitarist on this CD blows every other CD in this place away!' I am just looking at this fool like you have got to be crazy if you think this rude behavior is some kind of pick up. I mean, I live in Chicago, and some guy just walking up and grabbing stuff out of my hands? I mean granted I hadn't purchased it yet, but talk about rude, and then have the nerve to boast about some guy, playing some instrument on the CD I could probably care less about?"

"Uh-huh, I changed her mind quick on that, didn't I?"

"Yes honey you did," I just called him "honey" in front of everyone, oh my, "but at the time I didn't know that."

"So what CD did he hand you?"

"This R&B gospel mix group that he was playing with at the time. I had heard of them, seen one of their videos, so I wasn't totally lost as to who they were. Still I don't know who had played what instruments because I am not generally that deep into music, but he just went on and on."

"You know, I am starting to think I should really recap our whole story for everyone right now because I don't remember you coming off this cruel. In fact Mercedes, I remember when I placed that CD in your hand and then told you about that certain guitar player that you should be listening for you started to giggle."

"Fool please, I didn't even crack a smile when you were boasting about the CD you just made me look at."

"Fool? Woman let me tell you, the other CD in your hand had you a fool way before I even showed up on the scene! So if anything you should still, yes still till this very day, this very moment, be grateful for what I did for you."

Some how the Reverend again took it upon his self to referee this little story telling war Visean and I had gotten into, "Brothers and sisters may I remind you that there is one man in this room with us tonight who knows the real story of Visean and Mercedes meeting and He would appreciate it if the two of you would both agree to tell the correct version of that moment, since it was of His will that He blessed the both of you with by bringing you two to meet on your separate paths so that you could end up together, at this time, at this very location, to bless us all with the story. Now please, just tell us how you two met."

Okay, now I am definitely thinking that the scotch has kicked in.

Everyone at the table raised their glass and toasted the good Reverend for his moving speech. Visean and I on the other hand just stared at each other dumbfounded.

I decided to just speak up and tell everybody what really happened, after all how we met was innocent and fun, and wasn't all that bad. "Okay, okay. Thank you Reverend for bringing us both back to reality, as you stated it was with His blessing that we were able to meet. It is very simple, really how we met, and now that we have the first part of this wonderful of this meal in front of us I will tell you. I will break it down like this. I was shopping on Michigan Avenue, mostly just window shopping, when I passed by this music store and saw this really good looking guy inside." Visean sat straight up in his chair, raising his arms so that everyone knew that it was him I was referring to. Dork. "So I headed in, passed by him, brushed his shoulder to get his attention and then proceeded to some stupid section of CD's."

Visean started laughing, "She went for the Country music section."

Pops just smiled and said, "No wonder Visean took that CD out of your hand."

Justin spoke up, "Hey country music is part of the blues."

Alex cut in, "I am sorry but I am not attracted to any guy on any tractor and do not want to hear the blues about a truck and some boots. But I do give them credit for the gay cowboy song; at least the good ole boy club has someone trying to open up."

Tommy added, "According to record sales, country is once again on the decline, even though a few years ago the record industry tried to revamp it as much as they could and pull a younger audience. So that gay cowboy song may be just all a scheme to bring attention back to the genre and up the sales."

Victoria once again, brought in the social debate stated, "Well you would never know that country was

on the way out, all these new video's have men and women running around in little cowboy hats, and the women in those little ass cow outfits that are..."

Tommy cut her off. "Sweetie, I know and there is much left to talk about on the subject of music of late, but if these two don't tell us their story we are going to have to set another dinner date for them to finish."

"I am so sorry Mercedes, I just get into my little zone, and I am just gone girl."

"It's okay, you wouldn't believe the little zones I get into myself. I am not into country at all, well maybe just a little of the very old stuff. Anyway, all I know is that I didn't know who I had in my hand. When I saw the girl on the CD cover wearing a big old cowboy hat and a shirt cut down like the *Dallas Cowboy* cheerleaders, I knew I had screwed up. Now I am standing there thinking that I have caught his attention and at the same time praying that he didn't think anything of me deliberately brushing his shoulder when I walked past him into that section. I felt like a total idiot. There I am trying to be all brave and flirt with some stranger, but then to walk into that section and make it so obvious that I was nervous, I wanted to die.

So I thought, okay do I nonchalantly try to walk by him or do I look for a certain artist that may have had a good decent cross over song in this section. Or do I get mad like the clerk pointed me to the wrong section..."

Visean broke my train of what I should do's by trying to explain to help me out. "As you can see the chile was lost and confused and feeling like a fool. Being the wonderful man that I am, I stepped up and saved her by taking the CD out of her hand, and put into it something I knew she was probably looking for. What better way to introduce myself and let her know how great I really am than by putting one of the CD's I play on in her hand."

"That is my son, ego till the end. Can't hate him though, look how far it has gotten him in that kind of business."

"Yes while I was lost in my own little world of how to cover my tracks, I finally chose to look as if I headed to the wrong section, smile, laugh at myself and continue on to the next section. So I turn around to move onto the next section, why that CD was still in my hand is beyond me, when this man takes the CD out of my hand and puts into my hand another one. Forgetting that I was originally trying to catch this same man's attention, I looked at him and said, 'What is this?'

His response was, 'Something you should obviously be listening to because whatever this is in my hand is not the type of music you portray yourself as listening to.' Which of course was right but hey looks don't determine anything, especially the music I listen to. I mean I listen to a variety of Chicago radio stations that play a wide variety of music, so even though country is not one of them, it doesn't mean he is right."

Alex cut in next, "Give it up girl, you were trying to flirt with my cousin and you got straight up caught."

Laugh Mercedes. Just laugh! Just when you thought sistah girl had come over on your side.... "Yea, you're right. I was caught, country music in hand, and he was kind enough to still come over and talk to me about my incorrect choice."

"I'll cut in at this point if you don't mind." Visean gave me a smile; the look in his eyes said it all. "You see the only incorrect choice made that day was walking by and brushing my shoulder, instead of approaching me directly. As everyone at this table can clearly see, and not to mention earlier today an old girlfriend of mine, Mercedes window shopping turned out to be something she could keep for years to come."

Really? He really, just stated that to everyone at the table. He said earlier if you can't state something in

front of a man of God, then who can you state things in front of. I could feel my heart open, felt the pain of my being alone start to spread, as if it was awaiting the love of this man to be its final cure. Don't do this Mercedes. Keep looking at reality girl. I locked up my heart, looked at Visean, and said, "Visean, the only correct thing that happened in that store that day was you."

Another toast was raised to love and the chances we will take to find it.

Now this, all this that was being said at this dinner table tonight, all this that is unbelievable to me, this that only exists in my silly senseless day dreams, this is too much.

Dinner continued on with the regular conversation of what everyone did for a living, how each couple met, wedding plans, and even a little car talk which I was very selective in my statements so that an all out war would not start with Alex. As we walked out of the restaurant and said our goodbyes, I could feel the strength of Visean's true love for me for the first time. I mean, we are not backstage, we are not at rehearsal, or in the hotel room, we are here, with family and friends, sharing a piece of reality that I never thought existed for us. So now...what happens next?

Visean's father asked him to walk his mother to the car so that he could have a moment alone with me, stay strong Mercedes.

"Well young lady, I am glad that you were able to make it to dinner tonight. You look like you are feeling much better now."

"Thank you, I am."

"I want to tell you some things about my son; I'll be brief."

"Ready."

"Visean has a big heart that loves to give to people, that is why he plays so well. He always saw his talent as a way of giving to people, but he is no fool, he does

know when people are taking and not giving the love back."

This man cannot possibly be thinking that I am not giving any of the love back. Oh my, please, oh please, do not tell me he could read my thoughts about Xavier tonight during dinner. How could I even be so stupid to bring up those thoughts in my mind around his family and friends?

"I can tell Mercedes that you are a woman who gives back what you receive from my son."

Exhale.

"Visean, well he knows a lot of people in this world and will continue to meet a lot of people in this world. Just know this, only the special ones are allowed to be brought back into my home for me and my family to meet. Except of course when he was younger, it was then of course he thought everybody was special. Anyway. Therefore, Viseans' actions should have made it clear that you are someone special. Remember that."

Inhale. Smile.

"Next, my son does not have a lot of free time to live a normal mans life. In other words, I am sure you are familiar with his calling habits, how often you can visit him and actually see him while he is in the same place as you. I can't remember the last time he came home and had this much time to be with all of us. Seems like every time he has an opportunity, he looks for the next opportunity in his career and makes it happen. Yet through all of that, my son, when he does have time, will make you feel like no time has past since the last time you saw him. He gives his full attention to those he cares about, guess that is why we never get mad when he comes home to visit and only has a couple of hours to spend. God has truly gifted him in many ways. That is how I know he will be successful for a long time. What I am trying to say to you is this, my son may not have a lot of time to give you like other men will, but

when he does give his time, he will make you feel like not a minute has past since the last time you two spent time together. Stay strong in that if you ever decide to make a serious commitment to my son."

This cannot be real. Remember to keep breathing.

"The final thing I will say about my son is that when he finds, or has found, that special one in his life, he will give. He will let you know that no matter who he meets, you will be the first on his mind. Be careful of this Mercedes, his heart can be broken and has in the past. I am sure you know about my son's failed marriage, hell is there any such thing as successful marriage these days? That woman broke his heart, he said he would never let anybody in, and here you are. You are in, now please, be honest, be real, and remember that the next time you two can meet it will feel like no time has past. Be careful and you won't break his heart. It is that simple."

"Thank you. I will remember that."

"It is all about the little things Mercedes, that is what successful relationships are, the little things. It is that simple."

He gave me a hug and walked over to the car.

Visean walked over and gave me a huge hug, "So what did Pops have to say? He wasn't telling you to get out quick before you get so deep into me that you won't ever be able to get out did he?"

"Just the opposite Visean, he told me how I can stay longer."

"Well then, my pops is smarter than I thought."

"Yes he is."

"Well young lady, it is time for us to get home. We need to pack up, because tomorrow I get to take you away and we get to enjoy some very private and special moments together. Think you can handle that?"

"Think you can handle that?"

"Girl you always trying to kill an old man like myself, but I am still fighting to hang in there."

"Don't worry Visean because you are not going anywhere yet."

"I better not be going anywhere ever. Don't you know Mercedes, this is it, you got me for life, no matter how far apart we may be, or how much time passes before we can see each other again, just know, I am not going anywhere."

"You know I want to believe that Visean." One day I will. I'll open my heart and release the pain that built up and see if you can heal it. For now, just keep leading me from the dark into the light. Back your words with action; because I cannot have a blind faith in a man, just in God and that relationship ain't easy either, it's all work in progress.

I cannot believe tonight. Dinner was wonderful and the hardest question asked was how we met. I mean I didn't know what he told his parents about our first encounter but since he played his dumb role, I thought why not just get it out in the open. Of course, I am sure Alexandra just loved the fact that I was the one who hit on her cousin.

"Mercedes, baby, I opened the door, you can get in now."

Girls let me tell you, there was my man, yea I am going to go there, there is my man, standing in the moonlight just looking at me with those beautiful eyes. I couldn't resist, I closed my door and walked over to him.

"Baby girl, you had too much to drink or something. See I am the who will be driving not you so therefore you..."

I grabbed him in my arms, kissed him, so deep, and held him so tight.

"What was that about?"

I placed my finger over his mouth, "Shhh." I kissed him again. "Now Mr. Visean, thank you. Just thank you."

"Well whatever it is I did that made you do that, you are very welcome and I hope I do more of it so I can keep getting some more of that, cause I like it."

"Just wait till I can get you alone, you will definitely like it."

"Well then get your fine azz in the car girl, so I can get you home, packed up, and we can take off in the morning."

"What time?"

"The sooner I can get on the road, the sooner I can have you all to myself."

"And what time would that be?"

"6 a.m."

"Excuse me? 6 a.m.? Please. Visean the only time, and I do mean only time, that you ever get your butt out of bed to make it anywhere at 6 a.m. is when you have a flight and even then I don't know how you do it. So you are telling me right, hold it, let me look at my watch. Okay, it is almost 10 p.m. right now, we go home, you repack your already overstuffed bags by what 11 or so, and you and I will be out on the road at 6 a.m.? Where are we going to that would let us check in at that time anyway? Visean, what are you up to?"

"Girl, get your funky bootie in the car, when we get to the house you can repack those heavy azz bags of yours, then go to sleep so that I can drag you tired monkey azz out of bed tomorrow morning. If you should happen to remember correctly, that this morning, it was I who was up and dressed and out of the house before you even knew what time it was."

"Alright I will get in this car, but I want at least a hint where you are taking me to."

"Oh you want a hint huh? Well here is your hint. The place that we are going to is already rented for us as of tonight, but seeing that it is a two hour trip, I thought it

would be better to get some sleep and start fresh in the morning."

"Hold up! You already booked the place for tonight that way we could arrive in the morning?" I started walking around the parking lot staring hard at the sky.

"Girl what the hell are you looking for?"

"A UFO. Aliens. Something, cause I know my man could not have planned this far ahead, no way. Who took you? Who are you? What are you doing here?" I looked at him seriously and said, "I come in peace."

"Ok," he looked around the empty parking lot as if he was looking at people making an announcement, "Mercedes has done lost her mind. I tell myself not to let you drink and when I do let you, this is what happens."

"For real who are you? Where is Visean? Dag you are good, you even had his parents fooled."

"Mercedes," he was now guiding me to the passenger side of the car, "I don't remember you drinking that much." He opened the car door, "But, it is a good thing I am driving because," he put me into the passenger seat, "I believe when you fell tonight you may have hit your head a little too hard." He then kissed me on the cheek and closed the door.

After he got in, "Visean, for real, you have everything set up so that we can arrive tomorrow and just go to our room."

"Yes and may I ask why is that so hard to believe? I am a very capable man; I do make it on my own you know."

"Sweetie I know, but you can't remember who you are performing with from one week to the next. Half the times you don't know the 411 to give me so I can arrive where you are at and then out of nowhere you actually have things set up. No, wait, your mother set this up didn't she?"

"Man, my mom's had nothing to do with this."

"Mmm-hmm. Alright now, I am going to take you at your word."

"You always should."

"Well I am learning."

"Girl I have only begun to school your young fine so sexy ass."

"Alright now Visean, just drive. You don't need to be thinking all them freaky thoughts while you are trying to get us home and don't go the memory lane route, we have to pack because I want to see your ass up and ready to go at 6 a.m."

"Oh I see how it is; you didn't like the little tour of where I grew up the other night."

"Did I say that I didn't like the tour you gave last night? No. I just need to get back so that we can leave. If given the chance, you will have us driving around until six in the morning trippin down memory lane. I hope your mom makes extra strong coffee, you can't drive more than twenty minutes without it."

"Yea, yea. Go to sleep woman, you need your rest, I'll wake you when we get to the house."

"Can I sleep on your shoulder?"

"I'd rather you sleep in my lap."

I lightly smacked him on his leg, "Wake me when we get back to the house Visean."

"Mercedes."

"Yea baby?"

"Wake yourself up, pack your stuff up and be prepared to get up so I can take your tired ass to a place where you can sleep all day on top of me."

"I'm awake."

I forced myself to wake up and went into the house with him. When we got to my room I went to kiss him on the cheek goodnight when Clarice walked in the room. "Hey you two, I am glad to see that you made it home okay. Mercedes are you feeling any better, you look a little tired."

"I fell asleep on the car ride home and it is always impossible for me to wake back up." Am I smiling? C'mon Mercedes wake up. This will be the last time you have more than two glasses of wine with anything girl. I am such a lightweight.

"See mom, there is somebody out there worse than me."

"And I always thought it was you and your father, who of course is knocked out now. Don't worry, he gets up at 5 a.m. every morning, so you two will have a chance to say goodbye to him."

"That is good; I hardly even got the chance to talk with him. Time is always so short, so many things to do, especially when you are with this man right here."

"See, why does it always got to be my fault."

His mom just took her child's face into her hands and said, "Cause baby, when it is your fault, the world is a more entertaining place to live in."

She came over and gave me a hug, "You remember what I told you, first the sour and then you will know the sweetest taste came along. Goodnight. I am going to try to get up in the morning to say goodbye to you two, but I have never been the morning person that his father is."

"Thank you Clarice for having me in your home, helping me shop, and for the dinner party tonight. It was good to be invited into Viseans' world away from the stage and spotlights; it really does mean a lot to me."

"You're welcome and you are always welcome here."

"Thank you, and if you should ever feel the need to do some serious shopping along Michigan Avenue, you just call me up." This has turned out better than I expected.

"I may just do that."

"Goodnight Ms. Mercedes."

"Goodnight Ms. Clarice."

"Night mom, I am going to go repack my bags."

Clarice went straight back into mother mode, "Visean, I swear, please leave something in that room so that when I go in there I can remember whose room that is. You don't need to take everything back with you. How you ever pay for all those bags to be on the plane, as heavy as they are, is beyond me."

To be of help, well not really, I added, "I know one time the airlines wanted to charge our company \$50 per bag over 70 lbs. for a conference we were holding in Texas. It was cheaper to ship everything there."

"Mom, Mercedes, don't neither one of you two have to worry about how much I am paying to lug all the junk around which by the way is not junk to me, cause I got it like that."

"Clarice, I just have to ask if you have ever seen this man's house?"

"Girl, last time I was out there I spent over two days cleaning it and three months begging Visean to get a housekeeper."

Visean just stood there looking at the both of us in disbelief. The man was speechless, he came over gave each of us a kiss goodnight and then left the room.

Clarice just looked at me, "You're good for him Mercedes, it won't be easy, but try not to give up on him."

Sure that is easier said than done, I still have to go home and face X. I haven't even checked my messages lately and I can only imagine what he has left for me so far. "I can taste the sweetness and I'll try to hold on to that."

"Good. Now get packed and we'll see you off in the morning."

Thankfully I have learned through my many short term trips how to live out of my suitcase. The three important rules to travel by are to commit to what you pack, never leave anything unpacked on a daily basis, and always do Visean's "stupid check" before you

leave. The "stupid check" is where you recheck every inch of the room for anything left behind, but even for me this is not full proof.

I laid a pair of jeans and shirt out for the next day, zipped up all bags and headed for the bathroom to wash up, just as I walked by his room, out came Visean.

"Hey you."

"Hey."

He held me in his arms and then whispered in my ear to get ready for bed and go to sleep. We kissed softly and went our separate ways. The last thing I remember was hitting the pillow.

♂ finally...time ♀

Okay, I remember setting my alarm for 5 a.m. right? Right! So why is it 6 a.m. and this man is standing over me about to pour a glass of cold water on me.

"Visean?"

"One, two, three..."

"Visean."

"Four, five, six..."

"Visean!"

"Seven, eight, nine..."

"Try it and get none."

"Girl, try me and you'll get none. Now get up."

"Honest Visean, my alarm...it was set and I must not have heard it and I..."

"See here we go, you talking and not moving."

"I'm up, I'm up."

"Girl the only thing up is your mouth. Move your body or I'll finish the countdown."

"Dag Visean." I sat up, wiped my eyes, I looked at him and that freakin glass of water.

Girl you had better move.

"Dag nothin, now get your funky azz in the shower." Bent over and kissed me on the forehead then left the room.

I flopped back down on the pillow and don't you know it, "Girl I don't hear you moving in there."

"Yea, yea I got your moving."

How do I constantly do this? I remember getting to bed just before midnight, I remember setting the alarm and now I almost had his stupid ass throwing water on me as an alarm. Ugh!

After grabbing a very fast shower, tying my hair up, and throwing clothes on, I ran downstairs to meet Visean and get my baggage out to the car.

His father greeted me as I flew down the stairs. "Good morning young lady, I hear my son had to wake you up."

"Thankfully not with that glass of water he was about to douse me with."

"He's still doing that? Man, the fights he would cause between Alexandra and him were vicious because of that stunt. She'd spend the night and by 4:30 in the morning, the whole house was up from her screaming at him. Now my son can't even make it up past noon."

"Well he has done better than me the past two mornings; he has been up and out before me. Well actually in California I was ready before him."

"He told you he was up on his own right?"

"Yep."

"My son up on his own at 5 a.m., and you believed that?"

"No, but he has been out the house before me yesterday and this morning he was up, dressed and ready to wake me up."

"Girl, my son couldn't get up if he was a vampire, you opened up the shades and let direct sunlight hit him. I was the one dragging his butt out of bed at five this morning when I got up."

"Okay, I have got to ask, because I have tried on several occasions to wake him up, how is it that you get him up?"

"Who do you think taught him the water alarm?"

"You ain't right." Okay am I asleep, in a dream or what because I am feeling way to relaxed talking to his father. All day yesterday I made myself watch every single word that came out of my mouth to sound proper and polite and now my words are just flyin out.

"Breakfast is ready if you are hungry."

"You not only get up early but you also have the energy to cook?"

"I grew up on the full belief that if you know you have enough meals throughout the day, you can accomplish anything."

"I know that is right. My brain cannot even begin to fathom functioning until I have something to put into my stomach."

"As little as you are, I find that hard to believe."

"See there is the secret; I have to eat something for breakfast and for lunch, but after that, just a few small snacks. I don't eat before I go to bed unless it is something little."

"Well in this family you eat. You eat three meals a day and some snacks. Now I am not talking about bad food that will make you fat, just food that will power you up. My family always held the belief that if you eat right then you live right. It is just a natural following."

"I cannot say that for my family. In my family it was more of if you have a minute to eat then you better be prepared to fend for yourself."

"Well not in this house, so go eat; Visean and Clarice are in there waiting on you. I am going to go get dressed and I'll be back down before you kids leave."

I walked into the kitchen and couldn't believe the spread on the counter. Mr. Scott had prepared eggs, fruit, bacon, toast, coffee and juice. Jeez, it looked like a buffet was going on up in here.

"Clarice, how does he do all this in the morning?"

"He just gets up and starts cooking. Lays it all out, goes up to get dressed, comes back down and then fixes himself a plate."

"Visean do you do this in the morning?"

"Well if you consider three o'clock in the morning being the same thing as what my pops does, then yes. I get home from the studio, gig, concert, whatever, and throw on a steak and a vegetable."

"At three o'clock in the morning, you come home and start a steak and a vegetable?" I looked at this man like, now I know the aliens definitely took my man

last night. I mean he has called me at three or four or even five in the morning just trying to make it home slurring to me, "Baby I am so tired I can't even keep my eyes open" which I can barely hear to begin with due to his stereo volume and the wind coming in through the window. Now he is sitting here and telling me that he goes home and cooks.

"Yeah, and most of the time I wake up to find it all burnt up on the stove."

Clarice immediately jumped in, "Visean you could start a fire."

"Well that is one way to wake your butt up."

"At least I get up on time and don't make folks wait on me."

"Yea, yea. You could have woken me up as soon as you woke up, but you let me sleep. So there." Uh-huh, I know your secret now and don't think that I won't be pulling that water alarm on your funky azz the next time you don't want to get up and get ready.

"So Visean, are you planning on returning to the house tomorrow or are you leaving straight to the airport after your little night out?"

"Well I wish I could say that we were going to stop back by the house before our flights but both of us have to be to the airport around the same time."

"I think my flight leaves about 30 minutes after yours does."

Visean just gave me that look. Here we go. "As long as we don't have another California incident, I guess that will be okay."

"You guess that will be okay?" Great, here we go. It wasn't even my fault. He is the one who couldn't wake up, pack, and be downstairs on time. So how is it my fault he tried to talk to me? I don't think so.

Clarice just looked at me like she just had to know what incident we were referring to was. If I tell her before Visean does then she'll know I wasn't in the wrong. Too late, while I am deciding she is already

asking. "Mercedes was there something that happened in California that made my son worry about your safety?"

"Clarice, I was fine, I was in no danger...."

"Girl you practically jumped into my arms when I came into that lobby that morning. You were so scared."

"Scared?" I know he did not just try to tell his mother that I was scared. That makes me look like I am not the type of woman that can protect and handle herself, like I am always on the look out for my knight in shining armor to come save my scary azz. Whatever. "Clarice, you know how hard it is to wake this man up in the morning."

"I sure do, he is definitely in the right field of work being a musician. My son never got up early in the morning. Slept all day and stayed up all night from the early age of three." She began to laugh. "Visean had a hard time in school because of that, couldn't stay awake for classes. It wasn't until we enrolled him into that performing arts school that he actually made the sacrifice of getting up on time in the morning. He would make it to school on time for the first class when we enrolled him there. As soon as this chile made it in the industry, he went right back to his old pattern and even no sleep at times." Turning to Visean she said, "I really don't like that Visean; you may end up in the hospital due to exhaustion one day baby. You know the stars are having that happen to them more and more."

Visean just gave a look to his mother that said, "I got it mom."

"Well since we all know he has that pattern, it was that pattern that caused that incident that he is referring to. We were at the hotel and Visean didn't want to get up on time. The band started loading gear, Visean was still packing bags, and I checked us out of the room. While waiting for him to come down,

a man, who recognized me from the concert the previous night, approached me. It was really no big deal. He recognized me, told me he saw me alone at the concert, and wanted to talk to me then but found the opportunity now. Visean came down, the man said I obviously wasn't alone that night when he recognized Visean from the band and politely excused himself."

"See why I can't leave her alone for a minute mom, all these men want to try and talk to her. Not to mention her so call *friends* that she keeps."

Now this is a good time for the good Reverend Lovely to cut in and stop this conversation because someone is sounding like they did not wake up on the right side of the bed this morning. "Visean, you are the one that keeps the official list of who exactly my friends are. I know you have tons of female friends out across the world but you don't hear me trippin on them. Not even that awful Dymond girl."

"Hold up, everyone in this room knows Dymond is no friend and who was just trippin just last night about Daunice?"

"First of all, I was not trippin about your ex-girlfriend or whatever she was to you all those long, long years ago. I was just informing you of who we ran into that day and what was said."

"Uh-huh."

The entire time his mother watched us like a tennis match and then we heard his father drop his two cents in from out of nowhere. "Well I see my breakfast has put the energy into this room needed to start the day. Now son, you really don't keep a list of the men that try to talk to this young lady do you?"

I just folded my arms and looked Visean straight in the eyes, don't even try to lie that you don't because you know I have seen the list. Not that I mind, he doesn't do anything with it, and it does keep him informed that if he wants our future open to possibilities

that there are other men out there who want the same. Although I wouldn't give them the time, because they are just friends or *friends* as Visean so nicely puts it.

So what does that mean for X and you?

Dag, now I had to go and bring up that drama again. Jeez. I don't know and I won't know until I get back home.

"Pops look, I do keep a list." *Good for not lying to your father Visean.* "It is just to make her aware that I am paying attention to the other people trying to come up in her life."

"Son, does she keep a list on all your female friends, because if she did she would have as many pages as a novel by now."

"No."

"Well then son don't worry about who she is talking to, if either of you want to go somewhere else you seem adult enough to let each other know."

Yea right, how many brothers actually know how to call and say when it is over? None of the so-called men that were in my life had been educated in that area on how to do that. Usually they expect me to figure that out and leave open some kind of freakin mystery as to what it is that went wrong. So you know what, forget it, now I just do the same damn thing to them. Thing's men do...women do the same. Except it is harder for me to do because I am a woman and I want to do what is right, damn my conscious. I bet none of them probably saw what they do as hard, so I'll learn.

Clarice jumped in at this point, which I was thankful for because my negative energy level was about to hit the roof. "Now don't be starting trouble between these two. They are just fine. Both of them have been through a lot together and they'll make it, no matter how many friends either one of them have."

That was encouraging to hear especially because of the mess I created with X back home. Wait a minute.

What mess? I mean, all of the sudden Visean wants to talk about our future; it wasn't like I saw it coming and then had that night with him. At the time, I thought I was taking a step in the right direction with the right person. I mean who knew. Clarice is right though, we have been through a lot, and we aren't out of it yet. If this man or either man is serious, there will be a lot more to come. The question is who am I going to be serious about.

Going? Mercedes you are way past the "going" point and don't lie to yourself cause you know Ori is going to tell you no different. Just like a wanna be man; you cannot play with peoples hearts, no matter how much they have played with yours.

Yea right. I figured out the game and now I am just going with it. Talk to whoever I want, when I want and if something gets to serious and I'm not down with it...leave.

"Your right mom, we have and we have more to go but we'll make it. Won't we Mercedes?"

"You know how much I love to work so I don't see me going anywhere." *Yet, we will see what happens after time from this trip passes.* "Plus I like the fact that we don't go back where we left off, but work from that problem point to make it stronger."

"On that note, Mercedes and I must be going to make it to our little get away spot I have planned for us."

Visean's parents walked us out and hugged us goodbye.

His father whispered in my ear, "Remember give him time, he'll give you everything he has. My son is a good man."

His mother whispered in my ear, "Remember baby, the sweetest taste that is how you know."

Does this mean I am in as far as the family is concerned?

As we drove out I just looked at the man sitting next to me and wondered if he ever found out about my night with X, if he would stick it out with me. Then again, was it really going to matter? I mean, he'll go back to Minneapolis or the road and then what? I guess I have to wait and see if things are different this time.

"Don't even try to go to sleep on me girl. You know I need a co-pilot for directions."

"Where is the map?"

"Map?"

"You know the thing with lines, numbers and text to represent streets and highways that direct you to your destination?"

"Oh that. Yea, it's in the glove compartment."

I opened it up and found the map. "Okay, where are we headed to?"

"North."

"Okay, North has a lot of places, care to be a bit more specific?"

"No."

"No?"

"Girl, I got it. Put that map away and go to sleep. I can tell you didn't have enough of that or the other and that's why your funky butt is getting crabby on me. I'll wake you up when we get there."

"Crabby? Visean, I am not crabby. Tired, yes. Crabby, no."

"Woman, don't you think I know when you are crabby? I may not be around you 24/7 but I do know when your mind is working too much that you don't want to deal with anything else and just want to rest; so rest because I got it."

He was right but you know I wasn't about to admit it.

"Fine, I'll sleep to make you happy, but I am still not crabby."

"However you want to justify it baby, just get some rest, cause you are about to need all your energy when we get to where we are headed."

"Ha! I want to try and see you keep up with me."

"Tell you what, we'll try and work together and work with each other."

"Mmm, sounds all good to me. Can I lie on your shoulder again?"

"Need you ask?"

"Goodnight Visean, let me know if you need any help driving or with directions, okay?"

"Okay baby, I will."

I tried to get into the rhythm of the road and Visean's music so that I could fall asleep but things were on my mind. It is always one thing or the other so I went with the other, being my waking up late. I sat up, reached for my purse, and pulled out my cell phone. I use it as my home phone, alarm clock, calendar, and Rolodex. Oh yea, I love to play games on it when I am waiting in long lines at the grocery store. I am such a geek. I know I set the alarm for 4:30 a.m. so I could be up by five, so what happened.

"I've noticed you haven't had that thing on practically all weekend, avoiding someone?"

Yep, that is why the message notification is off. "Nope. I am just checking the time I set the alarm for." I flipped through the menus and prayed I had set it right so I could prove to him that I did have it set and somehow I turned it off.

"And the answer is?"

"Shoot. 4:30 p.m."

"So why have you had the phone off?"

"Simple, this is my time with you. If it is important they can leave a message and if it is my family they have your mom's number."

"I see. So how many messages have you gotten since you have been with me from your *friends*?"

"Two." I answered without thought so that he would believe me because really X has been calling at least twice a day. I tried calling him back but got his voicemail. I just told him I was still out of town and that I would be in touch when I got back.

"Really and who would that be from?"

"Excuse me Mr. Scott but do I be all up in your mix about who is calling you and what they have to say? If you would like to start on this subject, I will open with that you get more phone calls than I do and some of them you even walk out of the room by saying, 'Hey you.' Now I wouldn't call those kind of calls business, would you?"

Silence. Did he not think that when I hear him say that it caused a twinge of pain as it pushed me back to the reality of this relationship? Moments like those reminded me that when I get back on that plane to go back home and go back to my daily routine, that nothing in my daily routine had changed.

"Visean, I didn't say that to hurt you. I just want you to know that I notice those things and that they keep me in reality and out of the dream world."

"We have a lot to change don't we."

"Why do you say change? I don't mind the friends that you have, the people you meet, because simply it is all a part that comes along with what you do."

"That is not what I meant."

"What is it that you want to change Visean?"

Silence. He just stared out at the road in front of us. "You know there is a feeling I get when I get up on stage and strike the first note off of my guitar. It is a feeling that I fall deeper in love with every time. You know?"

All I could do is look at him.

"It is a feeling that I continue to hold more respect for every time. It is a feeling that I never doubt, because I know that it is something that will never leave me."

Is this where he is trying to go with this whole weekend? Well Mercedes now what? Speechless, I laid my head back onto his shoulder, felt his strength, and fell asleep.

When we arrived at our destination, I had felt like I had slept forever and a day. The kind of sleep that would allow me to get a lot of work done but unfortunately, I am more behind than when I left my office and there was no opportunity to be had to get work done.

As I looked around I noticed how beautiful the ocean is and how it was practically right outside our door. We picked up the key, unloaded the car, and lay down on the couch together.

I held Visean in my arms, it was the least I could have done to express something since his statement had truly wiped out the words in my mind. I was zoned, gone, on downtime, from words I would have never expected. All I could possibly come up with was, "Tired?"

"Not when I am with you."

"Want to take a walk by the ocean?"

"No."

"Okay then, want to take a nap?"

"No."

"Hungry?"

"No."

I started giggling, "Okay then Mr. Visean what is it that you would like to do?"

He got up from the couch, grabbed my arms and pulled me up. He held me, and whispered in my ear, "I want to do this and I don't want to stop for a long time."

He undid my hair and began to stroke it, he held my face in his hand, and he kissed my lips and pulled me close. He slid off my clothes; he made love to me the rest of the day.

We woke up around 5 p.m. The day was already gone, not that there was much to do. The place he had in mind for us was like Palm Springs, California, a place to relax and do nothing. We showered together and decided to walk up the oceanfront to the restaurant. It was beautiful to hear the waves coming in.

"Visean this is so beautiful. How did you ever find this?"

"Well one of the ladies in one the groups I perform with knows of this place because her and her husband escape to here every once in awhile. I just thought it would be nice for us to have that same opportunity. If you notice, I haven't had my cell phone on today."

Oh no, please don't go back to that subject I brought up about some of your phone calls. There is no need to explain. I was just trying to make a stupid point in a horrible way. "No phone, no stage, no band, no friends, no tour bus, no boss, just you and I and this beautiful ocean. It is about time we had some time together."

"I know, how many years have we tried to do this?"

"Countless."

"Well now that I have you all to myself I can say something I have wanted to say for a long time."

"Okay, and this time I won't pass out. Go ahead, I am ready." I planted my feet firmly in the sand, put my hands my hips, and grinned cheezily.

"I miss you Mercedes."

"You miss me? I am right here with you."

"Duh, I didn't think it was a ghost crawling all over me today."

"If you remember sweetie," I kissed his lips, "it was you and I crawling all over each other."

"Mmm, girl yes it was."

"So what is with this missing thing? What do you miss with me right here?"

"Man, I miss calling you everyday, I miss having you at my shows. Do you know that I notice you not watching anyone else on the damn stage but me?"

"You see me do that from all the way up there? I mean, the manager never gives me the greatest of tickets no matter whom you are playing with...you can see me for real?"

"Woman, everybody can be jumping up and down on the stage, running in front of me and your eyes are dead on me."

"Well you know what?"

"What?"

"I am very glad to know that your eyes are fixated on me also."

"Well that would be very true."

"Mmm, okay, what else do you miss about me?"

"I miss getting to tell you that I love you before I go to sleep and when I do sleep I miss waking up to you."

"Go on." I couldn't believe I was hearing these words by the ocean. Water is a powerful source of energy; I have always believed that to be true. I am hoping that energy was pulling the emotions of this man up to the surface. Maybe then when I get on that plane tomorrow morning, my daily routine will have a change in it. Wait, just wait, don't expect, and don't hurt yourself again.

"It's just not making love to you Mercedes, it is just being with you. Out of all the women I know, you go to a show to watch me, and talk about me afterwards. Everybody else talks about the show and tells me that I was good to."

"Oh I see I pump up your ego. Yea, now I get it."

"Woman please, you know what I am saying to you."

"No Visean I don't know what you are saying to me. I know what you are trying to say to me. I am just waiting to hear what it is that you want to say." There I said it, now how many of you women out there would

love to say that to your man? Well girls, I just did. How many of you men out there would like to say that to us? Yea, alright, we know because we have heard your request to many times for us to get to the point. Well that is what I am asking for now because time is short, especially between this man and I.

Visean just turned and stared out at the ocean.

"Look Visean, I know you are not trying to pop the big question. I know you are not trying to tell me that you are quitting music and want to stay home and have a so-called normal life. I know that you are not telling me that life for us is going to change in some huge significant way. So just say what you really want to say."

Visean turned and looked at me. "What is it going to take for this thing to work? What is it going to take to make this not a 'moment in time' for you? That is what I am wanting to ask you."

Alright, I replanted my feet in the sand; I squared off my shoulders and looked him dead in the eyes. "Are you sure you are ready for my response because I know that I have spent enough nights thinking about this same subject." Oops, that came out with some major attitude.

Visean just gave me this strange look like he was about to be beat down and eaten by the head tigress. I just looked back at him and said, "What does that look mean?"

"I just want to know where that response came from."

Okay, relax and speak. Open up and let it out. Be real. Throw the dice and see where you land. "Look." No wait. Relax. "Sorry. Visean it is just that I have spent so many nights running the streets of Chicago thinking about you. I think I can get you out of my mind and there you are on the radio. I hear you playing and no matter where my thoughts were on the subject of us, all I can do is smile. Now that is not a bad thing, but then I

must ask myself what is that smile and that feeling that I get about? I mean, we don't see each other that often and yet the next time we do it seems like no time has passed. It's crazy, it's fun, but is that all this is? Then I get with you and wow! My mind is at peace, I feel safe, I know you got me; I know you won't let me go. Then I get back on the plane," *go there Mercedes say it*, "and I feel like my daily routine when I return home will be just that, my daily routine with nothing changed. That Visean is the part that I think about the most. The time we spend together, like these past few days, brings us closer but the time apart brings us back to just what this is."

"What do think this is Mercedes? Do you think that I am just playing you? Do you think I just bring you out when I get lonely? Do you think I treat you like a toy to play with and then send you back home?"

Now I just looked at this man like I was the one about to be beat down and eaten. "No Visean that is not it. Not it at all. I have never thought of you ever treating me that way. You asked what you or we could do to change this..."

"So what kind of answer was that? Is it that you don't see an answer?"

"Visean, hello? Was I done talking yet? I don't remember finishing my sentence. Are you ready for me to finish what I was trying to say now?"

"Sorry."

"Look I know that both you and I are very much in tune to this subject. I know what I said in the car hurt you and I heard what you said afterwards with my heart. So going back to the original question you asked at the beginning of this whole conversation, we need to change Visean. We need to change. That is the answer."

"What do you mean by that?"

"First of all when we first met in that record store all those years ago and you told me what you do, I told

myself, 'Hmm, one night stand at best, it probably won't go any further than that.' Now I am standing here eating those words. I don't know about you, but I enjoyed this relationship for what it was at first and then I started opening up to you when I finally realized that you had opened up to me. You fell in love with me, I fell in love with you, you kept traveling and bringing me out every once in awhile, I kept dating other men. How crazy is that? Umm, let's see I am in love with someone but while they are tangible and reachable, it is not real. Since it's not real it means I can date and do what I want with you and the same goes for you doing what you want with me and whomever you want. Do you understand that?"

He gave me this dead blank stare. Alright time to break it down then. "Visean, we have to change how we look at this relationship not from the physical side of things, not sex or distance nor the time in-between Visean, but from the emotional side of this. We have to start doing what we feel is best for each other if we want this thing to change. Can you handle that? Can you handle basing this relationship off our emotions? Is that what you were also trying to say?"

"Baby are you ready?"

"Honestly Visean, I don't know."

"See that is where we have a good start."

"What do you mean?"

"Because I don't know either; I know what I want but I don't want to screw up your life."

"I don't want to screw up your life either."

"I know what we can do."

"Oh really, what is that?"

"Go eat."

"That sounds like a good start."

"I mean eating is partly emotional. I don't know about you but when I don't eat, girl I get crabby and tired and out of control."

"Visean please, just like me you hardly eat. Guaranteed that you do eat more than I do when you do eat, but I don't remember you as tired or cranky when you have not eaten."

"That is because when you are around me, I am not about to show out in front of you."

"Really."

"Yep."

"So are you hungry now?"

"Girl did we not just have sex all day? You're damn right I am hungry."

"So then are you cranky?"

"Getting there because I can start to smell the fish in the sea and my natural male instincts of catching food," he then grabbed me, picked me up, threw me over his shoulder while walking out into the water, "are starting to kick in."

"Visean, honey, put me down. No wait, first walk out of the water, and then put me down. Honey this suit I have on is silk."

I just started laughing as Visean walked back to shore, sometimes stopping like he was going to fall. Well, this is a good step one.

Dinner was excellent; let me tell you I was hungry. That man gave me a work out this afternoon and I am ready for my desert tonight.

We both stared out at the water as the sunset, "You know Visean, today was a good step for us in that new direction we are considering."

"Why is that Ms. Mercedes?"

"Because we both released what has been bottled up inside of us for too long. We finally spoke up and asked each other if this is going to go anywhere else. Do you agree?"

"Yep."

"Alright then, I am sure the rest will come naturally and with some work. Think you can handle that."

"As long as it involves you and me, I am willing to go with it."

"Well that is good because both of our scary azeez need some help in this department. I mean when..." Mercedes don't go there. Don't ask him when is the next time you two will be together because when you both hear the answer all this new hope may be lost. That question is something that will be easier to ask once you two have figured out how to make things work.

"Go ahead and finish you question."

"Question? No I wasn't about to ask a question. What I was about to say is when we get back to the room I plan on working on mixing the emotional side with the physical."

"Mmm, and just how do you plan to do that?"

"Well chile, let's finish our drinks, pay the bill, and go walking back and figure this all out."

"Figure it all out; can we do that in one night?"

"No, but I would love to start."

The server walked over and handed us the bill, which Visean quickly grabbed and paid. "Shall we go Ms. Mercedes?"

I got up from the table, grabbed his hand and we proceeded back along the beach walking along the shoreline. It was getting dark, the tide was coming in, and I got a little itch to do a little something crazy. Now the water is way to freakin cold to go for a little dip but the sand is so soft that two bodies on it would feel wonderful. There were dimmed lights shining on the beach from private houses along the shoreline. These were private parts of the beach and the owners were watching TV or helping with homework and what ever it is they were doing it didn't include what I had planned for us to do.

I started squeezing Visean's hand and bumping into him. Then I let go of his hand and tackled him. Well

not exactly, I mean homeboy is bigger than I am, so me trying to tackle him would be more appropriate.

"What is it that you think you are trying to do?"

"Mmm, come here and let me whisper into your ear."

Visean leaned in. Guy's are so easy. I whispered, "Wanna get freaky on the beach Mr. Visean?" and started kissing his ear.

He broke loose of my arms around him and said, "Girl, have you no shame? We are out here on the beach with houses right behind us. My God, children could be watching!"

I just stood there laughing.

"There you are laughing again, not taking a damn thang I say seriously." Ran up and tackled me down into the sand and whispered in my ear, "I thought you would never ask."

Okay, before you get all hot and bothered thinking of us all under the full moon, it wasn't. Under the stars, it was partly cloudy. The waves rushing and falling against our skin, I already told you the water was cold. Making love while rolling around in the sand, we didn't.

Sorry. We did however manage to get our shirts off and roll around in the sand, it felt great. Well except for the occasional shell in the back or the sand in the eye, it beat any make-out session I ever had in high school. The sound of the ocean, the feel of the sand, the occasional, very brief, feeling of the cold water, the moon above, the clouds, just the whole thing. The feeling of his skin, on mine, that is especially nice. Damn let me tell you, that feeling cannot be beat.

When we finally got back to the room, we stripped our sandy clothes at the door and made love in each room of the small cottage. The shower, the shower, the shower, I never thought my body could do that so many times. Oh my I hope he can do that again. Damn.

Goodnight.

♂ *back to?* ♀

I woke up to the alarm that we both set and checked before we even left for dinner last night, because we know how both of our punk azzes are when it comes to alarms in the morning. The alarm was set for 8 a.m.; well at least it isn't 5 a.m. Of course the punk next to me didn't even move when he heard the alarm, I swear Armageddon could come and this man would sleep right through it. They would have to wake him up when it was his turn to be judged.

Sometime during the night, I woke up to the sound of the television in our room. Visean was sitting up in bed with his back against the headboard and somehow he had moved me on his lap, because I remember hitting the pillow, not his lap when I passed out last night. I wasn't surprised that he was up, we had fallen asleep around 10:30 or 11 last night and we all know he is a night person.

"What time is it?"

"Don't worry about it; if I tell you it will make you feel like you have had less sleep in the morning."

"What?"

"If I tell you the time right now, you will then calculate how many hours you have to sleep until the alarm goes off and then you will make yourself believe that you either did or did not get enough sleep. Therefore I will not empower your mind to do that to you."

"You can say all that at whatever time it is right now?"

"Girl you don't know half of what I can do at this time in the morning."

"Well I know your funky azz can't come home and cook without burning it up because you fall asleep."

"Ha. Ha. I see we have a sense of humor at this time of the morning also."

I sat up in bed next to him, mindful not to peek at the clock, and looked at the TV. "Are you watching what I think you are watching?"

"Yep."

"How far are you into it?"

"Two minutes."

I reached over and grabbed the pen and pad off the nightstand. "Title?"

"Charlie's Azzez."

"You're kidding right?"

"Nope."

"That corny of a title was on pay per view?" I began to write down the title.

"Yep."

"Okay. Male and female, all male or all female?"

"All male? You need to go back to sleep."

I just looked at this fool, "Just answer my question."

"Umm, by the ad, it looked all female."

I looked at the screen; the movie was just finishing showing the opening scenes, and out walked Charlie. Charlie was a tall overly built, overly implanted, Black woman, with braids and barely any clothes on. Now there is a surprise for an adult film.

"Wow a Black porn on pay per view?"

"Yea I know, rare."

"We must be on the East Coast."

Visean just laughed. Now I know you are wondering what the hell we are doing watching this garbage this early in the morning, and what is it that I am writing down so here is how it goes. A long time ago when Visean and I had just started out I woke up and found myself in this same situation.

Now I was kinda offended, I mean here I was with this fabulous man that I was getting to know and he is up in the middle of the night, instead of passed out beside me, watching porn. It makes a girl wonder if she

did her job right when she made love to him. Now I am no goodie two shoes, I will admit in a heartbeat that I watch them occasionally. Shoot, my girl Ori has a collection that can compete with any man's collection out there. Plus, have AIDS awareness come up all too often and see how long you go without sex when you are not in a monogamous relationship. Even then you can leave yourself open to the question if it really is or not, but I am not even about to go there. Safe sex, monogamous sex, or no sex, hey everybody has their choice and their release.

So anyway, back to what I was telling you about. I saw a pen with a pad over on the nightstand, and began asking him the same questions: title, all male, all female, or male/female, etc. Then I started making bets with Visean on how many times the girl will scream out a certain word that she said in the beginning of the person doing her. For example words like yes, more, oh yea, etc. We make bets on how many positions one couple will do in a scene. How many guys/girls she'll do in one film or even in one take. How many times she'll look at the camera and smile. If she'll do the person that walked into the room or excuse them for their friend or do both. Stupid stuff like that. Anyway, it made the situation easier to deal with the first time and then after it just became fun. Sick isn't it? Yea right.

I looked over at the pad of paper and saw that we only had made three bets last night and that I, as usual, had won them all because he always over estimates. If you were wondering, I do not play this game with X. Xavier would probably look down on me if he even knew I watched this stuff.

Well it couldn't have been that good of a flick because I don't seem to remember the end of it. I leaned over, kissed him on the cheek, and headed for the bathroom to see what I could find. You do know what I am about to do don't you. I mean, it isn't my fault that man can't sleep all night long. We still have a

couple of hours before we even have to head back to catch our flights. I want a long walk on the beach, then breakfast, and then to talk some more about this whole new step thing. Visean was never one for sex in the morning, he likes it with me, but we had enough last night to last awhile, still...I peaked out of the bathroom and looked over at him, nah. I grabbed a glass off the counter and filled it with some water... cold water. You know I could go out and get some water from the ocean, because I am sure that has to be much colder than the stuff out of the faucet. Although, I could grab a few ice cubes and let this sit for a minute or two. Hmm, what to do?

"Visean honey."

Nothing. Not even a movement. Okay then, a little louder, "Visean." Still nothing, even louder, "One, two, three...."

He rolled over onto his back.

Louder yet I counted, "Four, five, six...."

He stretched out his arms. He is making this way too easy for me. Hmm, yea, a little quieter this time, "Seven, eight, nine..." and that is where I went down for the count.

How did this man get so quick in the morning? He swooped up, grabbed the glass in one hand, and dragged me down by my waist with the other. I was now lying across him and he began to lightly spank me, "Woman don't you know I am the master of this little game." Then he began to spill just a little of the water that I had sitting in ice cubes down my back. I shrieked.

"I give up, I give up. I surrender. No mas! Uncle?"

He continued spilling little by little down my back. "I'm sorry, please stop. Dayum that is cold."

"I wouldn't know, someone was to slow to make me find out."

I stayed quiet, one word could send that whole glass on my back, and that is something I do not want.

"Mercedes," and spilled more on my back, "did you fall back to sleep?"

"No Visean, I am fully awake and how about yourself?"

I could hear him set the glass down, "Well I was sleeping and then some young lady," he threw both arms over me trapping me, "decided to wake me up by trying my water alarm."

"Your water alarm?"

Mercedes shut up! Girl, he can grab that glass again if you tell him that you know where he learned that from.

Oops.

"Yes my water alarm. So now you are just going to have to stay where I have you so I can get some more sleep."

"The alarm went off."

"And?"

"I thought we could you know get ready, take a walk, get breakfast, talk some more."

"You should have gotten up and got ready and let me sleep instead of trying to be slick. Second, since when do you remember that I actually eat breakfast food?"

"You ate at your parents yesterday."

"Woman don't you know that whenever Pops cooks I have to eat. I can't skip out like I usually do."

"No."

"Now you know, now go back to sleep."

"But I am not comfortable and I am not tired."

"Go to sleep."

"Put me to sleep."

"I suppose you mean sex you to sleep. Well I am not going to do that because I know how to do something else to make your monkey azz go to sleep." Yawning, "I've been watching wrestling and know how to do the sleeper hold."

"Visean. Sweetie, wrestling is fake."

"Girl, I'll pick up that glass of water and finish its business on you if you don't take that back."

Whatever. "Okay sweetie, I am wrong, you are of course right."

"Thank you, now go to sleep."

I waited a minute. "Can I get up and get dressed instead?"

"Woman I am trying to close my eyes and every time I do, you start to talk."

"Please."

"Go." His arms lifted and I quickly slid down onto the floor and scrambled into the bathroom. I removed my wet pajamas and got into the shower. Hell he isn't going to be up for awhile so I took a nice long hot shower. I got out and still heard nothing moving around the room. I did my hair, put lotion on, my make-up, grabbed a robe, and walked out when I heard Visean's voice coming from the living room.

"Yeah I'll be there. What else do you have scheduled for me?" *It must have been his agent.* "Really? I was hoping to have that all hooked up when I got home. When does that start?"

Pause. "Alright then."

There was a long pause and then I heard, "Tell her not to call you anymore, that I do not need her assistance or anything else and everything will now be handled by you. She isn't planning on being at the airport is she?"

She? At the airport? What in the hell is he talking about? He never had a "she" working for him that I knew of. Why did he have to use the living room phone to make that call? Great straight back to the daily I go. My stomach immediately went into a chaos of tying itself into knots.

"Thanks for handling that man, that woman made a mess out of things for me."

Mercedes, stop. Breathe. Number one; don't go looking for trouble when you don't want to find it. You

shouldn't have listened to that conversation. Second, you two unplugged the bedroom phone last night, so he would have to use the living room phone, so don't go all undercover cop on him. Third, whoever "she" was is gone and now this "he" is handling it.

"Yeah man this place is beautiful. Mercedes loves it."

See girl, he even said your name, now calm the hell down.

"Alright man, I'll see you tomorrow."

I ran back into the bathroom holding my stomach as I heard him hang up the phone. Please let me have brought some medicine with me on this trip to calm my stomach down. I get that stupid IBS (Irritable Bowel Syndrome), every time I throw my stomach into a state of unnecessary chaos. It is so stupid of me. I quickly found what I was looking for in my bag and slammed down a pill.

Girl take a good look in the mirror, how can you stand here and say that you want something more with this man when something as little as that threw you over the edge?

Visean was right by saying that we have a lot of work to do and we have a long way to go. This insecurity crap has to stop right here, right now.

Why you are being so dag insecure is beyond me anyway. For real, hasn't Xavier been calling your ass everyday, twice a day since you left home? Shoot, if you got nothing to leave here with, you sure as hell have something to go home to. C'mon Mercedes, it is going to be alright this time.

I frowned, gathered myself up, and walked out into the bedroom.

"Good morning Ms. Mercedes." Visean just looked at me all smiles as he gathered up his stuff.

"I forgot that you like to walk around in your boxers."

"Girl don't be looking at me like that. We have to get up and do things, isn't that what you told me? So

don't try to get us back into that bed, or on the floor, or on the couch, or anywhere else your little devious mind can put us."

"Who said my mind was even there? I mean, I already thought about it and thought, nah."

"Nah?"

"Yep." Grabbed up my bra, panties, clothes, and headed back into the bathroom to get dressed.

"Why are you going into the bathroom to get dressed? Something you don't want me to see?"

"Chile you've done seen it all, I just don't want to entice." What I really needed was to get back behind a closed door to take a deep breath and exhale to settle down again.

"Well go ahead and get dressed out here cause I need to shower up anyway."

"Alright."

Visean walked into the bathroom closing the door behind him, I immediately fell back onto the bed holding my stomach. C'mon, drugs kick in. Ugh! I inhaled, I exhaled, and I reminded myself to relax. Maybe we should have had sex this morning, maybe that would have put me at ease.

Now Mercedes, you know that your relationship is not even about that. You want to find something strong to hold on to, think about what you two have.

What do we have? I mean today we both leave and then I call him and then he gets back to me when he can.

Now see that is the place you are leaving behind, this trip has brought you to a place that you need to be now. Listen to yourself, you are bringing up the past, stay here, think of the future, it's going to be alright.

I stared at the ceiling, thought of the conversation, maybe things were going to change, maybe this time it wouldn't go back to what both of us had grown accustomed to. The only thing to do now was work for that change, both of us, together. Well at least he is up

and getting ready, that is a good sign that he wants this day to be spent between the two of us.

I had just put my last bag by the door when Visean walked out dressed. "What are we leaving already? We have plenty of time."

"No, I just thought I would organize so we could enjoy what time we do have left together."

"Mercedes, we also have the car ride."

I smiled and looked at this man...gorgeous, just gorgeous. Not perfect for any woman, just the one who could see inside, that is where his stuff laid, inside. "So would you mind if we walked to get something to eat, cause breakfast is kinda my thing."

"I already" there was a knock at the door, "got that covered."

One of Visean's phone call's included ordering breakfast for me. There I am freaking out thinking it figures, it is the last day and this man's mind is already back to business and I'm not even on the plane yet. Instead, he is ordering me breakfast so we can sit and enjoy some time together.

He handed back the bill and closed the door. "Now young lady I do know breakfast is your thing and thought we could talk a little while you ate, because as you know I always have to repack my bags before leaving to the airport. So you eat, I repack, and we talk, cool?"

"Cool."

"Hey how did that movie end?"

"What movie?"

"The movie, last night, when you wouldn't tell me the time."

"Did that trick work?"

"Now that I think about it yea, it did."

"See."

"So how did the movie end?"

"Do any of those movies really have an ending?"

"True."

"Did you enjoy our little stay here?"

"I am still getting over the fact that we had complete and total time alone."

"See all in good time."

"No doubt."

"So do you believe me now that I want things to change?"

Can you be anymore to the point? "I am getting there, how about you? What do you think our next step should be?" Thank the world that medicine I took started kicking in, the food was good, but this conversation would have been the end of my stomach all together.

"Well I can say that I need to return more of your phone calls."

Whoa. Okay, very good start. "Really?"

"Wouldn't you like that?"

"Of course I would. It would be great if you had an email account also."

"Can't you get email over your phone or one of those palm things?"

"Check you out; you are finally getting caught up with the 21st century."

"Look girl, I may be older than you but I am not a dinosaur. Some of the guys use those palm things out on the road, and with my schedule and the way I lose my planners and always taking business cards from people, maybe I need one."

"Yes you do and while we are moving you up in the world we need to get you a laptop as well."

"Well I will have to check into it because that is just another door to open for us."

"I like the sound of that. Out on the road you can probably find hot spots for the laptop to use."

"Hot spot? Woman how in the hell do you know about all this?"

I just smiled, "Baby you know I am smart."

"That would be an understatement. I have to wonder sometimes why a smart woman like you would want to end up with someone like me."

"Please, like you're not intelligent?"

"Gurl, I don't know about half the stuff you just mentioned to me. I just went along with it to sound good to you."

"Well I can definitely say that you do know quite a bit more than me when it comes to a lot of things. That is what is good about us, we can learn from each other. I mean if we were both perfect know it all's we would be boring pompous azzes, otherwise known as normal."

"True. Think you can try to hook me up on a good deal for a laptop."

"Probably. How much do you want to spend?"

"How much do you think I should spend?"

"Well knowing you, you'll start out with wow it can do all this and then your friends will be like look what else it could do and you'll want the best like you do for everything else in your life, so it may be a couple grand."

"For a laptop?"

"Yep."

"Well, let me know then."

Great another project. I mean, good something that will bring us closer together by me being able to help him out. Positive Mercedes, think positive.

The pancakes and eggs he had ordered for me were hitting the spot for sure. My stomach was finally calming down, the food was settling right and the conversation was positive. I mean he really sounds serious about us hooking up this time on a more frequent basis. He even wants the communication to be increased as a starter. I mean, who knew.

"Well I am all finished packing up. All that is left is the stupid check."

"I love that you taught me that, works every time." Umm well maybe not but he doesn't need to know that.

"I guess that is part of our information sharing part huh?"

"Yep, yep."

"Well then young lady, we have about an hour before we need to hit the road, what would you like to do?"

Work. No joke, I know next week will be utter hell and as for the plane ride home, let's face it; I am going to be straight knocked out. "A walk along the beach sounds nice."

"Let's go then."

As we walked towards the water its power overtook me again, "Visean, why is it that you started this whole thing between us anyway? I mean this really has far surpassed anything I ever imagined that it could be between us."

"Really?"

"Really."

"So you really thought that when I first met you that there would only be that one night between us and that is all."

"Obviously I stand here corrected."

"Obviously. I don't know Mercedes there was just something about you that made me say, don't let this one go."

"Whoa, most people run after they hear themselves say that."

"Well I," and off went his cell phone.

"You brought it with?"

"I need to hear from a couple of people to find out what exactly will be up when I get back."

"I understand." Yea right, watch it not be one of those people that he is waiting for.

"Hello."

I can only begin to wonder who it is on the other end and how many times they have tried calling without leaving a message, so that they could call repeatedly. Yea right, I know, I am standing here with him thinking this when X has been calling my ass every waking moment. No, I stand corrected, he calls every morning and then every evening, just trying or hoping to get hold of me. If he only how this weekend turned out, he would probably be pissed and give up. Who could blame him?

"Yea mom, things are great here."

Jeez Mercedes, how stupid do you feel now?

I waved my hand hello, which of course, he translated over to her. The conversation continued about our time here together, each of our flights, and what he had to do when he got home. His schedule sounded just like mine; work with no time for rest. Where will that leave the both of us is unknown.

"Mom says she is glad we had a wonderful time and that she hopes that you or I, or both of us will be back to visit soon."

"That's nice."

"So where were we?"

"Visean, do you think it will be possible for us to see each other one weekend a month?"

"Kinda like a weekend military thing?"

"Yea, one weekend a month to be all that we can be."

"And then some if we repeat last night."

"No doubt about that." Do we ever not remind each other about the wonderful sex we had the previous night or any other night for that matter? Yea, it is that good.

"Well we can try for the once a month, it is something that we should do. My question is that my schedule is more open during the weekdays and yours the weekend. We both know how short our weekends

can be if I am in and out of gigs or even on tour in a different city."

"Well that is very true and with my job, my clients need me during the week days during their regular business hours when they can schedule me in and not the weekends when they are out of the office. Even though, I could get way more work done in the office without anyone being in there to stop by and bug me."

"Is your boss still trying to make the moves on you?"

Man, does he have to know everything? Well I am the one who opens my big mouth to tell him everything, so yes, I guess he does. "He is too funny with his weak excuses to stop by my office sometimes. Truly he is harmless and I don't worry about him. One quick mention of his wife and he is quick to get to the point."

"Well you just let him know that I may not be there within that couple of hours, but I'll be there when he least expects it if he goes too far."

Wow, Visean is actually talking about protecting me, this is new. Too bad it means absolutely nothing to me. I mean really how many men in all of our lives have made the same claim and when the time comes, we handled it ourselves? Exactly. "I will keep that in mind, but don't get ready to jump a flight anytime soon to come to my rescue."

"Who said you need to be rescued? Girl the way your attitude is, we need to be rescued from you. Shoot, I might just show up to help him out when you are jumpin all over him with those words of yours. You can damage a man with some of the things you say."

Dammit, he is referring to the car ride up here and I know it. "Yea I know. I mean when I am pushed to far, my first thing is to spit a word that will let you know to back off. After that, it's on. Some of those words you can't take back."

I looked down at the sand thinking of what I had "spitted" at my father when I was 16 and he took my car away to make me feel the pain I had inflicted on

him. Something that I can never take back, something I can never explain, it was something that cut him deeply. It took months to let him know that I was pushed to far by the whole situation and he should have given the punishment and backed off instead of driving it deeper into me. From that point on, we both knew our boundaries, if there were ever to be any between father and daughter; they were drawn from that day forward.

"You okay?"

"Visean, you know back in the car...."

"Mercedes, I wasn't even referring to that. I am glad you made that point to me. I am not about to sit here and try to explain to you or give you a reason, now I know and I will try to be mindful of what I do and how it effects you."

"Just don't hide things from me." *Like I am doing to you, like he is going to do to me.* "Let's just keep working on that open communication that we have." *So I don't tell all. Skeletons. Closet. Hello.* "It has always been two ways and that is what makes us stronger." *The deep and the dark always comes out into the light.*

"Mercedes, you know I have friends, some of them are like brothers and sisters to me. When you have heard me answer the phone the same way I answer when I talk to you, I didn't know it affected you like that. I knew it did, but I didn't. You know?"

No I don't know. I don't know because I don't keep a list, or a novel like his father had mentioned, of who he talks to and their relationship to him. I won't keep a list either. "Visean all we can do is work on this new direction that we want to take."

"Well step one is definitely spending more time together, that is the biggest thing I would like to change."

"Me too."

"Minneapolis is a nice city Mercedes, you would love the energy there."

I know where he wants to go with this, but this is not the time nor the place to try and travel that road again. We have discussed this before without having talked about making more of a commitment to this relationship. If we are going to do this, we have to do it in some kind of order that makes sense to the both of us, so that we have a strong starting block to stand on. "I am sure I would, but the winters there are rougher than Chicago."

"Girl the winters there are nothing."

"How would you know? You aren't even there half of the winter season and it is a longer season than where I live, that is why you don't realize how freezing it can get there. Plus you get way more snow then we ever see."

"You are not kidding about that, but everyday isn't a bad day there. The snow can be very beautiful."

"Visean please, the only time your monkey butt thinks the snow is beautiful is when you are on a plane taking off for somewhere warmer. You look out your window and go, 'Wow, look at how beautiful it is.' When you know your azz was just screaming an hour prior about how if it wasn't for the snow you wouldn't have had to plow the driveway to make it to the airport and put up with the slushy streets and sidewalk ruining your new shoes."

He just gave me that sly smile like *dag can I ever get anything by her*. That might be the reason he likes me so much, cause the Lord knows I can't pull nothing by this man. We walked along and then headed back to pack up and leave. We really didn't say much after our little conversation about his home. I mean what am I supposed to do, pack up and leave everything for a man that is there 100 days out of 365? Then, when he is actually in the city, that is just it, he is in the city, not home, not with me. I know I would love to go and see

him perform more, but when you make a home, you have to know what it is exactly you want. Truthfully, right now I don't believe either one of us knows exactly what that is. Now if we make more of a commitment to this relationship to find that out, then yes, maybe I just will make that move. All a moment in time, and this time, those moments have to add up to something.

We packed up the car, did the stupid check, returned the keys, and headed out onto the open road. Visean pulled out his CD case and popped in one of the CDs that he played guitar on for every track. Of course, me having my own collection of Visean Scott CDs at home, I knew the whole CD by heart and began to sing the lyrics.

"Oh so now we think we can sing huh?"

"No, but it is either I sing or I fall asleep from not driving."

"Well you can drive."

"Would love to but the problem being that if I drive, you will fall asleep and let it be known now, I don't have a clue as to how to get to the airport from here."

"Well then, since you are in the mood to express yourself there is something I would like to ask you about."

Okay why do I feel the expression on my face looks like a deer staring into a semi-trucks headlights right about now? Calm yourself. Stop freaking out. He doesn't know. Just let him ask. "Sure, what's on your mind this time Mr. Visean?"

He turned down the volume, which was a first in our history, so this must mean the question holds some importance with him. "Mercedes, does it bother you to meet my other friends?"

Bother me? No. Bother them? Yes. I am sure I do not have to reiterate the way things go down when he introduces me; maybe he has actually caught on as to how it is that I am treated by his friends, well at least his female friends anyway. "Well Visean today is your

lucky day because I really do feel like expressing myself and this is one topic I won't mind speaking about."

"Really?"

"Really." I saw his hand put a stronger grip on the steering wheel. "First of all, I loved meeting everyone who attended the dinner party. It was great to meet people who are so dear to you and your family. Your cousin on the other hand, well I don't think she was to down with me being with you."

"Alex?"

"Duh!"

"Woman don't let Alex get to you, she has never, I mean never ever liked any of the women that I have ever introduced her to at any age of my life. I don't know why. I don't want to even guess why. The fact is...she just doesn't."

"Sweetie, if you want to know why she doesn't, did it ever to occur to you to stop and ask."

"Umm, not really."

"Okay, like I was saying, I like meeting your friends, whether it was the situation we had this weekend or if it is while we are together during your performances. The thing is, sometimes your friend's reactions to me are even worse than your cousins. The slit eyes, the thrown out hip, the cold stare, the unwilling hand...I mean for real what is that all about anyway. You hooked them up with free tickets like you did me. Do you remember when you introduced me to that couple out in Cali just a few nights ago?"

"No."

"Visean, the performance you just did, backstage, the lesbian couple you introduced me to."

"Oh, okay. What about them?"

What about them? "What about them? Chile, even as a lesbian couple, who would have not an interest in you other than your friendship, gave me attitude. Tell me what that was about?"

"They're probably just mad that I got you and they don't."

I rolled my eyes as he started laughing. He continued on his reasoning by stating, "Girl just one look at you all dressed up and that is all it takes. They were probably wondering why you haven't switched teams yet. They would love to eat you up and I do mean eat."

Lovely use of visual words Visean, thanks.

"In fact," he grabbed for his cell phone, "I bet I could get hold of them right now and hook the three of you up. You know they are from Cali and they get down and freaky like that."

"Visean, honey. Come back out of lesbo fantasyland and get a clue. I don't want them and you are not even close as to what I was trying to get at."

"Yes I was."

"How?"

"What you are saying is that when I do have the opportunity to introduce you to my friends, they are not welcoming to you."

"Wow, you did get it."

"Girl you should know what I can do by now. I can look, listen and hear all at the same time."

"I always knew I was with a multitalented man."

"What I am trying to tell you is that my friends think that they are in some way special because they first of all they know me and second of all they are backstage where most people would die to be. Then they see you walking up by yourself and they don't know what to think. So now, what do you think about meeting my friends? Because if we are to see each other on a monthly basis, I know for sure that you will be meeting even more of them. Is that cool with you?"

Just as long as you don't mind when I throw some of their attitude back at them. "That is cool with me. I mean let them throw their fits or security blanket over

you or whatever it is that they are trying to do, because in the end it is me back your hotel or house and us in your bed."

"See there are those words again."

"You know I am right."

"Yes baby girl I know you are and I want to keep it that way for a long time."

"Cool with me."

"Cool with me."

We continued down the highway, my eyes started to close and before I knew it I started hearing planes over my head. We returned the car and headed over to the check-in counters. We checked-in Visean first and amazingly enough, his bags didn't cost him anything extra to check in. After we checked me in we found our airline gates but unfortunately they were not even close to one another. We found a coffee shop to sit at until our flights started boarding.

One thing I can say that I like about airports is that I get to people watch. I watch all the people in business suits wishing they were in clothes that were more comfortable to travel in. I watch the airport employees walk by each other and give some type of humorous remark. And finally my favorite, I watch all the sickening couples who have to glue themselves to each other when they are not going on the trip together.

Visean and I are nothing like that. Hell, unless we crash, we'll see each other again. Then again, if we did crash, we might see each other again. Who said it would be over? It amazes me that grown folks can act like lovesick teenagers in a high school hallway between classes. I guess I am supposed to be all swept up in their endearing romance, but to me it is too damn dependent and needy looking. To each their own.

Visean finally got back from checking on things and grabbed the coffee I had gotten for him. He looked so

damn good, I hope we are for real about this monthly visit plan. "So, is your flight leaving on time?"

"Yep, I forgot that I have a layover in Ohio before continuing on to Minnesota."

"Joy. My flight seems to be on time also."

"Got your calendar with you?"

"Yea why?"

"Well if we are going to see each other again wouldn't it be a start to try and set a date."

"Do you have your calendar available?"

"Yes I do, but remember my changes on a daily and frequent basis."

So then, what is the point?

Mercedes, the point is that if your name is on that calendar than that date is taken. "Alright, how is the weekend of the 21st for you? Before you answer, let me remind you that if you are out on the road for a show it is not a bad thing. I do usually have work to bring with me that can be done while you are out doing that thing you do."

"Well the weekend of the 21st won't work because I am booked for studio sessions and those mofos last all day and all night."

"You know I think we are taking a wrong approach to this."

"Really, how do you suggest we find a date to agree on?"

"Well my time is relatively more open than yours. So you give me a date to look at."

"Even if it is a weekday?"

"Even if it is a weekday. Flights leave early enough in the morning that would allow me to work. I think the flight time is like an hour and thirty minutes and then with no luggage to check, I can just pick up a train downtown and wah-lah, Mercedes is back at her desk and hard at work. As long as you can get me to the airport on your end, no problem."

"True. So if you do come up during the week, how long could you stay for?"

"Well I am sure there are tons of flights that leave out late enough for me to do a day at work, come out that night, spend the next day with you and either take a really late flight home or a really early flight home."

"What about work?"

"My boss seems to like me, I am sure I can try to work something out. Besides one month you might have only a weekday open and the next a weekend night open. So it's not like I am going to be ghost from the office all that week."

"I am beginning to see how this might work."

"Visean, every time we see each other doesn't have to be some big extravagant ordeal, in some great city that I have never been to. You know, it can be just you and me seeing what it is like to be around the house with nothing planned."

Big fear there let me tell you. When I was married we lived in an apartment, so there was nothing for us to get into. Not like I am into gardening or anything, but living in a house gives you projects to do and that wasn't there for us. So maybe it should come as no surprise that idiot boy, yea my x-husband, got so damn involved into his car. I know I sound no better but there are limits. Like the person who wants to go all out on his garage and put every power tool in it, still has to think about basic home finances and realize he can't have all the toys at once.

There was this look of fear or something in Visean's eyes. Granted both of us never stop moving and home time is when we sit down and go, "So this is where I live." The look he had was something of thinking along the lines of could we handle that type of situation. I mean neither of us had to deal with this for a long time. One step at a time, right?

"Alright then, look to see the week before the 21st, because when I am booked with the studio not much

goes on before hand except for a couple of local gigs and you can go to those."

I looked thru my calendar and prayed. "Well it shouldn't be a problem. How about I come up on a Wednesday because most of my clients don't really work on that day and I can leave out early Friday morning. Flights should be a little cheaper that way also. The only other calendar I have to check is my work calendar to see if Vicki has added any appointments to it. Sometimes we don't link up with each other."

"Well I hope it works out." Leaned over and kissed me.

"I am going to miss you Visean."

"No you're not, because in no time you will be back with me again."

"Nice thought, I will hold on to that."

"You know if I have those weekdays open, I could always come see you."

I immediately smiled instead of giving the true look of terror. "I would love to have you over."

"Well then, let's see what works for us. At least that way you could work a half of day while I sleep in."

"Yea right, you will keep me up all night and I'll be coming home to sleep when you are just waking up."

"Hey what time is it?"

"Time for us to go and catch our flights."

"Alright now keep those men off of you."

"Whatever Visean. I got the only man I want standing here in front of me."

"Well I like that."

"Well then let's make it work that week."

"We will and before I forget, they all got the guy at the same time in the end."

"Huh?" He just winked. "Oh." He is such a dork.

We kissed and hugged goodbye. I turned and walked towards my airline terminal not looking back, something that I do not do. I always want to cry after

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our time, because what I enjoyed, what I want, is now gone and I don't know when it will be back. Although both of us are making plans and trying to put them into effect about spending more time with each other, I don't know when it will be back. That is the part that always sucks about all this, always!

♂ ladies and gentlemen ♀

I walked through security and sat down by my gate. Great another work week ahead and I will have so much to do when I get back to get caught up again it won't be funny. I turned on my cell phone and listened to my messages. Actually, it was only one message from this man who had found my number and wanted to see if I still existed. This man was beyond fine, what is his name, because of course he didn't leave it in the message, which reminds me why it didn't last.

This chile was arrogant as all get out. He wanted the finer things in life and worked hard for them but didn't have a clue how to treat them. The man could not make it through a meal without one complaint about the service, the food, the chef, the table, the silverware, or even the window not letting in enough light. It was like he thought he was God himself in heaven and that beauty and perfection should be around him at all times. Yea, okay. The way he would go on and on about my outfit or my hair or my perfume...simply annoying! Unless I spent my entire paycheck on my looks, this chile was not happy. No wonder I forgot his name.

Wait. It was S something. I don't even know why I am even trying to remember this fools name. I do although remember how it ended. Figures right? Can't remember the good, if there was even any in this instance, but can never forget the bad. Wait, ending it was good. I know everyone can see the devious smile on my face, oh well.

The attendant had called my row so now I was standing in the hallway waiting to board the plane. I hate assigned seating because I have the worst luck with it. I always have to sit by a small child or someone

who isn't in a good mood or by someone who won't let me work.

Okay so what was his name? Well I can see the arrogance has not changed since this brother hadn't bothered to leave his name or his number. When we broke up, it was awful. Well for him it was but not for me. With him, I put on one hell of a show. I wore the most perfect outfits I had in my closet, did my hair before every date, if he spent the night I woke up early to make sure I looked as fresh as the night before. Girlfriend let me tell you, I was running around with my whole make-up kit on me at all times with him. Not a hair was out of place, a nail broke nor chipped, not a loose thread on my clothing and my make-up was looking better than any movie star out there. Why in the hell I did this, I have no idea. Truly, I am not like this.

I took my seat and joy, a mother with a baby took the aisle seat. She must have been back in the bathroom because I would have seen her and asked to change seats right away. Please let the person in the middle seat be somebody of large size to stop the screams this child is bound to produce due to the change in cabin pressure putting pressure on their tiny little ears. I thought for sure this flight would not have this situation on it since it was a mid weekday and in the afternoon. Obviously, I stand corrected.

Now I will tell you, I am not ashamed to move if the flight has empty seats available. I am sorry, but you know I have a lot of work to try to do on this flight and I am refusing to let myself pass out because playtime is over. After the last calls for seating were announced I noticed that no one was going to sit between us, so therefore there must be extra seating available for me to move. I excused myself and found the attendant, explained that I would rather not be seated near an infant due to the amount of work I hoped to accomplish while in flight and that I would like to take an open seat if possible.

She gave me a stunned look, but did direct me to an open seat; thank you Lord for her patience and understanding in the matter. I went back to my seat, excused myself as I grabbed my carryon items, and proceeded to move towards the back of the plane. The mother just sneered at me, whatever woman, to each their own.

I took my seat next to a very sharply dressed man; it was as if when he got off the plane his business meeting would start. We exchanged the normal pleasantries before take off and once into the air we both opened our laptops and got down to business.

Sheldon. Dammit that is that idiot's name. Sheldon. Jeez, how could I ever forget that? Probably because I wanted to. Mr. Arrogant Sheldon. Oh did I put on a show for you and boy did you hate it when you found out the truth about me. Maybe I just played him to teach him a lesson, but after what I did, he still called? No, something ain't right with that. Forgive and forget is not that brothers forte.

Ladies and Gentlemen, let me tell you I had this man going and more than likely for awhile there I had myself going as well. I am extremely not the person I pretended to be in order to be with him. Sure I like to dress nice, look good, own nice things, and act in a nice manner, but to be perfect...hell no that ain't me. It was right after my divorce and this man picked me to hold up on a pedestal.

I had to find a way to end the relationship and show him the exact reason why. It turned out my boy was throwing a party and I knew Sheldon would never approve of the people or of the on goings there, it was the perfect setting to end the farce I was living. I was getting to the point where I was ready to bring this brother to the reality that is life because I had enough of studying how he could exist the way he did.

Alright, before you start, I am not the one to judge, but I am the one to teach your ass a lesson should I

deem it necessary. With this brother, I found it very necessary.

My boy Li'l C contacted me out of the blue about a party he was throwing. "Mercedes you have got to be there, man this will be the best event I put on yet." Homeboy was straight up from the hood, cool as all get out and someone's who smile made you melt. We were to cool to hook up but couldn't resist a little sumthin-sumthin every now and then. Let me tell you, the now and again couldn't come soon enough, bro had it goin on in the bedroom.

Li'l C was always throwin' parties somewhere in the city and this one was going to be a private one for all his peeps who had been down with him from the start. He was going to hold it at his usual spot but then he decided home is where the heart is and for our support he wanted us in his heart. He lives over on the West Side of Chicago, and I know I just heard some give a shout out for the West Side. When I told Sheldon about it I did so in a different light that way he would go.

"Do I have to take my car? That neighborhood doesn't have the safest places to park."

"Of course not, we can afford a cab to and from there. We won't bother with the car."

"Alright then, what is the appropriate dress for this occasion?"

Alright now, quit trippin and just listen. "Well my friend throws pretty casual dress down parties, so jeans, boots, and shirt, nothing special."

"You don't mean baggy jeans and boots do you?"

"Sheldon, straight legged jeans are fine. I am just answering your question."

"Well what will you be wearing?"

Did I not tell you? "Hmm, that is a good question. Well probably a pair of jeans, a cami shell with jacket and my black leather boots."

"What kind of music?"

"House and varied forms of it."

"Is this going to be a gay party?"

Holding back from totally hitting him upside his head, I smiled and said, "Sheldon, house music is not all gay, everybody likes it. Most likely the party will be mixed."

"Alright, but don't plan on staying all night, I am sure that there won't be too many people that we know or want to talk to."

Yea right, this brother had no clue about half the people I associated with from the underground music scene. Simply put, go to a Chicago club and you better have someone watching your back. "The party starts at eleven and once you hear my boy spin you won't even worry about who is there to talk to, we'll be out on the floor dancing."

"Eleven? Who starts a party at eleven? Does one show up fashionably late by coming at midnight?"

More like 1 a.m. because that is when the live mixing begins. Smile Mercedes, get him to this party and you are a free woman. "Yep."

Sheldon gave his usual disapproving look, "Is it really necessary that we go?"

"It will be fun, a little bit of a change for us. We can drink a little, mingle, and leave. Plus it would mean a lot to him, he has been a friend of mine for years."

"What kind of party is this again?"

"My friend made his third CD and wants to do a private release party. Test out his sound with his friends; get a feel from people who like his work. After all, it is his third and he wants to make sure he isn't going out of style; friends will tell you the truth. There won't be anything wild going on there." Yea right.

"Fine then."

So the party came, of course Sheldon showed up in the most geek outfit possible. Straight-legged jeans, a button down shirt that he tucked in and a pair of black Italian leather loafers. I am looking at this fool like *thank you so much for making this even easier on me.*

You know what, when you break up or end a relationship with somebody you do some stupid ass stuff. We all do, it's an inevitable law of dating. Because sooner or later you wake up and figure out what you are in isn't for you and that is what I had done. Therefore, it was time to cut the rebound and move on with life.

We arrived at the party around eleven-thirty. The cab pulled up outside my boy's crib where his boys were hanging out waiting for people to arrive to send them to the right floor.

"We are not going in where those men are standing are we?"

I looked over and recognized Li'l C's closest friend Jhonny. "Yes, that is the place."

"But they look like gangsters."

"Sheldon, don't judge them by their clothes, in fact I know that guy with the black cap on, he is my friends closest friend. They're just standing outside to let people know where to go."

I saw the cab driver look back at us in the rearview mirror sensing what was about to go down.

Sheldon looked up at the building and saw a window filled with people with drinks in hand. He looked at me and said, "I am sorry Mercedes, but this isn't proper for us. Cab driver, please take us back to her apartment building."

Okay, time to lay it on thick. "Sir, please wait. Sheldon, come on baby, please let's go in. We will only stay an hour and then leave. We will listen to his CD, pay some compliments, call a cab, and politely excuse ourselves. Remember, not everyone can enjoy the wealth that you and I do." Yea right, I don't even make near what Sheldon makes.

He just gave me this look, so disapproving, the *how dare I* look. "Alright then, I know how you like to support your friend's efforts. I just wish that they were

into high class art and this was a gallery opening downtown instead of well you know."

We got out of the cab and headed towards the stairs, Jhonny (the man with the black cap) recognized me right away, gave me a hug and said, "Hey girl, you made it."

"C'mon Jhonny, you know I wasn't going to miss this one. Let me introduce you to my boyfriend Sheldon."

Now see, Li'l C and Jhonny already knew what was going to go down that night, so we came up with a little something that would be full proof. Jhonny stuck out his fist to Sheldon, "What up dawg."

Sheldon, looking at his fist said, "Hello" and stuck out his hand.

Jhonny who knew what was up complied. "Oh man I am sorry." Changing his fist to an open hand, he shook Sheldon's hand and said hello. He instructed us where to go.

Half way up the stairs Sheldon stopped us, "I am serious Mercedes, I don't like this, it is like a drive by or something will go down here tonight."

Since Sheldon has not spent any part of his life in the city but only in the northern suburbs every news headline he had ever heard about was now running through his head. I grabbed his hand and said, "Sheldon, relax."

The door to Li'l C's place was open, music was slammin out of it, people were loud, and smoke filled the air. As we made our way in, people just looked at Sheldon like there was something wrong with him. When I introduced him to friends they showed him respect, and I wish I could say the same for him. We grabbed a drink and made our way to an open corner.

"I thought you said you didn't know many people here Mercedes."

"Well there are more people here then I expected. What do you think of the music?" Like everyone else in

the room I couldn't stop moving, the beat automatically took over and put you into a trance.

"It is okay, if you are into that kind of style."

Obviously, he could see that I was. "What is wrong with the style of this music? It is freeing if you just let it in and grab you."

"How often do you frequent these clubs that play this music? You seem to know a lot of people here."

"Well I haven't been out in awhile, but while I was married we went out a lot. Especially the underground clubs, where DJ's would put out music so unheard of you came home dizzy. They would take you so high you wanted to beg them to take you down."

Sheldon went on and on about something and my eyes caught every fine man trying to make it by us in the crowd. Freedom is going to be so good. Ladies I am still a sucker for baggy jeans, baggy shirts, a bandanna, and a pair of boots. Hello! Ouch. How you doin? What is your name? Can I fill your drink? Alright now.

Especially some of those Hispanic males, ouch! Hey once again, even in this instance, music brought us all together.

"Mercedes who is it that you are looking for?"

See even back then I went off into my own little world and zoned everybody else out. "I am sorry Sheldon, what did you just ask, I was a little too involved with the music."

Liar.

"Who is it that you are looking for in the crowd? I hope it is your friend so we can leave already."

Right, go with that. He is the one who I was looking for. Not all the fine azz men who filled the room. Thank you Sheldon. "Li'l C is right over there. C'mon let's go say hi."

I grabbed Sheldon's hand and made it over to where my boy was standing at. Got dayum he was looking good. Except I had to watch where my eyes

stayed focused because I had Sheldon in tow and Li'l C had a girl on his arm. Hope she is just the flavor of the day because after I get rid of this arrogant azz, I am going to be ready for some Li'l C and he ain't so little.

Bad, Mercedes, bad.

He saw us walk up, grabbed his girl's hand, and walked over. "Mercedes girl, you made it. Yo I knew my girl would not let me down." He gave me a hug and whispered in my ear, "That him?"

When he looked at my face I smiled and he knew. "Li'l C this is my boyfriend Sheldon and Sheldon this is the crazy sick DJ you hear spinning right now Li'l C."

Li'l C held out his fist, "What up dawg?"

Sheldon not even holding out his hand, "Yes, well that does seem to be the question tonight."

Li'l C just looked at his fist and said, "C'mon man, a pound ain't nothin but another form of a handshake."

Still no movement from Sheldon.

Li'l C withdrew his fist and said, "Alright then. Hey Mercedes, this is La Tonya."

"Hello, nice to meet you."

Now back on this night, would be the last of the females who did not give me attitude when introduced. First, probably because she looked like she was rollin on something and second she had a 40 oz. in her hand. Good, a ghetto fab girl, he won't be tied up with you for long. "Hello." She leaned to look past my shoulder to get a better look at Sheldon, smiling, "Hello."

Girl, you can have him. Here are the keys, the title, the salary papers, and everything. You have a nice day. Obviously, she wasn't messed up enough not to recognize the look of money.

With the sound of disappointment in his voice, Sheldon replied with a polite response.

"Man, this CD is beyond, when did you record it?"

"Well I have been working on the sound for awhile, trying to mix up the old, the new and the future. We just finished it a couple of weeks ago."

"Where you gonna throw it at first?"

"You know the underground will show the love or show the door, so probably over off of Ashland."

"Uh-huh. You bein' brave now child, you had better watch out. You know those fools will shoot you on the spot if they don't move to what you got."

"Ain't no better way to find out."

La Tonya was off in la- la land as our conversation continued. Sheldon became more infuriated as he heard more and more slang fall from my lips. Or maybe it was the fact that more and more people who just recognized me from being out came over to say hello. Soon enough, Sheldon was left standing on the outside.

Now before you start going, "Damn that is cold. Take your man to a party and then ignore him like that" you weren't there and you don't know. In fact, I asked his opinion of things several times with no response. People said hello and he wouldn't even speak back; his only response was a slight nod of acknowledgement that they were in his presence. He just assumed that everyone there was below him in some way or another and decided not to speak.

The conversation then fell off into some realm of reality that I don't like to deal with so I decided to try to get Sheldon to dance with me a little. A group had started out in the middle of the living room and I wanted to join in. So I grabbed his hand and led him out to the floor...I danced, he stood there. After about 30 minutes, I gave up. I tried everything to relax him so that he would just have some fun while we were there. I wasn't about to leave because of him, Li'l C was about to get on the tables and mix live, and I was not about to miss that.

Anyway, the night ended in a huge argument with him telling me that he didn't understand how I could associate with "those" people. That I am divorced now and can move onto a better crowd than my ex-husband chose to be with.

He went off about how a woman in my position, cannot afford to have any friends that may be the cause of some trouble, that would lead to problems at work. He told me that although there are many types of good people in this world that I should be selective of those who I choose to associate myself with. "If you want to further yourself in this world, friends like that are not going to help you."

"What do you mean friends like that? If you paid any kind of attention to the music you were hearing you would realize that the man has a gift for mixing music. That gift will lead him to the places that will make him successful when he is ready."

"When he is ready? Guy's like that are never ready. They think drugs, partying and women are the only things their daily meaningless life should consist of. Did you see the girl your friend had on his arm, the wench was on drugs and drinking a 40 oz. like a man. Men like your friend talk and talk about the great future they are working on but never do anything about."

"Watch what you say about my boy Sheldon!"

"Your boy? Mercedes, you sound like some kind of person from the hood when you say that."

"You mean a hood rat Sheldon. No I am not a hood rat, Li'l C is my boy."

"That is another thing, what is the deal with all of the Ebonics lately? I have never heard you talk like this, like you are from the inner city. Did your *boy* teach you that? What else has he taught you Mercedes? In what kind of way is he that to you, I did notice the way you two looked at each other."

I smiled; shoot if you had went to bed with Li'l C your azz would be smiling to from the quickest little memory

of any night spent in bed with him. "He is a very nice pick me up, like chocolate but lasts longer."

Ouch! Damn girl, cut the man a little deeper. He has treated you very nice you know.

Please, controlled me is more like it.

"So you slept with him. Well that says a lot about who you are and what you are looking for."

"What would it be that I am looking for Sheldon? Someone like you? Mr. Perfect? Mr. Complain about imperfection? Someone who wants to personally design my future so that it perfectly aligns with yours."

"Yes, how could you not see that I have a future that is moving onwards and upwards where your boy doesn't even have a prayer of a future. Not one that could afford you."

"Excuse me, afford me? I am not even going to touch that because I know better about myself. As for my boy, that great future for him is now a step further along with the release of that CD."

"Release of that CD? Please, that party was nothing more than getting his friends to listen. Then he will release the few copies he can afford and they will go and tell their friends to buy them up at the local record store. It will never be nothing more than that because there is never a market for that further than the front door."

"Wrong. Look Sheldon, there is a place called the Internet in which one can release music either through a site or by building one of his own. Hell, look at the way *iPod Podcasts* are taking off. Li'l C has done Internet, websites, *iPod* and *Podcasts*. He has two previous CD's that sold over a thousand copies each. To which I note that some of those copies went to overseas buyers. Music studios have even approached him to come in and mix tracks for artists to record on. Why is it if a person doesn't wear what we wear to work everyday they are never going to be anything? Why is it if a person wears baggy jeans, a baggy shirt, and

boots we expect that the only thing he or she must know how to do is rap? Sheldon, life is more than a white shirt and tie. I may not be able to stomach my ex-husband but at least he kept it real with everyone. What is the problem that you can't?"

"Mercedes, obviously you are just defending your boy, as you so call him, at the expense of our relationship."

"I don't defend anyone Sheldon; I don't let people put my friends down when they won't even take a moment to open their mind to find out who the person is. You didn't give one person tonight a second look before you judged them."

"Look at the girl he had on his arm, do you want to be the next victim of that type of lifestyle? Do you want to be the next drunken doped up slut he decides to take to bed, oh wait I forgot you already were."

Sheldon sat there staring me dead in the eyes, looking at me like the ever so perfect woman who was up on his pedestal now decayed with age. Now I know you are waiting to hear that I hauled off and hit this man to the floor. Pulling a punch that a boxer couldn't even throw on his best day, but words speak louder and cut deeper than fists and this is where I hit my hardest. "I am real, by being so, I am not perfect. How I live makes me an open and learning person that will accomplish a lot in life because I chose to live life to its fullest. News flash, to do that it doesn't take a lot of money. You know what, all that I do for you to be your perfect woman isn't even me and no I don't enjoy it or see it as bettering myself. I am not the drunken drugged up slut that was on his arm tonight when I am in or out of bed with him. I am the woman that he knows and that is all he ever asks of me, unlike you."

"Obviously I was wrong about you."

"Do I look like I want to be designed by you? I know I did, but now you know who I have been struggling to be since I can't remember when. You, Sheldon, are

not a happy person and when I met you I wasn't either, that is how we ended up together."

"Mercedes, frankly, I am lost. I don't understand anything that is going on here or the matter that has went on tonight. It's late, we both need some rest, and in the morning we can continue this conversation."

"No Sheldon, we cannot."

"What are you saying? That this is over?"

"Sheldon, can you accept a woman who doesn't have perfect hair, nails and face 24/7? Can you accept a woman who would rather go out in khakis and a half shirt to a club than an evening dress? It is like I have all these personalities inside me, when all it really is that I don't want to fit into any one social spot. I want to fit in everywhere so that I can experience everything. Look I enjoy the evenings out with you at expensive restaurants, concerts in the park, plays and such; but I also like to go to clubs, wear weird clothes and a weird hairstyle. Hell I would even attend another alternative rock concert where there is 99.9% White kids. It is just me. That is how I find out what God put here, at least everything that I have access too. What is so wrong with that?"

Sheldon just gave me this disappointed look. I know what I had done to him was wrong in a way, but in the beginning, I really thought I was supposed to be this type of woman. That I was to give up all the things that I enjoy to settle for someone of a better class. I was wrong. After Marcel I felt like Sheldon was a step up but I was wrong, and I would not deny myself from being myself anymore.

"Sheldon you made me realize that unless I am me and not what you, my ex, or my friends expect me to be, I am never going to be happy. You didn't give anyone in that room a chance tonight to speak, to learn, to share, not anything because you thought it would be meaningless. I can't be that type of person and I can't be with a person who is."

"Mercedes with me you could have made it so far."

"No Sheldon, without you I will make it even further."

He got his coat and left.

Now he is calling me. Knowing his arrogance the call is probably to inform me that he has made it further in his life plan and that I have not. What an idiot. He will never realize that I have made it further than he ever has.

By the way, in case you are just a little curious. A week after my personal step into being free, Li'l C and I did hook up, and it felt better than it ever did. Damn that man is something special in bed. Now I have to think about the two men who think that they are the only one who is special to me.

The Flight Captain came on and announced we were in our final descent and asked the flight attendants to secure the cabin. While I had gotten a good amount of work done, it still had not put me near to what I had planned to be done. I closed up everything and stared at the city lights as we prepared to land.

We landed safe and sound and as soon as the fasten seatbelt light went off everyone jumped out of their seats to exit and stood in line until they opened the doors. I can never understand how people will stand up in their seats with their heads bent all weird due to the luggage compartments overhead to wait to get into the aisle to get their luggage to leave the plane. Now why after sitting for x amount of hours, where you are moderately comfortable, would you stand up to bend in odd ways or kneel on the seat and look at everyone standing in the aisle to depart the plane? I mean, hello, getting off a plane is like leaving church after a service has ended, one row empties and then the next. As for me, I just sit and wait our turn, nice and comfortable.

Since the seat next to me was empty, I prepared my stuff in that seat to grab when it was our turn to exit. I

grabbed my phone and turned it on to hear all one hundred messages I received while I was in the air. When my phone finally found service it alerted me that I actually had messages awaiting me. I was about to call and listen but our row was up for exiting. It was probably just Sheldon calling wondering why I hadn't called back after figuring out that I probably incinerated his number along with all the memories of our time together after that night. I grabbed my stuff and headed out with the rest to find my car that I had parked somewhere.

I did put the parking ticket in my bag along with the little reminder slip of where I had parked my baby, right? Cause if you all remember I was flying like a plane in this joint to make my plane out of here, so you know I was not paying too much attention to the important things that would help me when I got back.

You know how when you get off the plane and you are all disoriented as to where you are in the gates and where you have to go to get back to parking or luggage areas and you are like in your own little world and just following everybody who was on your flight, praying that the lead person at least has a clue where they are headed to? Yea, well that was me. I was locked in a trance of thought in my own little world. I was concentrating on finding my car within 30 minutes instead of two hours and not paying attention to anyone other than the person who was leading the pack out of the terminals and back to reality. That reason right there is probably why when we passed by security I did not hear a man calling my name over and over and over again. It was when I got the tap on my shoulder I finally realized that Mercedes was actually me.

The male voice that I heard belonged to Xavier. When I turned around my face showed the amount of surprise that it was him.

"Mercedes, hi." He gave me this loving look like, aren't you glad it is me?

Oh my God! I almost lost my balance from the weight of my bags and he caught me.

"Surprised you didn't I?!"

"X," *breathe*, "what, how did you know I was here?" Of all the nights to be working late in the office, why in the hell is this not one of them?

"Well if a girl would just return a brothers call when she is out of town he might not have to play P.I to find her."

"I did return your calls but I kept getting your voicemail."

"Maybe I couldn't wait to hear your voice in person. So you got any luggage to go get?"

I stood there stunned; he had to know where I was coming from. Who told him? Ori wouldn't, she knows she would be looking at funeral homes as her next home if she did. Miranda, it has to be Miranda. If that B-I....

Mercedes! She didn't know about the weekend away; she just knew that you were out of town. You are the fool who tells all your closest friends your flight times and numbers when you travel so if anything should happen and they catch the report on the news they'd know if it was you or not going down in flames. So don't be mad at your girl, cause you're the fool who let the cat out of the bag, just not the whole cat this time, thankfully.

"Mercedes? Baggage?"

"Huh? Yea, I mean no. I just did carryon items for this trip. X, why are you here to pick me up, my brat is parked right outside. Oh no, did something happen to my car, is that why you are here?"

"Girl, you need to quit trippin about that car of yours, I mean I could understand if it was a like the one I have, but yours, please."

"Whatever X. What is wrong with my car?"

"Nothing is wrong with your car. I just came here because I missed you so much that I wanted to get in on the first opportunity to see you. I already know you will probably crash when you get home so you can go to work tomorrow morning. So how was your business trip?"

Business trip? Oh! "Same thing, different city...no problems. You know just the usual." Think Mercedes. C'mon think. Yea of how I am going to kill Miranda.

"I would have thought she would have called you to let you know I had asked her about your trip and that I might be here when you landed. Guess she didn't. I thought you women were all into that romantic stuff."

"Romantic?" I was still in shock, there were people whizzing by us, and I couldn't get a grasp of the ground that I was standing on or the man who was in front of me. I am so screwed.

"Well I guess it could have been had I shown up with roses or something but I didn't even know if I was going to be able to get out of the office."

"Oh." *Breathe. Think. No, not of killing Miranda, think clearly.* "Well I am glad that you surprised me and surprised is the word, trust me on that. Ya know what, I had turned on my phone and found out I had messages and was going to listen to them and before I could it was our rows turn to exit. So do me a favor, hold this bag for me while I step into the ladies room where it is quieter so I can retrieve those messages. I want to make sure that it's not my boss or my assistant looking for me or with an urgent client message."

"No problem."

The man stood there smiling. He was smiling at me, knowing I just got off a plane from somewhere on the East Coast. Granted, Visean lives in Minnesota, so had it been a plane from there he probably would not be smiling but reaming my ass out for public display. He was there smiling with no clue of who I just spent my extended weekend with. I got into the bathroom and

hit the message key on my phone. A woman who walked in behind me gave me the of *hmm running men like they run us* look. Please. Okay. So, maybe. When my phone finally connected to my voicemail there were three messages.

Message one. Sheldon, Mr. Privacy, did call back to let me know his number and the time he could be reached, I guess that man wasn't so stupid after all.

Message two. Visean had called to let me know he had made his layover city, was missing me already, and then started trippin about something that a passenger had done on his flight.

Message three. Which was received two minutes before my plane was to land on the ground, was from Miranda. "Mercedes, this is Miranda. Look it is Tuesday and I am so sorry that I didn't even think to call earlier than this. I forgot to tell you what I had told Xavier until I ran into Oriana and she suggested that I get hold of you and girl, wouldn't you know it I forgot to call you until now." *Kill her.* "Xavier wanted to know where you went on your business trip. Since I was carrying the information you had given me in my purse, you know incase I was walking by a television set while I was out and they reported some plane crash I would have the information right there with me to know if it was you or not, I gave it to him." *Kill her.* "Since the two of you have been friends for so long, I thought you wouldn't mind. Girl, that man is looking better than ever, is he single still. Maybe you should hook the two of us up cuz you know the trifling men that I am runnin into out here on my own. Sistah's need to stick together. That is a whole other topic that we can discuss another day. See you when you get home." *Oh you will when I kill you.*

I walked over to the bathroom mirror, straightened myself up, took a deep breath, exhaled and began to walk out. The woman who had given me the look had walked by me to grab a towel to dry her hands and

gave me that look of disgust. Yea, whatever. I walked out and found X watching the crowds of people move by.

"Well that took you long enough, I thought I was going to have to go in with my eyes covered and yell out for you or feel around like a blind person and see if I could run into you. Then the thought touching a person that I wouldn't be caught dead laying a hand on crossed my mind and so I stayed out here and waited."

Now I was the one just standing there smiling with a blank look on my face. "Well it turns out Miranda did call and you know how girlfriend loves to run her mouth and that is what really took up my time."

"Well as much as I love this airport, maybe we could get out of here. I took the train over so I was hoping you could give me a ride."

Like I have a choice. "Sure, no problem. In fact, you can play the game that I usually play when I get home, 'Where Did I Park My Brat At?'"

"You're kidding right? I mean you did take the little reminder slip they provide at the elevator to remind you where you parked at, right?"

"Okay, we are talking about my car here, I have been dreaming of driving him because I miss him so much, of course I got every little detail of where I parked him at." Well I hope I did. I started reaching blindly into my laptop case and found the little precious piece of paper.

"Good, shall we go?"

"Lets."

We walked down endless hallways with him carrying my bag in one hand and holding my hand in the other. This is just too much. I mean had I had the time to check my messages and hear that X could have possibly been waiting for me I could have had this figured out, but now I am flying by the seat of my pants. Damn, I hope my storytelling skills are up to par today.

What choice do I have but to tell him stories. I don't want to tell him the truth about where I was or who I was with, incase everything that happened this weekend turns out to be mute like it has in the past. After all, he really does believe I am coming back from a business trip and the only person who knows the deal is Mom and Ori, so I am safe for now, right? This is too crazy. I mean I don't really know what is up with Visean and I. Yet, here I am greeted at the airport by X, who is now holding my hand and walking with me to my car.

How do men do this? For real, how do they go see their lover, freak, or whatever and then go home to their wife, their girl and lay down next to them? Especially if they just climbed out of the other woman's bed. Guess I may have to find out for myself if he decides to spend the night. Eww, can I really sleep with two men in the same 24 hours? Well technically speaking it is over 24 hours but dayum. How do they do this? This proves that men like that; they have no conscious what so ever.

In less than 20 minutes we finally found the correct parking elevator and then found my brat, a new record I might add. I know. I am such a geek.

Nothing was really said, like I said, he carried one of my bags in one hand and held my hand in the other and just smiled. There has to be something behind that smile, like he knows and he is here to make a statement before Visean can. I don't know, all I do know is right now I am going to kill Miranda and no you guys, I don't care that she did not know all the facts about my trip. Her innocence is not even a factor to my quiet rage right now.

I guess X could tell I was totally into my driving, since I had inserted a CD and blasted it as soon as we got out of the parking area and out onto the expressway. It was the only way to get away from my thoughts. I was driving like a street racer, not caring about Mickey and

his lights that would flash if I had crossed his radar. I finally slowed it down as we neared my apartment.

"Ha! New record time home." Leaned in, kissed the steering wheel, and said, "I love you baby, good job on that one. Thank you for taking good care of me."

Looking at me like I had done lost my damn mind X said, "You weren't kidding when you said you missed driving your baby were you?"

"Problems with my driving?"

"Nope, just kicked back taking notes on how to beat you."

"Dream that dream of yours chile, because that is all that it will ever be, a nice dream."

"Whatever Mercedes. I see you all those moves you be doing like you are on *Speed Channel*. Nice moves, but I can still do better."

"Bring it on then. Let's go."

We both laughed as we unpacked the car and headed to my apartment. What do I do now? Dammit I got so into my driving that I forgot that the smart thing to do would have been to go to his apartment and just drop him off! Ugh! Now I will have to hope he thinks about taking a taxi or I will have to ask in some kind of manner if he is ready for a ride home.

Will he leave? Should I make him leave? Should I fake falling asleep when he goes to use the bathroom so when he comes out he will feel sorry for me and leave? Maybe I should just tell him I am on my period, I mean it's not like he knows that much about me. Especially that. Dammit, why did Miranda have to tell him my flight information? Well at least he isn't questioning me about the trip.

Dag, I forgot. How in the hell I am supposed to call Visean to let him know that I made it home alright? For once, the man is going straight home, well supposedly, and if I don't call, he will call. Okay, maybe it is better that he calls, and then it would just look like a normal

phone call from out of the blue. I mean, Visean has called the house before when X has been over. Hmm.

I dropped my laptop in the living room, my carryon in the bedroom and my toiletry bag into the bathroom. When I got back into the living room X was standing at the window looking out. I looked over at my phone and saw that I had five messages waiting. Dammit, I forgot to call the landline to retrieve my personal messages. Well I will just ignore them and check them when and if he leaves.

"Everything okay X?"

He turned around walked over, took me in his arms, and kissed me. "Now it is since you didn't even hug me at the airport."

"Sorry, it was just that I was so freaked out that you were there when I got off my flight. I mean I travel so much by myself that I just zone out to get where I need to be. Plus all that mushy home coming stuff is just sometimes depressing." Hold up, I just admitted that? Man, jet leg is a bitch.

X kissed me again and all I could think of was did he wonder if I was kissing him back.

"Tired?"

Guess he did.

"Definitely. I have to unpack, which is easy and then hit the bed. I hardly accomplished what I wanted to and came back with even more to do. There is going to be a lot of late nights at the office for awhile."

"I can help you out with that."

"Really? How?"

"You'll see. Want me to go?"

"No." Freak! What in the hell did I say no for? Hell yes I need for you to leave. Mercedes!

"You sure?"

Well girl you already went ahead and told the man to stay so go ahead and tell him to stay. "No problem, you know where the stuff to change into is at." Take your head, pound against wall!

With that, he went into the bedroom, found the stuff to change into, and walked into the bathroom shutting the door behind him. As soon as the door shut I hit the phone, dialed up Visean and prayed for his voicemail. One, two, three, and "Hey you. Oops, I mean, hey lover girl."

Damn, damn, damn. "Whatever. Hi, make it home okay?" I could hear the water running; thank God X thought to take a shower.

"Mmm-hmm, the flight wasn't so bad after I got away from that stupid fool on the plane talking about how bad my friend was at guitar."

"For real, what was all that about anyway?" I could hear variations in the water hitting the bathtub, which meant he was in the shower, good I got a few minutes.

"Girl I do not know, nor do I care. All I know is I have a hundred and one messages to return and probably won't sleep for the next week with all the studio time I have scheduled."

"Tell me about it, my ass is going to be doing the same thing, just as long as we both try to make that date we talked about available."

"Girl, don't you know that I will."

"I hope so."

"No such thing this time Mercedes. I am serious about making you and me a more frequent thing."

"I am willing if you are." Yep, yep, that is why X is in my shower right now. Speaking of which I could hear the water starting to fade which meant he was ending his shower. Got to go, got to go.

"Well I know your punk butt is tired cause I made it that way so I am going to let you go. Get some sleep and I will call you tomorrow."

Yeah right.

Mercedes!

"Okay, goodnight sweetie."

"I love you Mercedes, just know that I am trying."

I looked over at the bathroom door, "I love you to Visean. I am trying too."

When I hung up the phone I started listening to my messages. Out of the five, three were static that must have been from somebody calling me on their cell phone and then hanging up. Sheldon was also one of the calls, telling me he would try my cell and the fifth was somebody speaking Spanish, obviously a wrong number. What in the hell is up with Sheldon calling my home phone and then my cell phone, what could be so damn important? Do I even call back or do I just let the man keep calling?

Xavier walked out with a towel wrapped around his waist, what happened to putting on the shorts he took in there with him? He came over, lifted me into his arms, and took me to the bedroom. My heart was racing, was I about to do what I thought I could not do?

He laid me out on the bed, laid his strong body on top of mine, and started working my body with his. His hands moved around my body like he had been there so many times before. I don't know what happened, or how I did what we did, but man he felt so good I couldn't stop. He made love to me with such power and passion until I was his completely. I fell asleep in his arms, wondering how in the hell we just did that and how it was that I felt no guilt from it.

Early the next morning he woke me up with a kiss goodbye.

"I missed you Mercedes, I just had to show you how much."

With that, he left and I hadn't even noticed I wasn't breathing.

♂ on and on ♀

Okay so yesterday I was lying in bed next to Visean wondering how our future together would work and today I am lying in bed wondering how in the hell I let last night happen. Am I losing my mind? Am I a slut? I mean c'mon, I know men do this but how could they not question themselves. I mean I could see if one relationship was a living hell and therefore the other I used for escape, but both relationships are fine. Well, in the context of them not knowing what is happening they are fine. Man, I have to call Ori.

Call Ori? Mercedes, as much as she does, what you are doing is the one thing she does not. She has not ever strung along any man in her life.

Strung along? How am I doin that?

Where should we begin? First Visean is a non-reality and then this past weekend he becomes reality. First you and Xavier are just friends and just a week ago you slept with him.

I rolled my eyes to the back of my head, rolled over and glanced at the clock, time to go.

I got up, dressed, and left my stuff packed because as we all know Mercedes didn't have the chance to unpack last night. I decided that driving to work would be good so that at the end of my very long day I could take off and think. I am going to need the time to think. I am going to need a lot of time to think.

The traffic jams on my way into work were a blessing. I was able to sit in my baby by myself, with no one else. No one offering me a future relationship with them, no one questioning who I am, where I came from, what I had plans to be. Just my brat and me, no questions asked.

The first person I saw while walking into my office was Vicki who of course had that smirk on her face. "Nice to see you back."

"Good morning Vicki. You make it sound as if I was out of the office for a long time."

She handed me more than several messages and told me that my first appointment is here.

"First appointment? I thought I had no appointments today."

I turned around and saw a young woman sitting on the couch. Her skin a dark brown, her hair was in a freeze curl with spiky bangs coming down over her forehead, her skirt was a little too short and her top way too tight. I looked at Vicki and motioned her in my office.

"Okay, I know I went out of town, but she looks a little young to be having tax problems."

"That is because that young lady is here for an interview for the summer internship."

"Okay. I didn't even have a chance to look over that yet, aren't we starting a little early? Did something change?"

"Yes, the program called and asked if we could start interviewing early, so that the students could discuss their interviews with the instructors."

"Oh, well okay, but did they notify us?"

She just gave me that look again. Vicki you are a good assistant but today is not the day to play decoding games with me. "I emailed you yesterday about it."

"Email?"

"Yes, you know electronic mail. Didn't you check it while you were out of town or was someone keeping you preoccupied the entire trip?"

"Let's just say that it was a very complicated trip that kept my mind very occupied with the situations that were at hand and that I forgot to check my email."

"Well just let me know when you are ready to start, here is her application."

"Vicki, just how many of these interviews do I have today."

"Four, she is the first. They will be here in two hour increments."

Joy. "Four? Vicki do you know the amount of work I have to finish?"

Again, I got the look.

Right, what is 10 to 15 minutes every two freakin hours to interview someone? "Thanks, I'll be out in a moment."

Vicki glided out of the office, happy to see me so out of it. I think it thrills her to get her own story line of my life in her head instead of knowing the real goings on. I laid the applicants folder on my desk, powered up the computer, looked through my messages, and left the voice and email for later. What is it about my missing these important messages lately? Well at least I will be so busy I won't have time to think of Visean or X.

I opened the file and looked at the application that she really tried to fill out. My God, aren't they teaching anything to these children today? I counted several spelling errors in her cover letter and in her application. I also found errors of things being entered in the wrong spaces. Why didn't her teacher or counselor look over this before submittal? Well, I guess this is what this program is really for, getting these children up to speed in the real world.

I walked out and once again looked this young woman over, smiled, walked over and extended my hand, "Ms. Janet Wilson correct?"

The girl smiled and shook my hand.

I kept my smile and walked her into my office. Ms. Wilson took a seat, politely folded her hands on her lap, and waited to begin.

"Good morning. Were you able to find the office alright?"

Ms. Wilson just nodded her head.

Okay. "Can I get you anything to drink?"

Ms. Wilson, again, just nodded her head.

Okay, let's see if I can think of a question where she has to speak. "So tell me Ms. Wilson what interests you in this particular program this summer?"

Now everybody, ready for this, because I cannot believe this myself, Ms. Janet Wilson looked me dead in the eyes and shrugged her shoulders.

I leaned back in my chair, looked at her, and said, "I am sorry, is there something wrong with your voice today? Can I get you some lemon and water? Maybe that would help soothe your throat."

Ms. Janet Wilson started to hang her head down.

I got up and walked over to her. "Ms. Wilson, you seem to be very nervous sitting here, is that correct?"

Her head was still down.

I breathed in deeply and exhaled. "Ms. Wilson, were you able to hear what I just said?"

She nodded her head in agreement. "Good, please do as I ask you then. First, raise your head, inhale deeply and then exhale slowly."

She did as instructed. I was still standing to the side of her. "Very good. Now do it again."

Again, she did as instructed. "Okay, now, stand up."

She looked at with a surprised look on her face. That look of *please don't throw me out*.

I was not about to throw this child out of my office; I was about to let her know that she has no right to treat herself in this manner.

"Please, Ms. Wilson, stand up."

She did.

"Now, I want you to go behind my desk and sit in my chair."

She just gave me that look of *are you for real?*

"Go ahead, sit in my chair. It's alright."

She walked over and sat in the chair, sitting straight up, looking like she was in front of a firing squad.

I sat down in her chair and said, "Janet, may I call you Janet?"

She nodded yes.

"Well Janet, you look really tensed up sitting in that chair. While I can honestly admit there have been stressful days around here I don't think I have ever sat in that chair like that."

She started turning red.

"Would you like to see how I sit in that chair on a daily basis?"

She hung her head again and started to move out of the chair.

"No, no. It's okay to stay sitting there, just look at me and I will show you."

She sat in the same position and brought her head up to look at me. I grabbed some papers off my desk, leaned back, kicked my feet up on the desk, and said, "Yea, this is about right but that chair leans back more. Why don't you try it?"

"For real?"

"Oh my God, you speak!"

Janet just smiled.

"Well now, are you ready to begin?"

"Yes ma'am."

"I look that old? I knew I should have worn those other shoes today. You know what my theory on shoes is as a woman. My theory is that shoes state your age. For real, think about it. You're in here in your cool thick healed loafers and I am in here in my laced up healed men type shoes, I don't even know what these things on my feet today are even really called. All I know is that they match my suit."

Janet finally started laughing and once she started talking, all went well and Ms. Janet Wilson completed her first real interview.

The day, the interviewee's that day and everything else went pretty much as planned, slammed. Before I knew it, the clock was reading 6 p.m. I still hadn't even

touched voicemail; it had seemed like everybody in the office had stopped by or called, including my boss with a million and one questions about me or work. I think I ate. I looked and there are food wrappers in the trash. My interviews lasted much longer than fifteen minutes because getting these children to speak up was like to trying to make someone believe that aliens really do exist. I mean it is six o'clock and I still have to finish about four more hours worth of work. I looked at my car keys, no Mercedes; BADBRAT is not the answer right now. You'll be stuck in traffic for hours and then what?

I got up, I stretched, and I sat down, hit the speaker button and listened to all five of my messages that I had been avoiding. A couple of clients had called with some relatively easy questions that I could quickly research and answer tomorrow morning. Sheldon had called here, again leaving his name and number asking me to call. Dag, what is up with this man now hunting me down for a return phone call? I wrote down his number and put a big question mark by it. Xavier was the last call but actually the first message of today, this morning before I even got to work, "Hey baby, last night was something else, you got me feeling you all the way home in this taxi cab. Don't work too hard today and call me when you get this message." Needless to say that I haven't called and don't feel like returning the call either. No messages from Visean but that's typical considering his day is running about three times faster than mine.

I picked up the phone and dialed Sheldon, might as well package all the drama up into one big pretty package. Here we go.

"Hello."

"Yes may I speak with Sheldon please?" Ok, I know I dialed right and a male answered but who knows whose number this is. I mean I don't even recognize it.

"This is Sheldon speaking. Who is this?"

Silence.

Mercedes! Hello. Speak!

"Hello Sheldon, this is Mercedes returning your phone calls."

"Mercedes, very nice to hear your voice."

Funny you didn't recognize it when you answered the phone. "Well I must say I am surprised to hear from you after all this time." Do you hear me people? Here comes Ms. Perfect grammar.

"Well you shouldn't be, I do see you quite often."

"You see me?" Where in the hell does this brother see me?

"Yes, you do go out for lunch like everybody else in this city don't you?"

"Yes, so if you see me why not stop and say hello?" It isn't like I am always sitting with some fine ass man for lunch. Which is kind of depressing, but hey we all can't bat a hundred everyday.

"Well let's just say the company I am with would not be so understanding of me stopping to say hello."

"Ah, I see, finally found the perfect woman for you Sheldon?" Blah, blah, blah.

"Yes, she is quite lovely. How about you Mercedes, are you still hanging with your boy from the West Side?"

Boy from the West Side? Oh. "Whatever. Look Sheldon, what is it that you have to tell me that you are trying so hard to get hold of me when you could say hello in person since you see me so often?"

"You didn't answer my question."

"Oh about Li'l C, he is fine; his CD went huge, he was picked up by several companies to do track work for them and moved into a bigger place to support his work."

"I am surprised to hear that."

"What, that the CD did so well? I'm not, my boy is talented." Yes, he is talented in many, many ways.

Mercedes!

What? The boy is good, especially when he...

"Still Mercedes, you have not answered my question."

"Look Sheldon, I have just had a roller coaster of a weekend, my work week is overloaded and games right now are not playing well with me. Please ask the question in a direct form or call me at a later time when you are able to do so." Oh yea, I am low on patience right now.

"You never were one to play around the topic, always straight to the point. What I am asking is if you are involved with anyone right now."

Brother don't even go there with that question, I am over involved right now. "Sheldon, why are you asking me this? You stated at the beginning of this conversation that you are currently involved with someone. Am I not correct?"

"I see you are still quick to assume also."

I see you are quick to assume also. Stupid mother...
"Sheldon, the point please."

"The point Mercedes is that my cousin has just moved here from New Jersey and I thought you might be interested in taking him around Chicago since you know more of the, lets just say, lower ends than I do. He is into rap, hip-hop, thug life, import cars, baggy jeans, boots and all that stuff that you showed to me that night, our last night together, and I thought you two would be a good match. Mind you he is only 22, but he likes older women."

Older women? Thug life? Imports? Hold up. "Sheldon, you know what, I could take that as some kind of snobbish insult from you, but I won't. First, at least I open my mind up to other happenings in this life than what the norm say is correct for our society. Second, just because your cousin does all that and wears all that, why do you claim he is a thug and why do you think he would have no interest in your lifestyle? Are you saying he is just some hopeless case? That you should just throw him back into the world he may have

been trying to escape from when he moved out of Jersey?"

"Mercedes, this has gone way to far already as it always has. Can I pass along your number or not?"

"Please do, cause if there is anything I could show this man, this cousin of yours, is that life is multisided and not one narrow view."

"One favor Mercedes."

"What?"

"Try not to sleep with him."

"Excuse me?"

"Look, it is not so much him, he'll probably be intimidated by you, but it is you that I am asking not to go after him. I am asking this because he reminds me of how Li'l C looked and I don't want him all messed up, he came here to get things straight."

Ladies and Gentlemen, I took the phone, held it in front of my face and just stared at it because I know he just didn't. I shook my head, put the receiver close to my mouth, inhaled, and then hauled azz on him. "Baby, if he is finer than you are and has a more of an open mind, I'll rock his world onto a whole other level, video tape it and send you a personal sealed copy with a kiss from me. So you go ahead and pass on that number, I'll take good care of him. In fact, I can't wait to get my hands all over him."

Silence. What did this man expect me to say after a comment like that? Did he expect me to just blow up? Hell nah! I ain't going out like that. Messing with his head after what he did to mine was the best comeback I could think of.

"Sheldon baby? Hello? You know the numbers; just pass them on to your fine azz cousin that is hopefully blessed and talented in many areas. In fact baby, if you want a copy of us having that ok sex that we used to have to compare to me and your cousin to, I'll throw it in as an extra bonus. Hell, I'll even burn it to DVD so we can upload it to the Internet." I then hung up the

phone on his stupid messed up, stuck up, whack, little, non-blessed azz!

Drama! Ugh! Stupid freakin idiotic men cannot stand them! Do him a favor and try not to sleep with him? What the freak ever! Does he really think I am just going to attack him as soon as I see him or what? A brother in baggy jeans and boots doesn't make me just rip off my clothes to lay down with them. See how freakin stupid Sheldon is! Ugh, I swear, yea, the next time he sees me, I am going to see him and I pray, just pray his little perfect mold of a girlfriend is there with him so I can really mess him up.

It was nearing 6:30 p.m. I wasted too much time on that fool! Now I am upset and I have to finish up working so I can get home tonight, unpack like I should have last night and try and get some sleep before 5 a.m. rolls around tomorrow morning. Not to mention that I need to do my hair, which I will be too damn tired to do tonight. That's it!

I went online to find the number to the shop I had always heard about. I called the braid shop, told them there was an extra \$100 for their best braid artist to fit me in and made an appointment for this Saturday morning at 7 a.m. A girl has to do what a girl has to do! Cause I have enough other stuff sitting on my plate right now then to be dealing with this damn hair of mine.

Yes I am frustrated. Yes I am exhausted. Yes I am burned out. Yes this damn weekend threw me up in the air and left me there. Right now, I don't know where in the hell it is that I am supposed to be landing. You see right there is my problem. I cannot believe that it was Xavier who threw me up in the air and not Visean after his announcement that we are going to be more "real".

Why did X have to meet me at the airport?

I grabbed the phone and dialed up Miranda because I realized it was her that threw me up in the air, way before X even had the chance to that night.

"Hello."

"Miranda!"

"Mercedes! Girl how was your trip? You know what forget about the trip since it was all boring business anyway, how was your surprise? Isn't that stupid of me, I mean here I am on the phone with you and remember to ask you what I should have called you immediately about. Unless...you did get a surprise at the airport didn't you? Oops, didn't he show up? Oh, now I probably made you mad because he probably didn't show up! I mean a brother as fine as he is can get away with a little bit of play in some areas but when it comes to my girls, they get none at all. I will not stand for it, especially after all the times that you would not let me take something from Mr. No Good. So how was your trip?"

"My trip? My trip. Yes lets talk about my trip. My trip was fine. It was even kind of fun except for a few little bumps in the road. Things went smoothly and then..." and then it hit me. Miranda had no idea what I was doing on this trip, only Ori did, therefore to go off at her for giving X the information about my trip would have been totally wrong. She is my friend; I can't jump her for not knowing what she was doing.

"Mercedes, are you still there? Oh my God, please don't tell me that man broke your heart. Ori and I will go kick his ass if he did girl. Mr. I Am So Fine cannot do that to you. You have been his friend for way too many years for him to act like a punk now. Tell me what happened, you know I will listen."

I exhaled because that is all I could do because I almost ruined a friendship due to my own choices that weekend. "Then I got off the plane without enough time to check my messages and Xavier was there to surprise me. Totally threw me off because I wasn't

expecting him to be there since he didn't have any of my flight information, let alone any clue what I was out of town for. I practically fell out onto the floor when I saw him." Yeah, that is a total understatement.

"Well I am glad that for once I didn't judge a good man wrong. So did he bring you roses? Did have a limo waiting to take you home?" *Did I not tell you about this girl?* "Did he take you up in his arms and swing you around? Oh how I love going to airports and watching people meet sometimes." *I hate it.* "It is just so heartwarming." *You mean sickening.* "Here I am asking you all these romantic questions about what he did for you, when it was I that left you the message asking if you could hook the two of us up. I am sorry Mercedes, I should have realized, well now I just did, because he was so anxious to get your information Mercedes. It was like he was worried or something. I am surprised you didn't let him know where you were going or anything. Guess that is why I thought it was okay to ask you to hook the two of us up. You aren't mad about that because you sound kinda mad right now. Everything okay?"

"Yes Miranda everything is fine, I was just so surprised to see him there. I mean I got off the plane and just headed with the crowd. I thought somebody was calling my name and I just ignored them. I mean who would be at the airport calling out my name. Then I get a tap on my shoulder and when I turn around, there is X, smiling at me and I just about lost it."

That's another understatement.

"Oh that is so sweet. So did he come home with you or just say hi and then leave?"

"Well he took the train up there so I had to give him a ride. So yes he came over for awhile and then left because I was so tired."

"Did he, uh, leave in the morning?"

"Miranda, what are you asking me?"

"Did the two of you finally hook up?"

This had to be the last thing that I want to talk about right now. "No Miranda we didn't. He stayed and then left."

"Man the two of you need to hook up, I mean that other girl has been gone awhile now and he is dating again."

"You know what, I am sorry, I have to go. I am at work still, I have more to do. I really just wanted to give you a call and let you know that I am back and okay."

"You are still at work? Girl, you need to take a rest and enjoy a man sometime. Like I know everything or anything about that, which we all know that I don't. But you should."

Trust me; I've rested with enough men over the past couple of days. "Thanks girl, but you know me; I got to get back to work."

"Well call me tomorrow, maybe we can sneak in a lunch."

"Sounds good."

I looked at the clock, 6:50 p.m. Dag, where does time go. I looked at my desk stacked with folders, it was a living nightmare. I thought of the rest of the interviews I had coming up for the summer intern program, the comment sheet I need to fill out for each of them to return to their instructor, the work that had to be at least ready for tomorrow, not to mention for the Greenburg case later this week; I wanted to scream.

I sat down and just got at it. By the time I looked at the clock again, it was 10:30 p.m. By the time I closed up it was eleven. I was too tired to drive around to think, so my brat and I headed home. When I finally hit the pillow, it was midnight, and I still hadn't returned Xavier's call.

♂ *pouring souls* ♀

I can't even begin to explain how the rest of my week went. First, I don't think that I would remember it correctly. Time went by so fast it is too blurry to look back and put together what I did and when. Second, I wouldn't want to bore you with stories of how I basically got up, got dressed, worked, got home, got undressed and went back to bed. Seriously, every morning out by 6 a.m. and every night in bed by 12 a.m. and for it only being from Wednesday to Friday...it kicked my ass!

Unless you were lucky enough to catch me picking up my phone you weren't able to get hold of me. Anyone that is on my voicemail I'll maybe get back to this weekend. If you weren't a client then basically I didn't exist. I do remember talking to X like a day or two ago. Trust me when I say that he has been leaving me daily voicemails and that now I know how Visean feels when he gets all of mine. This time though, X actually caught me at my desk right after one of the interviews for the summer position.

"Mercedes, is everything okay? You haven't returned any of my calls."

"Look X, I am just too way overloaded to return any phone call from anyone this week. I swear by Sunday if I have any friends left at all I will be truly blessed." Oops, that was kinda harsh.

"So then we are okay and you are just busy."

Okay? Are we okay? See this is the reason I am not returning calls. By zoning out into my work, the situations that I have created for myself do not exist.

But they do exist, so soften your tone.

"That would be correct. Please don't read anything else into it."

"Okay baby. Hey that client...."

Then it went into some kind of discussion about the client that I had sent to see him. I don't know. All I know is that it is 5 a.m. Saturday morning and all I am looking forward to today is going to the shop and having my hair braided. After that it's off to work, come home, crash on the couch, and be a zombie until Monday morning. I refuse to work Sunday's because just like God's brain, I also need to rest for one day.

Dammit. Ugh. I forgot to call Visean back. He was another one who got through this week.

"Hey baby girl, why haven't you called? It is not like you not to call and at least leave me a message so I can hear that sexy voice of yours."

It was Visean's usual 2:30 a.m. phone call. He had just gotten out of the studio, was on his way home and it was my job to help him stay awake. This time though it was his turn to make me wake up enough to speak actual sentences, which of course he accomplished by turning up the music in his SUV. "Hey turn that down a little."

"I see someone has been awakened from their sleep finally."

"Hi Visean. Sorry about not calling but right now I am living the life of you, except I don't look like you."

"I hope not. Working late again?"

"Starting early and working late. Chile I don't even know what the date is right now."

"You are starting to sound like me. Girl don't you know that my lifestyle isn't for everybody. Don't you know that you need to be in perfect mental and physical condition to do the amazing things that I do without any stimulant drugs. You're not using drugs are you?"

"Is sugar still legal?"

"Yes."

"Okay, we are fine then."

"Why aren't you asleep? Do you know what time it is?"

"Visean, I was sleeping, you called and woke me up, remember?"

"Uh, yeah. Ha! Well I am just pulling into my driveway, so go to sleep."

"Okay."

"Before you do...."

Okay, he told me to go to sleep now he wants my mind back on line? "Yes Visean."

"What are your plans for next weekend?"

"Visean, sweetie, I have no idea what plane of the universe I am in right now, and you want to know what is up for next weekend?"

"Girl, get your ass out of bed and go get your calendar to find out."

"Visean, you just told me to go back to sleep."

"Oh I did, well that was before I remembered this."

"How about this, just tell me, I'll memorize it and then let you know what the answer is."

"You sure you won't forget."

"Honey, you know I don't have a memory like yours, of course I won't forget."

"See here it is three or four o'clock in the morning and you still cuttin' on people."

"I thought you weren't going to tell me what time it is."

"Mercedes, just listen so that you can go back to sleep instead of trying to extend the conversation like you always do."

What? Whatever, I am too tired for his silly azz. "Listening."

"Next weekend we are going to Detroit to put on a little show. It won't be anything but a day and I wanted to know if you can make it up there. Isn't Detroit close by?"

"A few hours away, nothing major. When are we talking about, Friday or Saturday night?" Hell brat and I could always use the road trip.

"Umm..." *Oh no.* "Saturday night, yea cause Friday night I have that thing and then Saturday morning I have something or was it that afternoon I was supposed to catch that early flight? Umm-err-uh..." *Ugh, I want to go back to sleep.* "Wait, yea, Saturday night. Can you be there?"

"Visean, tomorrow I am going on line and buying you a *Blackberry.*" Right, like I have the extra time for that right now. "Because sweetie, you need a peace of mind."

"Girl you are always looking out for me, no wonder I love you so much."

Okay, if I wasn't half dead asleep that would have hit my heart, but right now at this time in the morning, nothing is functioning. "You know me. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Night Mercedes."

"Night Visean."

You know what? I think like right now is the first time I remembered that conversation. Well he hasn't called since that night so it will be okay to give him an answer once I get my head done and back into the office to check my schedule. Maybe I should leave myself a message so that I remember to do that today. Man he will freak when he sees me in these braids, well he will if the style turns out the way it should on me.

I made the call to my office phone, picked up my bag of weave, and walked out the door. Then I walked back into my apartment to find the directions. The one thing I did not want to do is be late for the woman who decided to take me so early on a Saturday morning.

The good thing is that I had Ori to come in and help save the day. I emailed her a quick note telling her that I was getting my hair braided this Saturday. I

asked her if she could be an amazing friend and pick out some hair for me because she knows more about braiding than I do, my color, and which braiding magazine's would be for me. That way when I walked in I could show the woman the style, give her the hair to do it with and save her the time of having to think of what to do with me.

Ori had picked out the best braiding weave available, so that I would be in the least amount of pain possible. She also had done an awesome job picking out colors for me to use so that my braids would have a more natural look with some highlights without even knowing the style that I was going to do. Ori claimed that a good stylist will know how to use them correctly. She had better know how for the extra hundred I am throwing on top of her tip.

Picking the style was a little bit of work for me. I had to choose and I had to choose fast because I had no time to sit and contemplate what would look the best on me. Small braids were out because of time constrictions and large braids were out because they didn't last but a week and a half. I finally found a style that was a little below the shoulder line with some blended in layers in the front. The magazine showed that it could be swept up into a ponytail or worn down so that either way it would look very professional. I made sure I got up this morning to wash and comb my hair out, something I truly did not want to do, but had to do to save this woman time.

I found the directions and hauled azz out to Evergreen Park to have my hair done. I made it right around 6:55 a.m. I waited in the empty parking lot until ten after seven when someone finally pulled in, it was her, and she waved me on in.

Sharon was a middle aged, thick middle weighted woman whose hair was in a stunning set of braids. She walked in the shop, turned off the alarm and then held the door open for me to enter.

"Mercedes right?"

"Yes. Hi, thank you for fitting me in."

"Girl, times are tight right now, you offered the extra money and I am here." She laughed as she walked through the shop turning on lights. She grabbed some things from different stations, started a pot of coffee, and got me a gown to throw on. She walked over by the phone and then thought better of it. "I'll just leave it to voicemail so that we can get started and keep going. The receptionist will be here at nine to answer them anyway."

She walked over and started to examine my hair that I had pulled back into a ponytail. "So what made you want to braid your hair? It's a pretty length and looks healthy, are you trying to make it grow longer? Braids will do that to your hair if that is what you are trying to do."

"Well life has been a blur lately and to resolve one of its issues would be to do less hair maintenance in the morning."

"Well then braiding your hair is the right choice. You can be like a dude in the morning if you want to. Just wake up, take a short shower, and throw on the makeup so that you can head out the door. No irons, no hair dryers, no hot combs, no styling products, no fuss. Now what is it that we are we doing for you today?"

I pulled out the magazine and opened it to the page I had marked. "Here we go. I want this style right here, but a little shorter throughout and a little thicker in the braid so that it will be faster for you."

"Oh don't worry about that honey, these women know when they walk into our shop they are going to have a wait ahead of them."

"Well hopefully I won't extend that wait to long for them since my appointment was last minute. My hair is washed, conditioned, and combed out. I have all the hair you could possibly need right here in this bag and

as I have already shown you, the style already picked out."

"Honey you must be my blessing of the day. Come sit down right over here and take that ponytail down while I put on some music. I don't listen to any of these radio stations around here; it is just the same songs every half hour. So awhile back me and the girls got together and bought a CD changer for the shop."

"What happens if someone should leave?" Me, being the critical money thinker to the end just had to ask.

"We just buy out their share and make the new girl pay for it if she wants to use it for some of her CD's. The owner is going to buy it from us by the end of the year anyway. She had a financial set back a few months ago that she is trying to get back up on her feet from. Divorces can be so ugly when one person has more than the other. In this case, she had more than him. Always has. Not that he was some low life thug without a job or nothin, not like half these men that drop their girls off at the shop everyday. He had a job, where she has a career which means a significant financial divide between the two of them."

"Finances can be such a nightmare to a relationship."

"Honey I know that is right." She tore open a package of each of the colors of hair and started laying them out on a tray that she had rolled over. "Like I mentioned before, times are hard and it is even harder when you and your man can't produce enough to keep things going. Funny, we should pull together when times get tough; instead we get at each other like pit bulls."

I started laughing, "Sorry, dark sense of humor sometimes."

"I take it by that laugh you don't have a man then."

What the hell made her assume that from my sick little laugh at the real side of relationships that I must

not have a man? "No, I have a man or two. I am just dating right now."

"Mmm-hmm, that is why you can laugh at that last statement."

"I didn't mean to offend you, sorry if I did."

"No, girl please, you can't offend me by laughing at what people do."

"Oh, well I..."

"For real, I know where you are coming from. Girl, I have worked in this shop for six years now." She started putting the parts in my hair constantly looking at the magazine that I had given her. "I hear all kinds of mess from people. Hell, that talk show guy that has all the White trash on there could come in here and film nearly every day. We all are walking around with these drama's going on." *Yea, let's not start on mine.* "Hell, I laugh everyday when I get home from here and thank God for what I have. Do you want to know the only reason I can thank the man upstairs every night?"

"Sure."

"Don't move your head honey, the braid knot might slip while I am braiding."

"Sorry."

"Well the reason I can go home and thank God every night is because everything I have that surrounds me, I put there by my own choice. I don't think people recognize that these days. You are the only one who can choose what reality surrounds you. Sure people can come up in your life, cross your path, come back onto your path or what have you, but in the end it is up to you to say stay or get the hell off of my path. You can have a path of drama or you can have a path of blessings, it is up to you. Not that I am saying that to get to those blessings there might be some drama, some bumps in the road, but we make can make it over, we can clear our own path, we don't have to settle."

She finished one braid and handed me a mirror. "Now is that about the thickness you were thinking of?"

"Yep."

"Good. Now how do you like the coloring of that braid? I mixed it up to throw some highlights in if you will be wearing this style up some. Now what we could do is some color blocking, just because your hair is going into braids doesn't mean that a regular style is left at the door. So we can leave the bottom layer pure black and then head up with the other colors after."

"Whatever is easiest for you."

"Girl, have you ever had braids before?"

"Nope, not even as a kid. My mom didn't want to have me running around with beads knocking everywhere. That is the only way I would have them."

"Well let's put it this way, if I was styling your regular hair then you wouldn't say whatever is best for me because you know as a woman, whatever is best for that person certainly is not best for you. So, honey, how would you like to do this?"

Makes sense, but honestly I was too tired to decide on anything. "Umm, okay let's do this. I never tried the color blocking idea before and since it won't affect my real hair color, let's go for it."

"Good, I think that will be pretty on you. Plus a little trendy look never hurt anybody."

"True." Although I am sure the braids alone will freak enough people out up at work out.

"Yes, like I said honey you are a blessing for me today. You will probably be the only woman who walks in here totally prepared. I have so many young girls coming in here asking for styles on people that I have never heard of. I try to keep up, but these half-weave, half-braid styles are a killer not to mention very expensive, especially for my time. Speaking of which." She finished another braid and headed for the coffee pot. "Did Terri tell you how much it was going to be for

me today? I swear that girl tells people what I told her the price would be but then I can't remember by the time they sit down in my chair. It is written in that book over there, but with Terri's stuff you do not mess. That girl is more organized than the CIA."

"Yes she did. Terri said depending on the style it would be anywhere from \$150 to \$175 because I brought my own hair."

She just looked at me, "Yea that seems about right. Would you like some coffee?"

"No I am cool for now."

She made her cup, walked back over, and went right back at it. There was silence for a while. I studied the shop with its multicolored walls filled with pictures of models displaying products everywhere. Pictures of babies and family were posted all over each station but no pictures of the stylists with their men. Hmm, I wonder.

See here goes my little devious mind. In this city you never know if the man who claims he is single, really is. If I worked in one of these shops, I doubt I post a picture of my man either. Because you never know who is going to walk through the door and go off at you about it. Whether he is an interest, a current boyfriend, an ex-man, or your baby daddy or even a cousin, why bring the drama in like Sharon said.

Actually, what she said about that had me thinking about my path and the drama I personally was decorating it with. Not that there has been drama between Visean and Xavier yet, but if either one finds out, then there will be drama. The thing of it is, is that I am trying to ride these waves of sudden interest to find out if these become calm and chill like the ocean or if they are headed towards the shore, crashing into the rocks at the edge of land. The good Lord knows I do not need that. Besides all of that, with work having me so tied up, X seems to be understanding and Visean,

well he is so tied up with his own work, he wouldn't even notice me not giving him a call.

Uh, you want to rethink that Ms. Mercedes. I remember part of that early morning conversation about you not having called him, meaning which he noticed.

Yea, he noticed but is that a good thing? I mean before we would see each other and right after we left he'd immediately return all of my messages and then weeks would go by and returning messages got penciled in next to having a prostate exam. So for right now, he notices but what I want to see is what happens in a few weeks.

Well a few weeks may not happen if you are able to go to Detroit next weekend for his performance.

Did he even give me a time? Okay, we are talking about Visean; of course I didn't receive a time. Let's see, if he gets a hotel room it will be paid for, so I can watch the performance and then crash out and leave in the morning. Wait; did Visean say when he was leaving Detroit? Was it that night or the next day? Sundays aren't too busy for him; maybe he can stay until Sunday. Wait, I don't think he even told me when he was leaving Detroit, just when he was getting in. Great, another last minute weekend is in the making. Joy.

I wanted to rub my temple to release the stress but any indication of that may have Sharon, who is constantly tugging on my head, start inquiring about what is going on in my head.

"Are you alright honey?" *Uh oh.* "Am I pulling to hard?"

Exhale. "I am fine."

"Girl I am not myself until I have had my coffee. I was all excited when I got in here this morning because I was late but whatever energy I had in me at that point has been spent. That is why I got quiet on you; it is rare to be in here and not hear a sound. All day long,

I hear different stories from women we don't even know tell us about their lovers, family, or friends. It is like a shop chair is a place to sit and pour out your soul. I swear if one day I could own a shop on my own, I would call it 'Pouring Souls'. The only thing is I might confuse people about what the shop is really about with a business name like that. I'd be trying to do hair and get people in there from some sort of Goth culture looking for a nightclub or some buppies looking for a high end martini bar. Oh well, doesn't really matter, the day I am actually capable of opening my own shop will be the day that I can no longer stand long enough to braid heads all day." She started laughing.

Well the one thing I can say about Sharon is that she likes to tell you that she is not doing so well financially. I thought most braid artists did hair on the side to make some extra money. I did think her future shop name was very cool though. "You know Sharon small business owners who are just starting up do receive special tax breaks from the federal government for the first year or two of business. It helps them get out of the red from the costs of starting up. Plus there are multitudes of banks that will give special interest rates to first time business owners and work with you on loan payments. I would be willing to give you some information for you to start with if you are interested, not that I am trying to take away an employee from this shop or anything."

"Whew check out Ms. Money Knowledge right here. What do you do for a living honey?"

"Actually I work for a firm in downtown Chicago where I do tax preparations for small to multi-national businesses. I try and help them cut through the red tape we call tax laws and find some tax breaks if any."

"See you have come to me first knowing what you actually want done to your head and now with the blessing of knowing the in and outs of small business."

"Well I wouldn't say all but I do have some knowledge from my line of work."

"So what do you think of my future shop name?"

"I think it is quite wicked. I think it has a high potential if marketed right for a shop where you can come in and know you and your hair are understood. After all the way we style our hair is an outward expression of ourselves. What we say when we are sitting in these chairs is a voiced expression of who we are, even if the story is phony, drama, ghetto fab, happy or sad; we just get it out. To me, 'Pouring Souls' has high potential. With a name like that it can be a unisex salon and even a multicultural salon."

"Oh I don't know about that now, I don't like to touch White people's hair."

And that, Ladies and Gentleman, is where my imaginative mind came to a screeching halt. I hope this woman intends to explain herself.

"Now don't get me wrong, I have no problem with White people or any color or race people that God put here, but when it comes to doing hair, that is where I have a problem." *Okay.* "See the texture of the hair on White people is different than it is on you and me. The texture of Asian hair is very different than the texture of the hair that you and I have and even the texture that White people have. That is why I don't like doing White people's hair. The texture of the hair and I do not get along. You have to use a different cutting technique, a different product line to style their hair, especially if they have curly hair. Chile let me tell you, a White girl's natural curl is not even close to our nappy headed curls. Their hair can be tight, loose, and wavy in the same day if not done right. Shoot every day with that hair is different because of their natural curl. I have just learned in the past, that I should not touch a White person's head to do their hair."

"At least you know whose head to touch and whose head to pass on. Cause some of these stylists are trippin this city. Talking about they can do anybody's

head that sits down in their chair and when that person gets up, girl...let's not even begin to go there."

"Oh I know that's the truth. When I was first starting out, I worked over in the southwest suburbs with my mom. I thought I was something special to have started working out there right away. I was hooking hair up left and right and then came in this White woman, probably about twenty-five years old. Cute, nice, really sweet, just wanted a little off here and there and then a styling so that she could hit downtown that night.

So here I go, my first White girl since beauty school. I always did struggle with their hair but I never told the shop owner that. She sat down and explained what she had wanted. Really, it was a simple cut, a basic trim. So I got through that okay, I took my time, making sure I did it right, nice and even you know, then came the styling that she wanted. She brought in some picture from some French trendy magazine. Girl let me tell you, there were curls, braids, and twists all over that models head. She knew the price of the whole deal and didn't care, she wanted it. Now see, I can do all the twists, braids, curls in the world but getting them to work on a White girls head, that is where I messed up." *She practically screamed that across the empty shop.*

"It was the product line I used. I knew that I should stop and go and get some of the products that I had seen on other stylists stations to style White peoples hair, but for some reason I just didn't. I thought, 'I can't afford to buy all new styling gels and such' as I was just starting out. After all a gel is a gel and if I use it in the right proportion I should be okay with it."

"So what happened?"

"Girl, when I put the gels on her hair it became a matted mess. When I tried to spritz it and then take a curling iron to it, I hardly got it off the rod before it burned her hair. When I tried to comb the curl out, because you know it had the gel in it and the spritz on

top of it, a tooth of a comb couldn't even budge its way through it. When I tried to comb through the rest of the hair that was only gelled, it frizzed like you wouldn't believe. I had turned this pretty girl's hair into a complete nightmare!

Oh my God, this girl was in tears, I was in tears, Claire, who was the owner of the shop, was trying to calm everybody down. That day taught me to never touch another White person's head again. Needless to say, I wasn't asked to come back to that shop after about a week or so. Claire didn't have the heart to let me go right away. Bad hair stylists are bad for business, especially one that claims to do multicultural hair. Since then honey, I have been sticking to all Black shops and if a person of another race comes here, everybody knows not to send her to me. To this day, I am scared to even touch a biracial child. Even though all I do now is braid hair, they just know for safety's sake."

I just smiled; at least she knows what her limits are.

The clock hit 8:30 and she was half way up the back of my head. "So what time does everybody start coming in?"

"Well Terri gets here around 8:45 to get everything started but since she knew I was coming in early she might traipse in here around 8:55 or so. The rest of the stylists come in about ten minutes before their first appointment. Now, I think my first appointment was at nine this morning, but the girl that I do never shows up on time. I've been doing Latrice's head for about six months now. She changes her style of braids every three to four weeks, they rarely get nappy on her because once they start she has already has decided on the new style to wear them in.

Now I love Latrice, she is a good customer, but she comes in late, with her braids in and unwashed and wants me to hook her up. I try not to let her come in on Saturday's because we can get so busy but she gets

her appointments because she books so far in advance. Lately though," she stopped to grab more hair and then her coffee, "when she gets here I hand her a pair of scissors, a garbage bag and a comb and tell her to go start taking that stuff out so that I can keep going on with other clients. Most of my other clients, like you, have the good sense to come in here already prepared to get their hair done. So don't worry because we will have plenty of time by the time she decides to arrive. I swear that girl lives and sets her clocks by CPT. Ha!"

"How long does it take to do the micro braids?" I remembered that style Visean's mom had shown me in that magazine. The style I was having down was close but nothing like the one I had seen.

"Well that depends on how you want the micro's done."

"Really?"

"Girl you really don't know anything about braiding do you?"

"Nope only from what I have asked."

"Alright then, when you went to pick out this hair we are using today did you happen to see the already made braids, spirals and such packages?"

"Actually my girl Ori picked everything up for me. I didn't even have the time to take care of that."

"You've never been to an all Black hair shop? Well let me correct myself, you have never been to a Korean all Black hair shop?"

We both started laughing. "Only when I was little."

"Well where do you get all your hair products from then?"

"There is a shop over by Water Tower place that carries almost everything I use."

"Humph, sounds expensive."

"Not too bad."

"Well, like I was saying there are two ways to do micro braids. You can do like we are doing now using

very small parts and smaller amounts of the synthetic hair and that will take around, maybe 12 hours or more, depending on length and style. Most people who do them, have them done in two parts because of the work involved. Now there is the quick and easy way due to those other pre-made packaged hair braids, twists, etc. You cornrow the hair and then sew in the braids. All of that takes about two to three hours depending on the style that you choose. A lot of the younger girls like to do it that way so that they can keep changing them often; it is like a quick weave. They go in, they come out, and then you start again with something else. I take it that you have found a style that uses the smaller braids."

"Yep. I was out on the East Coast just last weekend visiting friends and his mom showed me a magazine with this style that I fell in love with. Since I decided to have this done so quickly, I didn't want to ask you to do that style for me. Now that I am aware of how the braiding can be done, I would say that style was definitely not achieved by sewing the braids in."

"Those East Coast shops do some braiding out there. Every time a hair show comes around it is always the East showing out with their new styles and things. Maybe it is just due to the higher concentration of Black people out that way. Oh honey, the men, with their little cute short cut dreads and braids and things...take my breath away. Our Chicago men don't wear styles like that and in the South, they don't wear any of their hair at all because of the heat. I like those magazines though, I am always hoping these young guys get away from that funky West Coast gangster rapper, long cork screw hair look. They are starting to look like women if you ask me. I am surprised they don't walk around in pink curlers and a hair net."

"Give them time, they will. You're too funny Sharon."

"Yes I am and that is probably why I need to go to the bathroom. Ah the joys of coffee. I'll be right back honey."

No sooner she was in the bathroom did a woman start struggling with the door with her key. She finally got it open, walked in, looked at me, and walked over to the front desk. My guess, that it was Terri. I yelled over a hello but got nothing in response. Great.

Terri looked to be about twenty, thin, in style, major attitude, a short haircut, and makeup that would make a model think twice.

She opened her book, looked over and said, "Mercedes right?"

"Yes. Good morning." A second try never hurts.

"Did Sharon make here on time?"

Okay maybe good mornings aren't this woman's thing. "Umm, yea, everything was fine."

"That's good; she has a tendency to be late sometimes. Where is she now?" She gave a hard look around the shop making sure nothing else was being touched I am sure.

"She stepped into the bathroom."

Terri proceeded over to where the CD changer was at and turned it off. "That woman always likes it mellow in here." It looked like she was beginning to load her own CD's.

Sharon walked out of the bathroom and yelled over to Terri a good morning.

Terri turned around and cut her eyes, "Do you come in here to have everybody go back to sleep with the music you be loading in this player?"

Okay, that did make me feel a bit better. Obviously good morning or even a hello is not in this woman's vocabulary. How in the hell is she even the receptionist? Good help can't be that hard to find.

"Terri not everybody wants to jump up and down like you do twenty-four hours a day. Us older folks like a little smoothness in our ride."

"Whatever Sharon."

Sharon shot right back at her, "Whatever Terri."

Terri walked over and took the magazine, "Which of these styles are you having done?"

Sharon spoke up, "We doing the one in the middle, except with a color block."

Terri lowered the magazine, looked me dead in the face, and stated, "Yeah that style will go with her face. Those colors you chose for her are just about right to Sharon, except I would throw in some red myself."

"I didn't pick up the hair for her, her girl did."

"Her girl?" Terri looked me right in the eyes and said, "You a lesbian or something?"

What? This girl must get up early to smoke the crack pipe she walked up in here high on. "No, I am not a lesbian."

"Well that's good. You got a man then?"

You got a man then? Who is she kidding? "A few."

She stepped back in surprise, "Well then, I know when I have asked too much."

Sharon started giggling under her breath and whispered, "Don't mind her; she must have had a bad night."

Which in fewer than three minutes she was more than willing to share. "Sharon!"

"Yes Terri."

"Do you know this good for nothing man came over last night talking about why was I trying to talk to his boy?"

"What man?" Sharon amazingly enough had a touch of concern in her voice.

"That boy that keeps coming up here all the time asking me out. You know the tall lanky looking one with the Afro."

"The cute one?"

Terri whipped around her chair and looked dead straight at us, "Sharon I know God gave you eyes, so

you cannot possibly even begin to think that boy is cute."

"Yea, he cute. He got his own little thing going on. So if you ain't talkin' to him why he coming over to the house accusing you of talking to somebody else?"

"Cause he's dumb."

Yep, there is a reason for you. Terri for real left it at that. She whipped her chair back around and grabbed the phone to listen to the voice messages. During which she stated, "Man sometimes I can't stand these people."

Okay.

She flipped through her book and started erasing and writing down things on different pages, whipped the chair around again and said, "You know Carmel isn't going to happy today don't you?"

"No. Why is that?"

"Because that stupid man she is dating didn't come pick her up from the shop last night when we closed."

"You're kidding. What happened?"

"I don't know. We closed and she waited. Sandra was still here, she probably took her home."

"You right, she is going to be in a mood today."

"Well that is what you get when you start depending on a man."

Yes, Ladies and Gentleman, as young as she is, she has already figured it out. Good girl.

Sharon started laughing, "Girl you are too young to be talking like that."

Terri stood up and put her hands on her hip, "No I'm not. Shoot, I am only twenty-two and have gotten dawged out by more males in this city than anybody else." *Is that up for debate?* "I don't care what they look like or how they treat their mamma, they still no good. Cause when their boys call them or that other girl that they have been looking at the entire time they have been with you finally gives them a nod, they are either out with them or creepin behind your back."

Sharon and I both responded with an "Amen to that girl."

Terri went over to the front door and unlocked it.

"See, she know, why do you think she answered me back by telling me she has a few men instead of just one."

"Yes she did, didn't she?" *Uh oh.* "In fact Ms. Mercedes here was just telling me about her trip to the East Coast last weekend." *Please don't do this.* "She didn't think I heard her when she mentioned someone's mother showing her a braid style that she wanted done. So who was this that you got to meet his mother all the way out on the East Coast?"

Yep, it happened. The chair had locked me in, strapped me down, and inserted a needle somewhere into my brain so that my soul could start pouring out information to these women like so many had done before me. Did I really think that I could skate through it and not have to tell all?

Terri just stared at me with a smirk on her face, "Go ahead, whose mamma did you meet?"

It was 9:05 and not one woman had walked in the shop to pull me out of the hot seat. Think fast Mercedes. "A guy I have been dating for a couple years, nothing to special, just wanted me to meet everyone face to face finally."

Sharon grabbed another section of hair, "Sounds like he wants to do more than date."

Probably, but hey then there is X who is also in line for that to, so who knows. I knew these two weren't going to be satisfied with that little sound byte but I waited for them to pull the next bit out of me.

Terri started to come over but the phone rang and pulled her back. Thank you, whoever that is on the phone, thank you. Still there was Sharon.

"So what does this man do?"

"He is a musician."

"Really? What does he play?"

"Electric acoustic guitar mostly."

"Does he play for anyone major?"

"Yea."

"Anybody we'd know?"

Man I did not want to say, because then she would have told Terri and then Terri would be the type that would have to tell everybody who came in today. Why didn't I just say he was a, I don't know, truck driver or something stupid like that? "Well mostly he does studio work and is a hired man for road tours. So while he is not with one specific band, because most are electronic anymore anyway, he is more the one you scan the credits for on the CD."

"Oh. So where does he live at?"

"Minneapolis."

"Whew girl it gets cold up there! How can he stand it?"

How can I stand this? I mean I am trying to escape the thoughts of him right now because when I am with Xavier I have enough of them. Still, there was that stupid smile on my face when I talked about him. "He can stand the cold because he is never there. Just like he can stand the snow because he is always looking down at it from an airplane."

Sharon laughed and Terri was now greeting a woman at the counter. Another stylist waked through the door and then another. The shop had started to come to life.

By 9:30, the shop was full and Sharon was working on the top of my head. "Thank the girl who got you this hair for me, she got enough of all the colors so that I could do a nice even job because I don't think we have these numbers here."

"Numbers?"

Sharon let out a loud laugh and yelled to the shop, "Ladies, I have a braid virgin sittin in this chair right here. She don't understand numbers when it comes to hair packages."

The shop laughed and some yelled, "It will be alright, Sharon has got you. You'll walk out of here a braid pro."

"Numbers honey, they are the color of the hair in the package."

"Oh."

Terri walked over, "I don't think Latrice is going to show up today."

"She'll be here. Good thing she is late, that will give me time to finish up with her."

Terri moved on to other stations talking to the other stylists and interrogating the other customers. Twenty-two and killer attitude, what a trip.

At ten a young girl with major attitude leaking from every part of her being finally walked in straight past everybody over to Sharon. Alexandra would have nothing on this girl. "Hey Sharon."

"Hey Latrice."

"See you don't even look up, you just assume that I am here and not ready to go."

Sharon looked up, "I see I finally got it through that head of yours to get yourself ready before you get here."

"Yeah, but I don't see why. I am still late and probably won't make it out of here at the time I need to."

"Well have a seat because I still got about twenty minutes left on this child's head."

"Excuse me Sharon, but I am the one with the appointment, not her."

I just looked at this woman because here we go again. Her hair had to be about maybe four inches long, which made sense since she kept braiding it up all the time anyway. Her skin was a light brown, her face had freckles and her body was well shaped but nothing special about it. She looked all about 18. If she is 18 where was she getting the money to continuously

braid and weave her hair all the time? The answer came walking through the door.

A man walked through the door and smiled at the ladies. He was tall, good-looking, a short free curl, skin a little darker than hers with a goatee. He had on the baggy jeans, the shirt, and the boots to finish it off. I was dying, dayum, how did she hook up with him, he looks to be about my age.

He grabbed her by the waist, "Baby I waited for you to come back out and tell me how long you were going to be but you didn't come back out." He looked over at Sharon and I and flashed that million-dollar smile.

Million dollar smile my azz, please this brother dripped playa all over him. I'll have to remember that mug so I don't talk to him in a club one night.

"Terrance I told you I would be a minute." Latrice said while breaking out of his grip. "I would know right now but Sharon started on somebody else because I didn't get here on time, even though this time I am ready to get my hair done."

Looking at this man, I am surprised she took the chance to let him see her real hair. It was obvious he didn't care by the way he kept checking me out. Please, you don't even stand a chance with me playa. Stay with the young and dumb, cause you can't handle nothin sittin in this chair right here!

With her eyes slit at me she asked, "So Sharon how long before you can get to me?"

Whatever.

"Latrice I have done told you about not showing up on time. Now first off you are lucky that this nice lady came in here totally prepared otherwise you would really have a wait ahead of you. Why don't you and Terrance go for some breakfast?"

Whoa did his facial expression change in less than a second. Brother man must have somewhere else to be at and then come back.

"Fine, let's go Terrance."

"Baby you know I got somewhere to be. Why don't you sit down with a magazine and then give me a call when you are nearly finished up here."

"Terrance, I know where you think you got to be, now let's go."

Grabbed his hand and started walking but Terrance didn't move. I cannot believe the two of them were going to start some ghetto fabulous soap opera right here in front of the whole shop. Everybody in here already knows that he is headed to his other girl's house and was trying to ditch Latrice to get there.

"Baby, I don't know where it is you think that I am going but I have a very important interview today that I don't want to screw up. Now please, sit here, and call me when you are nearly finished."

"You know what Terrance...fine. Give me the money to get this ish done today and then you better come back to pick me up."

Terrance pulled a roll from his pocket; flipped out some twenty's and handed it over to her. Sure you are headed for an interview bro, more like another drop or another girl. To which she said, "Uh, some extra please, I would like to have something to eat today since it was you who made me late getting here."

"Fine, whatever you want Latrice." Handed her the money and bounced out the shop. In the parking lot, you could hear an import screech out, which must have been his.

Latrice grabbed my braid magazine from the tray and started flipping through it. Dag the women who come up in here are bold, I am starting to think I am over by Argil Gardens or something.

Sharon looked at Latrice and kindly said, "Latrice honey don't loose my place in that book I am coming up to the crown and I want to get it right."

"Sharon you don't need any book to do no hair, you know you got it."

Sharon just sighed; obviously Latrice was a lot of work besides her hair.

Latrice reset the magazine to the correct page and put it back on Sharon's tray. Then she picked up some of the hair that was laid out. This girl was as mischievous as a freakin three year old.

"Man this hair is soft. Is this human?"

"No, it is that new stuff that just came out on the market; remember I mentioned it to you the last time you were in."

"Man that stuff? That is too much money. How much did you pay per bag for this?"

"I don't know my girl got it for me and then I just paid her for the hair and the magazines."

"Well this here you are putting in is expensive. You must have some money from the number of bags you got of it."

What? You think you can get money out of me the way you do out of him? Sorry sweetie as I already stated once this morning, I don't swing that way and my bank account is not your ATM.

"Well Sharon I will be over on the couch, waiting for you to call me over."

"Don't worry Latrice it will be soon."

Latrice set her bags down by Sharon's station and proceeded towards the couch area. Instead of finding a seat she went out the door.

"She is probably on her way to smoke. She usually stays high all day long. She thinks we don't recognize the smell when she comes in."

Carmel walked over to Sharon's station, "Sharon why do you put up with her mess? She is always in here fussing at you when things aren't even your fault. And that man of hers, he ain't nothing but her dealer!"

I am definitely making mental note to self about staying far away from him. There are some brothers out there you just have to stay away from. I should take his picture and make sure Ori never touches him either.

Usually though she has pretty sharp instincts about guys like that.

"Oh that is just Latrice. I won't make excuses for her, but she is a steady client and because of her I have gained five other steady clients."

"Steady or not that girl needs a good ass whoopin at her age." With that, Carmel walked back over to her area to finish her client's hair.

Sharon then spun me around so that she could finish the front of my hair. "So what do you think so far?" *Of the people? You don't want to know.* "They aren't hurting you to much yet are they?"

"Pain? Please, that ain't nothin."

Sharon laughed and said, "Well this is a good brand of hair, you shouldn't be in pain too much tonight. The first time you shower, wash them in hot water so that they will become even more flexible for you. Then take a conditioner, the one that your friend has in the bag for you here is fine and spray it on. Just don't spray to much on or when you take these out you will have build up from hell!"

"Really?"

"Yep. Feel right here for me." She placed my fingers at the root of the braid. "See this will start poppin up once the hair underneath the braid starts to grow, and your conditioner will start building up in-between the base of the braid and your scalp and if that happens...expect hell combing it out. Liquid grease cutting dish detergent doesn't even get it out. So, be careful. Wash the braids like you would your normal hair, but I can't stress rinsing enough. Trust me; this braid style I am wearing requires me to rinse about three minutes or more to make sure I got everything out."

"Alright. Thank you for letting me know that."

"Now this style should last you about three to four weeks before it gets out of control and since you said your life is a blur, make sure you set aside some time to

take them out. It is easy but you are going to have to wash and probably perm your hair."

"Got it."

"Then if you want, come back to have them done again or whatever you chose."

"Cool."

"When you take them out don't cut anything above an inch, otherwise you'll start cutting your natural hair."

"Got it, nothing above an inch."

"Alright then, I'll be about ten or so more minutes and then we shall decide how you want to close these off."

While she worked I heard the other conversations going on around us with the "girl" this and the "girl" that. Sharon was right when she said women came here not only to get their hair done but also to pour out their soul in a room full of women who'd probably understand. The gossip that I overheard was way too local for it to reach anyone I knew in the city, so I paid less attention to that. What did catch my ear was a woman talking about how she was suspicious of being run by two men. She was going on and on about the time of the night both men would call, the places they took her, etc. She was fearful that they knew each other and wanted to see who could get what first from her. Now that is a trip.

Thankfully, Terri never had the opportunity to come back over and question me about Visean or Xavier. Sharon started shaping the braids like she would a normal hair cut and then said, "Okay, what do you think of your first set of braids young lady?"

They were beautiful. "Simply beautiful. Thank you Sharon."

"No problem. Now do you want to burn the ends, wax them, or leave them frayed? If we burn them they will start catching onto things and each other and start getting frizzy at the end. If we wax them they will have a nicer finish but the wax sometimes doesn't hold all

that well. Then there of course is just leaving them as is and depending on how active your are or how much you pull them up or what have you, then they can get ugly. My suggestion is to wax the ends, it is easy enough that I can give you some to take home and when and if it does come off the end you can easily repair it yourself."

"Okay then, let's wax."

"Be right back. I got to go heat some up. Sit back and relax, you're on the home stretch now."

Which was good, it was getting near eleven, not bad since we started around 7:45 this morning. Not that I was headed anywhere special, just that I didn't want to be in the office all afternoon. Well really, all evening, plus I was starving.

Sharon came back and finished up. She gave me a mirror and showed me by lightly lifting up the top layer to show me the color blocking effect that we decided on. "Now I know you intend to pull these up but give it about two days before you do okay. They won't slip or anything like that but you need to give your scalp some time after being pulled on so much."

"No problem."

Sharon cleaned up her station, putting everything back into my bag that she hadn't used. She looked around, "Hmm, well I guess Latrice got lost in her own world once again. Good that will give me time to take a break and get something to eat."

"Terri will take care of you on the way out. Just give the extra money to me now, she already knows not to put it on the ticket."

I handed her over two fifty dollar bills and thanked her again. I took care of my bill with Terri where I added a tip for bookkeeping sake. Terri who was on the phone thankfully went through the motions and I was able to walk out stylin my new braids without answering more questions.

Can you believe it?!

♂ *sunday mornings* ♀

OUCH! Jeez, talk about waking up in some pain! Dayum! What in the hell did that woman do to my head? Why in the hell didn't I leave the aspirin by the bed last night?

I untied the scarf that held my hair, which gave little to no relief at all, stumbled out of bed and into the bathroom to grab the bottle of aspirin. Honestly, the pain radiating from my head would have been about the only thing that woke me up today; I was totally wiped from my life. Maybe if I took enough of these things I could go right back to sleep.

Mercedes!

From the bathroom I then found my way to the kitchen to grab a bottle of water to take the stupid aspirin with. I wanted desperately to kill the pain in my head so that I could go back to sleep. I opened my water, downed my aspirin, and then peered nastily over at the clock so that Father Time himself could feel my disgust for the hour of the morning it was.

Then the reason my mother told me never to be nasty to anyone, especially when you don't have the whole story, happened. As I was giving the clock my most evil of looks, I know Father Time was sitting there with a smart-ass smirk on his face when I saw it was 1:12 p.m.

Dammit! I cannot believe I let myself do this. I mean yeah, I wanted some sleep but not waste away my only freakin day off this week in bed! Ugh! I looked back over at the clock; well it isn't like I had too much planned for today anyway. No. Wait. Correction, I was supposed to hook up with X today and considering that I unplugged the phone last night and shut off my cell phone I am sure he has called thinking that I have totally blown him off.

I walked into the living room where I found four messages on my recorder.

Beep. "Good morning lover girl!" *Oh my God, Visean called on a Sunday morning.* "I know what you are thinking, it is Sunday morning and my ass is calling you. No the world hasn't ended it is just that, well today is a day of rest for some of us and I thought it would be a good time to get hold of you." *Rest? Right.*

"Obviously you're either dead in bed from your week of hell or you're out and about with your *friends.*" *Didn't we discuss that issue Mr. Visean?* "Well today isn't a day of rest for my ass and as usual I am running late. But I wanted to call and hear your sexy voice, since I am going to hear the Lord's angel's singing to my guitar all day today anyway." *Awe how sweet.* "So I am out, call me after five. Miss you baby. Love you." Pause. "Oops almost forgot, forget the Detroit gig, it fell through. Don't worry there will always be another."

That is okay, I forgot about it to. When I got into the office I completely ignored my voicemail and oops, it was only from me. Love you to Visean.

Beep. "Girl this is Ori and I am going to need your help today big time." *Oh no don't tell me she got into more trouble with someone.* "Okay, so Tiffany, from the office, and I went out last night." *Wait, Ori went out with the bubble headed blonde from the office last night.* "Everything was okay until homegirl made a move on me."

I stepped back and yelled, "You lying girl!"

"Trust me Mercedes I am not lying. I am as just as freaked out as you have to be right now hearing this. In fact, why aren't you hearing me say all this and your answering machine is? Are you still in bed? Girl it is going on 11 a.m. Hello! Mercedes? Wake up!" There was a long pause. "Fine then either your azz spent the night at the office or with X or possibly you are still asleep. No matter, girl CALL ME!"

Now that don't make no kind of sense why Orianna is even trippin out about something like this. The woman looks so good that everybody hits on her, male and female.

Hell I remember the time she got brave and went to a club by herself that was known for a bit more of a risqué type crowd. While there she was approached first by a lesbian couple, then a married couple and then two men who wanted to get it on with her. This visit was during her experimentation phase of life. She knew she loved sex and would sleep with a man the way a man would sleep with a woman and found out about this alternative club. She figured anything that was shown on the movies was just over dramatized or glamorized and that it would probably be a dud night. Yea right! This is Chi Town, not some little southern bible town. Ori came back freaked out and swore she would never visit that club or any other ever again. Her thing was not their thing and she now knew her boundaries of what her thing is. The only reason she could possibly be tripping out is that she works with this girl. Hmm, I wonder how she let this girl down.

Beep. "Mercedes this is X. Are you home? I tried you on your cell but you didn't pick up that either. Is everything okay? You're probably still knocked out in bed. Well, it's a little past noon, so I guess I will try you again in a little while. No matter what time you wake up today, plan to make time for us. Later sleepy head."

Speechless. He understands.

Beep. "Um hi. Mercedes right?" *Who the hell was this?* "Um, a'right look this is Darri. I mean Darrius, Sheldon's cousin," *Oh my God, homeboy actually gave him my number!* "I got your number from him. I know it is Sunday and everything but yo, I wanted to start the week out right so I thought you and I could hook up today and you could get me orientated me on this city." *Chile where is Sheldon at? Why is he not*

showing you around? "Sheldon didn't have time for me today, something about Katrina needing him at some kind of appointment." *Katrina? Oh. On a Sunday? Sheldon had an appointment to keep. Right.* "So if you could give me a call at Sheldon's later on, I would appreciate it. Oh yea and don't worry, Sheldon won't trip when you call and ol' girl isn't allowed to pick up the phone while she is here." *Surprise, surprise.* "A'right out."

I don't believe this! After all that I said to Sheldon he still gave that boy my number? I mean honestly, it's not what's his name fault. Still I just thought Sheldon would drop this.

Exhale Mercedes, more has just been added to your plate.

Well whatever his name is sounds cool. I could hook him up with some of the people I know, show him around, and find out what is really up. I mean, when I have time I can hook him up. God puts these people into your life for a reason so I will try to succeed at what I have been handed to work with. Well the least I should start with is giving him a call back along with everybody else.

I called X first and told him that I just woke up and thanked him for being so considerate of my needing a day of sleep. He was more than understanding and set up a dinner date with me for 5:30.

Next on my list was Ms. Thang to find out what the hell she was so upset about. I dialed up her number and I don't even think I heard it ring when she picked up. "Ori?"

"Mercedes, I never expected. I mean the girl; I have told you about her, but dag I never even thought she played for the other team. I mean she was always talking about Jim, Bob, John, or some other crazy White boy she hooked up with."

I walked in the bathroom and began to get ready for my day. "Ever stop to think that maybe she goes both ways?"

"Eww. Mercedes!"

"What?"

"Yea, yea you right." I could see her rollin her eyes at me through the phone.

"So what exactly happened? How did she make her pass at you to let you know that she was a lesbian, bisexual, straight up freak or whatever?" I put her to speakerphone, pulled out a cleansing pad and began to wash my face.

"I don't exactly remember how it all went down."

"How all what went down?" I rinsed and grabbed a towel to dry my face and started reaching for my make-up.

"All I know is we met at this club downtown, somewhere I hadn't been before and everything was cool at the beginning of the night."

"Was it an alternative club?"

"No, at least I don't remember it as one. I think I saw regular couples in there. It's not like I really look for that stuff on a regular basis Mercedes."

"Ok." I smiled; she is going to admit she started drinking heavily in a minute.

"So we get in, go to the bar and do a shot together."

I put down my eyeliner, "Stop. I just want to make sure I have the person who you are talking about correct. You went out with the dippy blonde from the office right?"

"Yes."

"Why? I mean I know you just tease her about being dippy because she isn't; but I thought that is the only way you could make it through a day with that woman. You are always complaining about her. How much she brags about men as if trying to make you

jealous or something. So what is the deal that you headed out with her?"

"Mercedes!" *Here it comes.* "Look that doesn't matter, the fact that does is that she hit on me. Came up all on me."

Yea thankfully I don't need to apply lip liner right now because the smirk on my face won't be going anywhere for awhile. "And how is it that you have decided that she was trying to come up on you?"

"Well if you would let me finish."

"Go ahead girl, I know when to shut up and listen." Right. Smile.

"Mercedes I know you got that stupid ass smile on your face, now wipe it off and get serious with me for a moment. Please."

Please? Dag. "Ori did this woman try to hurt you?"

"A woman? Please! Hell no!"

"Well as freaked out as you are, as serious as you are and as many times this situation has happened to you it sounded like something bad went down." I could hear her exhale through the phone. "Ori, what happened that night?"

"Everything went fine at the club, she and I both danced with different guys, had a lot to drink, sometimes we were dancing with each other for a minute, ya know the stupid club stuff to make the guys look. It was nothing more than that."

"Okay."

"Then we get out of the club and she suggests breakfast. Breakfast is normal so I said I would go with her. The thing was, is that she suggested having breakfast at her place."

"Did she live near the club?" I finished putting on my foundation.

"No."

"Okay, hold for just one second."

"Mercedes!"

"Orianna! Hold, dag."

I powered my face, put a small amount of moisturizer onto my braids, threw on some clothes, picked up the phone, took her off speakerphone and headed for the kitchen. X and I may be having dinner tonight but I'll be passed out if I don't have a little something before then. "Okay, I am back, sorry about the wait, please go ahead."

"Where was I?"

"See maybe it wasn't all that bad."

"Mercedes!"

"Ori! Dag. Girl you were saying that you left the club and she suggested breakfast at her place, so what did you two end up doing?"

"For some reason I accepted her offer."

"Alcohol will do that dear."

"Screw you Mercedes. So we got a cab, go to her place, she excuses herself and comes back out in a robe and starts making breakfast in the kitchen."

"Okay. What is so unusual about that?" I looked at the clock, it was nearing 2:30 and I needed Ori to finish her adventure up so that I could return other phone calls. Although homeboy's cousin shouldn't top my list of people to call back, he does. If you want a young person to succeed and do right then you have to do right yourself.

"So we are talking and everything is cool until I start looking around the apartment. Girl she has pictures of women everywhere and art of naked women traipsed through her apartment. I start looking at her and notice the robe she is wearing is a short black silk and girl, I swear she had nothing on underneath."

"So then, how did she hit on you?"

"She comes over and sits down on the couch next to me and says that breakfast will be ready in a moment and starts running her fingers through my hair, commenting how pretty and unique it is."

"Ori, a lot of White people do have a fascination with our hair."

"Do they also have a fascination with our thighs?"

"Say what?"

"Yes girl, girlfriends other hand was all over my thigh! Oh my God! The worse part is that I had been drinking so much and having a glass of wine while I was there it took a moment to register what she was doing."

"Wine with breakfast?"

"Mercedes!"

"What? Sorry, go ahead."

"Good because it gets worse!"

"Worse? Ori, what did this woman do?"

"She starts kissing my neck and whispering in my ear telling how much she likes me."

"No freakin way! So this girl has no idea how much you really can't stand her? Dag, maybe she really is a dippy blonde."

"Girl, did I not tell you."

"So what did you do?"

"Oh my God this is where it gets embarrassing."

"Ori, did you kiss her back? What did you do?"

"Girl, I was in such a state of shock that all I could respond with was, 'Is breakfast ready, I would hate to have the stuff you made burn.'"

"So this woman is all up in your hair, your thigh, your neck and your ear and you were worried about breakfast? Oh my God." I busted out laughing.

"Mercedes this is not funny!"

"Yes it is girl and you know you're going to be looking back at this and laughing one day to."

"Hell no I'm not!"

"Dag! Alright Ori, finish the story."

"This skeezer takes her hand and turns my head and says, 'Something else is already burning, can you feel it? Here let me show you.' And kisses me full on the lips and then the bitch has the nerve to try and slide me the tongue."

I was of course doubled over in silent laughter. Okay, okay, sound serious so that she doesn't get

pissed. Okay, okay, "No way! So what did you do?" I then continued to laugh in silence.

"I jumped off the couch and headed for my coat. She heads for the door and puts her hand on the handle to stop me. Then the freak unties her robe and starts to you know, play with her chest area and goes, 'Are you sure you want to leave this Ori? We could be having a lot of fun right now.'"

"OH MY GOD!" So now, I am really dying laughing. I couldn't stop laughing! I heard Ori screaming over the phone to shut up or something, that this wasn't funny. I just couldn't stop laughing.

Okay, wait. Compose yourself. Whew! Inhale. Exhale. No, laughing is bad. C'mon, Mercedes pull it together. Okay. I grabbed onto the counter to grab hold of my composure. "Ori, I am so sorry that I find so much humor in this. Please tell me what this freak did next."

"Mercedes, I don't know how or why you find humor in all this but if it ever happens to you and you are as freaked out as I am I swear I will show no mercy in my humor. Having some girl hit on you at the club is one thing but having a girl hit on you in this way is a whole other!"

"Ori girl you have told me that you watch girl on girl porn all the time, hell don't lie about it...I've seen your collection. So I just can't believe that you are so freaked out. But you're right Ori, so how did you escape?"

"That aint' got nothin to do with this. I looked at her and was like, 'I don't know what you thought, but I am not interested! Now please let me leave before I do something to hurt you to get you out of my way.'"

"Dag!"

"Oh yea I was about to get all ghetto fab up in that place, neighbors would have been waking up to hear me kick her nasty ass."

"Now wait Ori, that isn't fair."

"Girl right now I don't care what is or what is not fair."

"So did she let you out?"

"Of course."

"So what happened at work this morning when you had to see her again?" Ori's company didn't require employees to work Sunday mornings but with some of their business being with international clients she and others stopped by to stay one step ahead.

"Well she avoided me which was smart, but did send me a private email to my private account, because everybody knows company email is not private. She is trying to claim that during the course of the night when she went to the ladies room without me, I was with some guy, she did a hit of X."

"That pill Ecstasy? Girl she is stupid, one pill will kill. You couldn't tell she was on it?"

"No and I know about that stuff. She claims that she has had an interest in women before but the pill must have taken it to another level. She apologized over and over again and stated she would never mention it and hoped I wouldn't either."

"So did you e her back?"

"Hell no. There is no excuse!"

"Dag. So have you seen her around the office?"

"Yea but she didn't say anything. What a freakin high price to pay to have her finally leave me alone!"

"Man Ori, what a freakin trip. I am so glad that she didn't put anything in your drink either. I mean we all worry about these sorry azz no excuse idiots in a club who might slip us something but she might have tried to slip you something so that she could go all the way with you!"

"You just had to put that thought into my head didn't you?"

"Well girl you know me, safety first."

"So what do you think I should do?"

"I don't know. You could email her back and slam her about taking the X and trying to come up on you and to leave you alone for any personal issues but would work with her professionally only. No need to lose careers here."

"It was just so nasty!"

"Are you sure about that? Maybe you are attracted to her and just didn't want anything to happen. I mean you hate this girl but went to a club with her for some reason."

"Yea right!"

"Well either way, you'll look back this and laugh."

"How can anyone find any humor in this?"

"Please, think about, homegirl starts by playing with your hair, then your thigh, your ear, kisses your neck and then comes up with the cheesy line of 'There is something else burning.' Hello! Then she stops you at the door and starts fondling herself. What a freak! Trust me you will find it funny!"

"Whatever Mercedes, you always did have that dark sense of humor. Just don't tell anyone, not Xavier, not Visean, not Miranda; nobody, okay?"

"Girl you know me, secrets told to me are protected tighter than Fort Knox. So are you feeling better now that you told someone?"

"Yea."

"Well I gotta go, I have one other drama starting in a few minutes with the next phone call."

"And what drama would that be Ms. Mercedes? The one that involves Mr. Xavier? Mr. Visean? Or have we dumped them both and moved onto new programming?"

"No we have not dropped them and I have not moved onto new programming, well not exactly."

"Umm-hmm."

"Fine. You remember Sheldon don't you?"

"Please don't go there again with me. He and I weren't even close to being on a civil level. I don't

know why you are even speaking his name and please don't even begin to tell me that you two are thinking of hooking up again."

"To sound all valley, 'As if!' No, but he did call. It seems that I am like the only ultra cool person he knows who can show his younger cousin from New Jersey, Chicago. He asked if I would get him orientated on this city because I know about all the clubs, the imports and the night life."

"So Sheldon isn't trying to assimilate his cousin into his boring lifestyle? What is his cousin not good enough?"

"Girl who knows. Then this brother has the nerve to ask me not to sleep with his cousin!"

"What?"

"All because of Li'l C."

"Man whatever, that joker bet not even think of asking anything out of you as a trip down nasty lane. That is what he needs to concentrate on not having happen."

"Oh it won't. I wouldn't. Please I told you how unblessed that boy is. Ugh. Anyway, he has some new drone in his life, Katrina. I bet she is the one who is refusing to give up charitable time to his cousin."

"Another mold huh? Ugh. Well it is cool that you are going to help a young bro out. What do you have planned?"

"No freakin clue. My work schedule is hell. Today is the only day I have off and I already have plans for dinner tonight with X. Darien, D, Darrin, or whatever his name is asked if we could hook up today to kind get him pointed in a direction for the week."

"So take X with you."

"Hmm...maybe. We'll see. X is tripping because I have been so tied up all week there hasn't been any time for us."

"Speaking of which...." *Oh no, I haven't even had a moment to catch Ori up on my trip, I know she is about*

to ask. *Damn, it is almost three.* "How was your little trip with Mr. Music man?"

"Girl, right now I don't have the time to even give you a glimpse or preview, it will just keep us on the phone for another hour, an hour that I do not have right now."

"Well if some of us wouldn't sleep in like a vampire they would have more time."

"Yeah, yeah...whatever."

"Un-huh, one last question. How did the braids turn out?"

"Beautiful. Thank you so much for all of your help, it made my time at the shop so much easier on her. I love them but man do they hurt."

"Well give them until tomorrow morning and then wash them in really hot water. That hair is soft but will feel better when you soften it a little more."

"Alright girl I am out of here."

"Yea call whatever his name is and whatever you do stay away from idiot boy, we don't need that high society idiot back in your life again."

"Yes Ori. Bye."

"Bye."

My blood sugar was too low, I grabbed what little food I had in the refrigerator and started preparing a small bowl of pasta. I know I have to eat with X later but we probably won't eat until 6:30 and I am hungry now. I got things going and decided to dive in head first with...dag, what is his name? I walked over to my recorder and realized I had deleted the message from Sheldon's cousin. Dammit. Oh well. I know it started with a D. I looked up his number and dialed.

"Hello."

"Hi, is Sheldon in?"

"No, who's this?"

"Mercedes."

"Hey Mercedes this is Darrius."

"Hi!" Thank you for reminding my slow azz your name. "I was actually calling for you. How are you?"

"I am good. I'm good. Hey I wasn't sure if it was cool to call you or not today. Sheldon said it didn't matter when I called that you aren't too busy of a person anyway."

"Darius, I really want to start this off good between you and I so let me state this about your cousin, he never had a clue to who I really am. Therefore, whatever he does say about me is probably wrong. Okay?"

"Cool."

"Alright then. So what made you move from Jersey?"

"Yo man, my dawg's couldn't keep themselves out of the cell block and I don't want that to be my life. Know what I'm sayin? So my cousin decided to hook me up to bring me out here. Not like I can't get into any trouble here, cause I have heard all about how furious it can get up in here. Then he came up with the idea of you, and I was like, cool, I can try that."

"Try what?"

"You know, hanging out with you. You know, having fun without being locked up for it. He thinks you are trouble anyway, you just don't get caught."

"Un-huh." What the freak? Chile, please do not let me catch Sheldon out anywhere, with or without his girl, because I would like to untwist that twisted mind of his.

"So Sheldon mentioned that you have a DJ friend that hit it pretty big. That is cool. Yo, I can spin a li'l something myself. Always wanted the equipment, but yo, that can cost some mad money."

"True." Why is this man starting to make me feel like I am 80? I put the rigatoni noodles in and poured some sauce into a bowl to be heated. Think Mercedes and relax. It may be Sheldon's cousin but he isn't Sheldon. "So what have you done in Chicago so far?"

"Nothing. He won't give me a key to this place yet so the only time I can go out is when I know when he is going to be back. It's so stupid. What I really want to do is just find a job so that I can get my own place, which is going to seem hard cause it costs money to live out here. Not like Jersey didn't, but dag."

"Well there are a lot of different areas to Chicago with different prices on rent, so I am sure when the time is right you will find something you can live in. As far as jobs, Chicago has a good transportation system, so it's not like you are stuck out in farmland trying to get to the big city to land one. So what is it that you did to earn money in Jersey?"

"Basically whatever I could find. Jobs at department stores for discount on clothes, car washes, one time I even worked out on the docks. Man that job sucked. I'd come home smelling like fish, my girl didn't even want me near her even after a shower. The money was good, but yo, I am too young to be without a girl yo. Know what I'm sayin?"

Yet again how would I? I am a girl. Then again, Ori could have found out last night. Oops. "Well Darrius...."

"You can call me Darri."

"Well Darri, unfortunately I slept in like a fool today and didn't get up until after one."

"Dag, did you go party last night? I should have called you, I knew it."

"Naw man, I didn't go out last, work has been off the chain trying to catch up from a weekend trip. I don't think I have seen daylight except for outside a window and I haven't seen the inside of my apartment because I don't need light to sleep."

"What do you do again?"

"I am a tax accountant, which means I clean up everybody's red tape mess that they try to pass by the IRS as legitimate tax earnings, deductions, and such."

"So you smart right?"

Tax, yes. Men, no. "I play it off like I am."

"Well what do you think I should do to get adjusted here?"

I am so surprised he is asking me a question like that. "Well if Sheldon wasn't trippin as usual it would be a lot easier to start somewhere. Not having a key is a trip, does he not trust you?"

"Yea and for a reason, but I don't want to talk about that right now. So when can I hook up with you?"

"I am having dinner tonight with my boy X at 5:30 and then after that I don't know."

"Is that your man?"

One of. "Yea, something like that."

"Oh dag, female playa!" and started barking like a dog.

I just looked at the phone and started laughing. Guess I am. "Darri man, no, I am not that, I just have a lot of male friends, they are easier to be down with. Know what I'm sayin?" Ha! I finally throw that back at somebody.

"Yea girl I do, I had a lot of female friends back in Jersey as you say." *Of course the person on the other side of the court would understand and be able to elaborate on it.* "They were cool, especially the ones with benefits. Love those types of females; miss 'em to. What about Chicago women? They down?"

Yea, if there were more like Ori. I wonder if her little escapade will slow her down any or put her into high speed with men. "Well since I am a female and don't date other female's I wouldn't know all about that."

"Well all know is I don't like what my cousin has, his ol' girl be trippin all the time. I thought he was bad, but he met his match yo! Homegirl is a trip."

"Believe me, he needs it. So how old are you?" My snack was almost done.

"Twenty-two, I don't turn twenty-three until next year."

For some reason Terri from the braid shop came to mind. Nah, she would destroy him. "Got your high school diploma? Any college? Interested in college?"

"Yes, no and no."

"Straight?"

"Yep."

"So what are you interested in then?"

"Music, fast cars, and havin fun."

"Alright, tell you what. Right now, I have to eat. Otherwise, you're gonna be talking to straight up air on this side. Cause if I don't eat, I'll be all passed out on the floor and you'll be wondering what the hell just happened trying to call 911 and won't know where to send them." *He started laughing.* "I'll call you tonight when I get back."

"Cool then. Peace."

"Peace."

Lord knows I could have spent the next few hours on the phone with this man talking cars, especially if he mentioned the H word. Girls please understand, I am a gearhead big time and I am very willing to show it. I grabbed my pasta and drink and hit the couch. Luckily, there were some good shows on cable. By the time I quit zoning, it was 4:30. Dammit, I had to get ready for my date with X.

What I am preparing for? Dinner at a nice restaurant, a bar, his house? Better, call.

"Hello."

Such a nice voice. "Hi! I am just sitting here wondering what kind of dinner I should make myself presentable for tonight."

"What are you wearing right now?"

"One of my many sports outfits." I looked down at my shirt to see which I had grabbed for the day and realized that it was the one I bought while out shopping with Visean's mother. Oops.

"Well just stay in that and I will come pick you up."

"Okay. 5:30 right?"

"Oh yes."

Huh? "Okay. Bye."

Why is it getting to the point where it is somewhat weird to have a conversation with him? I mean really. Well he said that I can stay comfortable which is good, but I still need a shower. Joy, that means pulling these braids up so that they won't get wet. Well at least some of the painkiller has kicked in. Ouch.

I took a quick shower enjoying the fact that my makeup and hair was already done. When I looked at the clock I almost freaked, it was only 5:10 and I was ready. This is good. You know I really should go down and get my mail because I haven't since I don't remember when. It would probably be nice if the mail carrier didn't have to draw up a plan on how to stuff it all in everyday until my lazy ass goes to pick it up. I grabbed the mailbox key and headed for the elevator.

The lobby was dead, no one in it at all which was kinda unusual for this time of day on a Sunday. It looked nice outside, so I headed out. The air was fresh, well as fresh as you can get for this city, and it felt good. I walked for a bit longer than I should have off in my own world again and when I looked at my watch it was 5:27. Damn, X! I have to get back.

I headed back, got my mail, and when I went back up, I saw Xavier standing by my door.

"X? When in the heck did you arrive?"

"Just a minute ago. Where were you?"

Large amounts of paper did not give this man a clue as to where I was at. "Well I headed to get the mail," lifting the mass to show him, "and when I got down there I noticed how nice it was outside so I headed out for a walk."

"You got into your zone again and forgot the time didn't you?"

"You know you are right but hey, it is only a little after 5:30 and here I am." I had a big cheesy smile on my face.

"Mercedes, Mercedes, Mercedes...." He just stood there shaking his head.

"What?" I moved past him and got us in. Dropped off the mail on the counter and heard a voice in the background that wasn't Xavier's. "...Girl I done told you that you could call me after five o'clock and here it is 5:35, no wait, is my watch fast or did I set this one slow...." Freak! Visean.

I tried desperately to keep myself from bolting pass X to the phone. I quickly walked over and picked it up. "Visean."

"Hello? Hello."

"Yes it's me." I looked over at X and smiled. X in return turned his back to me and walked into the kitchen. Whew this is going to be tight.

"Wasn't I just talking to your answering machine?"

"Yep."

"And now I am talking to you."

"Yep."

"A live person."

"When I last checked, yep." I started giggling. I can't help it the man is so cute. Oops.

"So um-err-uh where were you that first you were a machine and now you are live?"

"In the kitchen. Well first I went to get the mail, then I walked into the kitchen and heard this voice and was like, wait, who is that talking? Then I realized it was you talking on the recorder and then I picked up and you see that is how we are having this conversation now." With that, Xavier popped his head out of the kitchen to give me a twisted look.

I of course smiled politely back.

"So is anybody there with you?"

Uh. Yes. No. Uh. "Yep."

"One of your *friends*?"

"Yep." Visean, please do not have me say a name.

"Well that is okay; just let your friend know that the love of your life is on the phone right now." I knew I could count on you.

"Oh really." Dayum my smile.

"Really."

"I can agree with that."

What? Mercedes you have X not more than five freakin feet away from you. Girl there is brave and then there is just plain stupid, choose your poison.

"So how did your day playing at church go?"

"Good. Right now I am headed into the studio until about 1 a.m. or so, think I can call you then."

"Definitely."

"Sure your friend won't mind?"

"WhatEVER Visean." Uh-oh I just said his name.

Oops!

Xavier walked out of the kitchen, looked back at me shaking his head, and went into the bathroom. Perfect!

"I love you baby girl! Make sure you tell you friend that."

"Yea, yea whatever." I heard toilet starting to flush.

"I love you to Visean. I miss you."

"Me too baby girl. Don't worry I won't be long like the last time. I'll call you tonight."

"Yep."

"Bye."

"Bye Visean." With that, I heard the faucet shut off and X walked out of the bathroom and into the living room. I know what you are thinking, dag what are you going to do to get out of this. Well, out of what? Visean called big deal. I am not going to be like some soap opera and go all drama queen and create some kind of lie or scheme. Please, I am better at this than that. I simply looked at Xavier and smiled, "Ready?"

"Was that the guitar player?"

"Yep." I like this answer. It is working well. One word, simple, it doesn't lead to any further explanations.

"I thought you weren't talking to him much."

"We still talk when his schedule allows."

"How long has it been since you seen him last?" He stood there with his arms folded but trying hard to not look harshly at me.

No, no, no Mr. Lawrence that information is classified and you do not have the proper clearance. "Man Visean? I can't even remember. I think during the wintertime. Why do you ask?" Keep it normal, it's none of his business anyway.

"Just wondering."

"Well Mr. XL,"

"XL...man Mercedes no has called me that since I went to school."

It is so easy to throw a man. I started giggling and threw my arms around his neck, "I know. So XL, Mr. Xtra Large, trust me I do agree with that, I am hungry, so what are we doing."

He leaned in and started kissing me. "Follow me."

♂ the pool game ♀

Ladies and Gentlemen where is it that you all think he led me too? Stop right there with your dirty minds because he led me to pick up my jacket and then out the door. We ended up over at his house, where dinner was waiting.

"Xavier this is so nice." He had the table laid out with deli meats, the works for toppings over ice, and wheat sub rolls.

"Sweetie you have been tied up in that office all week. I really wanted to take you somewhere but I just wanted you to relax on your day off."

I smiled and dropped my head, oh my God people. Oh my God. It's the little things, I keep saying it over and over to people and they don't believe me, but if they could feel the joy I have inside of me right now, they'd know. "Xavier, thank you. This is really, just more than perfect."

"I know. You know I have been your friend for a long time now, just because that level has moved up doesn't mean I deleted the database of what you like. I still plan on paying very close attention to that and making sure it keeps enough room for additions." He walked over and stroked my face. "It's the little things that you love so much Mercedes, I know that."

"That you do." I kissed him gently on the lips and hugged him. Dag ladies, what am I going to do?

"Well young lady, I know somebody slept way past the noon hour and it is already past six o'clock but before we eat there is something else I would like to show you." He took my hand and led me down the hall, "Now cover your eyes."

When I was allowed to uncover my eyes, I couldn't believe what I saw. The way Xavier's condominium is set up is sweet. You walk in and there is a small dining

room off to the left, the kitchen behind it, and the living room in front of you. You walk towards the kitchen into a small hallway with the master bedroom on the right and the second bedroom on the left. Well X had told me about some remodeling he was having done but didn't say it was anything like this. He had the wall removed to the second bedroom and replaced it with a half wall. One thing about X, he does not like to work at home, that is for the office or other suitable places. Behind the half wall, he remodeled the room into a game room with a pool table and dartboard. I almost fell out when I saw it. "X, man bro, this is way hooked up! Dayum! Well you put my place to shame; shoot you put the whole complex that you live in to shame."

X was walking around the pool table dragging a finger along the new dark red felt. "So I take it you like my idea. Not to bachelor of me is it?"

Yea if you were Sheldon's girl for sure; but I'm not and you aren't him. "Please, look at who you are talking to. You know I am already devising floor plans on how to do this in my place."

"Really? I don't think you have the room. I mean no offense or anything."

"None taken. So think you can still beat me?"

"Without a doubt, but lets eat first."

We made our subs and sat on the couch. This was really a first because the only place X ever eats is the dining room. He had speakers installed so that he could hear the television and the carpet removed and replaced with hardwood floors in the living room so that all the years of eating food in there would be gone.

"Man X, you got me feeling all special eating out here instead of in there."

"Drop anything and you will be licking it clean."

I gave him a stunned look.

"Just kidding Mercedes, they do make stuff to clean up what one spills or drops." At that moment a black olive dropped from his sandwich followed by a green

pepper slice. He reached down, put it in a spare napkin, and proceeded to wipe the spot off the floor. "See, no problem."

"Alright Xavier, if this is a Sunday with you, I think I can hang."

"Well maybe when works slows down, you can start from the early a.m. and stay until the late p.m."

"Oh really?"

"Girl, you just don't know."

"I hope to find out."

What is it with me? I swear, I'll be in the office all tripped out about what I am doing with these men and how I am acting with them and how wrong it is; yet the second you put me around either one of them it just kicks in so naturally. All I want is them, their attention, their time, their closeness, their kisses, and their sex. Just everything and not even have a thought about the other person. This is getting a bit scary with me and yet it is so natural that it is not scary at all. I mean I just turn to look at Xavier and all I want to do is crawl all up on him for being so sweet to me today. Now I know that is not the only way to thank him for all this but it just feels like that.

We finished our sandwiches and cleaned up everything in all areas. X is still a neat freak. "Ready for that game Mercedes?"

I somehow glanced at the clock it was just after seven. Dag, I had better call homeboy back. "X this is going to sound really rude and all but I need to use your phone for a moment to call a friends cousin who asked me to kinda look after him while he is here. It is a long story that I can explain while we play, it is just I don't want to call to late."

"Go right ahead you know where the phone is."

What? No questions asked. Just go ahead and use the phone. Bet. I it picked and dialed Sheldon's and of course, Darrius answered. I explained to him where I worked at and that since he had to wait for Sheldon to

get home anyway to come meet me at my office around 5:30 so that we could get the ball rolling. He was cool with it and told me to enjoy my time with my friend.

I got off the phone and walked back into the new game room where X was setting up the table. "Everything okay?"

"Yep. You remember Sheldon don't you?"

"Who doesn't?"

"Well his cousin Darrius came in from Jersey and since Sheldon and his new woman consider themselves to good for him, he asked if I would acclimate him to Chicago. Which is fine, because it sounds like him and I get into the same things but get this, Sheldon isn't givin' up a key to his apartment. So how is this brother supposed to get it together on limited hours?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well he can't very well leave the house in the morning when Sheldon does to look for a job because then he can't get back in until the evening. If you are trying to keep life straight and not in a block, then your ass doesn't need the streets to keep you company when you have time to kill. Understand?"

"I'm with you."

"So that leaves him what, from 1 p.m. on, after Chicago takes it lunch break. It's not fair, get yourself together but here is one key and not the other."

"You do amaze me Mercedes."

"How?"

"Last I remember you couldn't stand that brother, and now you are doing him a favor."

"I am not doing Sheldon a favor at all, trust me on that. The only person I am trying to help is Darrius. People aren't brought into your life without a reason. I want to help."

"Of course you do, that is why you are simply amazing. Now, are you ready for me to kick your ass?"

"Please brother, just try me."

"Oh I will, you can count on that."

The way he had set the tones through the coloring of the room to go with the pool table was off the hook. The man has some serious talent when it comes to decoration unlike my untalented ass. He set the lighting low and put on some slow jams. I just looked at him, "Are you ready to play pool or make love?"

"Girl, you should know. Mellow is me; I don't need to be all hopping around to get into a game with you."

"Mmm-hmm. Mellow or jumpy I still plan on whipping your ass!"

"Then go ahead and break Ms. Thing."

I chalked up and found a comfortable spot on the table. My break wasn't half bad for not having played in a couple of months. My next shot wasn't bad either but I didn't leave myself with another shot so I did a hit or miss show and looked up, "Best two out of three?"

"Sure, why not."

I took a shot at a ball I couldn't get near and missed. "Okay then, that makes you stripes, go for it Mr. XL."

He turned and smiled at me. "I got Mr. XL right here for you."

Man, X is just flat out gorgeous! Ouch. Just seeing him lean over the table to make his shots was enough for me. I don't know if it was something in the dinner, what I was drinking with it, but I am just noticing things that I had not noticed before. The brother's skin was just a perfect tone of brown. The way he kept his hair was so neat but yet not conservative or over done. For once, he was dressed down and not in my sport clothes. Just sexy. That is all I can say.

Jam after jam came on and we played the first game straight through with me winning, he couldn't make a bank shot tonight to save his life.

"Ready for round two Mr. XL?"

Xavier set down his pool stick and headed towards me with his eyes dead locked on me.

"Alright X, what is on your mind?"

"Can I have this dance Ms. Mercedes?"

"I would say yes if I didn't think it was a plot to not play the next game."

He moved in closing his arms around me and whispered in my ear, "This is just a little intermission so that you will calm down from your win and get ready for your next two losses."

Okay, first, the brother whispering in my ear is doing anything but calming me down. I mean dim lighting, slow jams, having his arms around me and uh, I've worked like a dog all week, my body is major stressed and he is definitely in my medicine cabinet as a stress reliever. I whispered back into his ear, resisting the urge to nibble on it, "Whatever it takes to keep you calm from your upcoming loss to me is fine sweetie."

Xavier whispered back in my ear as he slid his hands down my back, "You do what you gotta do and I will do what I gotta do. Understood?"

Help! Think pool; think winning, think of very cold water, "Mmm, like I said X, whatever it takes for you is good for me."

X spun me around as the song ended. I started giggling.

"And what is it that you find so entertaining Ms. Mercedes?"

"Well Mr. XL, are you trying to get me dizzy before the next round?"

"I wouldn't want to create more of an unfair advantage, since you are already at one."

"Oh really and what would that be?" X had let me out of his arms, I regained my composure and grabbed the pool stick. Whew!

"Something wrong?"

"Uh no. I'm fine."

"Music isn't getting to you is it?"

"No, it's nice. I mean usually I play to rock but this is very cool. Goes with the setting of the room you have created."

"Another glass of wine then?"

Another glass of wine? Shoot I had one and just getting close to him made my head spin. "Ya know, I think I am going to go for water this time, maybe after I beat you at this round I will have another glass. Got to stay focused ya know."

"You do that."

"I will."

I again broke because I won the first round and this time it wasn't so lovely. Ouch. It was more like down right ugly. "Open table, go for it."

"Mercedes," he leaned over knocking in the three ball, "there is a special way to play this game if you are interested in hearing about it."

Chile, do not do this to me. "Dare I ask what that may be?"

"Well the way it can be played is very interesting." He now did a combination shot knocking in the one and five ball in. "There is of course betting on a game for money or betting on a game for other favors."

I started laughing, "Really?"

"Really." He leaned over to hit the thirteen ball in but missed.

"Well since we have already started this set it wouldn't be allowable to change the winnings now."

"That is correct but you didn't let me finish."

"My bad, go ahead."

"Well as a former frequenter of local pool hall establishments," I started cracking up as he went into his comedic lawyer mode, "I found that one cannot not only make a bet on a game or match but also the individual shots within that said match."

"Really? How interesting? Tell me, are you interested in making shot bets?"

"Well as a matter of fact I was thinking of approaching you with this idea. Take this next shot for example...."

He had to be as hot as I was when we were dancing to be going through all of this.

"...if you agree."

Ugh! I zoned again. "Agree to what?"

"Are you asking me to repeat myself because you didn't understand or you weren't listening?"

"Uh," *dammit*, "I ah, was um, yea."

"Well?"

"I was listening, and sure it's on."

"Mercedes," he walked over and kissed me on the lips, "I really hope you make this shot."

Huh? "I do to." Uh-oh. Why do I zone at the wrong moments? He wants me to make the shot. Umm, is that a good thing or bad thing? Did I not hear what he said? Think Mercedes. Think. *Dammit!*

I leaned in and concentrated on putting the fourteen into the corner pocket, it was an easy shot so what the hell is it that I would win or would lose? I breathed in, then out, made the shot, and made the pocket. Hurray?

I looked up at Xavier as he put down his pool cue and took off his shirt. "What are you doing?"

"You won the bet."

"Huh?"

"Mercedes, you didn't hear me earlier did you?"

No. Yes. Uh. Wait, got it. "Uh, yeah, I heard you but I just got confused when you said I hope you make your shot, I mean wouldn't you want me to lose so that I would have to take my shirt off?"

"Strategy my dear, pure strategy."

I stepped back and pointed a finger up in the air, "Xavier. Mr. XL." My neck was starting to work, "If you for one moment think that by you playing with your shirt off will distract me from the shots that I am about to make, sweetie, you are so wrong."

"Well that remains to be seen, now doesn't it."

Looking at his bare chest, the sweats hanging below his boxer's waistband, I knew he had a good shot of

being right. I gathered myself and concentrated on nothing but the cloth and the balls on the table and some how in God's name sunk the next shot with out scratching. Whew!

With that boost of confidence I walked around the table passing right by Mr. XL and even ran my finger along his chest. I prepared for my next shot and made it. When I looked up X was looking at me in amazement. "Aww, Xavier, now don't think anything bad by this, okay? I mean just think maybe this is inspiring me to win the game so that we have some time left before I have to go to do other things."

That's it Mercedes. You are so freakin brilliant. Encourage sexual engagement when your azz knows that you have to go home and get up tomorrow for another week from hell.

"Now see, you think that would be encouraging to me, but its not. That just tells me I should work a bit harder. Cause competition is fierce, and when it is, I don't hold anything back to win."

"Well sweetie, do what you gotta do, cause right now, I am about to make this shot."

"Go ahead on then." With that, he spread out his arms to stretch flexing all of his muscles.

Well if I am not drooling, I should have the look on my face of composure because the heat in certain parts of my body is not composed at all. I inhaled, I exhaled, and I missed my next shot. Not good.

"Hmm." Xavier simply walked by me and started humming along with the music.

Now I would say that two could play at this game but the table was already in my favor pending his next shot, so why cheat like he is obviously doing.

X made the first, second, and third shot. The talent he had for banking a shot had obviously come back with a show of strong force. This sucks. After the fourth shot, which he also made, the table was no longer in my favor. Fortunately, he missed the fifth shot.

"Nice clean up."

X cleared his throat, threw back the rest of his drink, and stated, "Not only did I clean up, catch up but I also passed your fine ass up."

"I can see that, but the game isn't over yet and like our home team, I don't give up until the final play is done."

"Go ahead then. Try."

"Thank you, I will." Except, he had left me not one freakin shot on the entire table. Not even a bank shot could save me right now. There was none to be had. With nothing to make, I made a fake shot that was intended to mess up whatever it was he was planning on for what he had left.

"Nice mess, but I can still clean it up, win and get this match tied up."

"Go for it." Man I love competition. Especially a very friendly one. I looked at X's back muscle flex as he leaned over the table, hold in there Mercedes, you can do this. Yea, even with visions of me grabbing his back even tighter as we made love, I can do this. Stop. Concentrate. Breath, do something. I started laughing.

"Something funny about that shot I just made?"

"No."

He just gave me this weird look as he proceeded to clear the table to the eight ball.

"Good job but you always did suck at getting that last shot in. But you probably don't need to be reminded of that, now do you?"

Xavier just looked up from the table and said with that bedroom voice, "I can always get the last shot in to knock things out."

Dayum! Somebody, get me cold water! Hello!

With that said X proceeded for the first time in I don't know how many games played between us to sink the eight ball into the side pocket from an angle. I stood

there trying not to look surprised but even more confident.

X walked in front of me with his pool cue in front of him and said, "All tied up."

"Yes it is."

"Sure you don't want the wine; it seemed to have helped you during your first game."

Yea, right, all it did was make me hot and bothered every time I saw you move. "No, I am okay. You've just probably been practicing a lot since you have a table in your home now."

X proceeded down to the end of the table and handed me the ball rack, "Maybe. Your turn to rack."

I walked down and started setting up the balls for a break as X slid them down to me, when I was almost finished I felt X's arms surround me and pull me towards him. He moved my braids and started kissing the back of my neck.

"Umm...."

"Shhh."

Melt. I just went limp in his arms. Whatever heat was already starting to build that I was trying to cool down was now on fire, I don't think we are going to finish out this match. What is it about this man, he makes me melt. Never when we were just friends did this happen, I was strong, he had somebody, and now he doesn't. Isn't Visean a somebody to me? Why don't I do more or say more to make that statement known? Don't I feel it to be true? Maybe it was because we finally did sleep together it was beyond anything that I had experienced before, because I didn't expect it to be. Whatever it was, it was working and I could feel him begin to slide the pants off my body.

"Xavier?"

"Shhh...." and began to lift my shirt leaving a trail of kisses up my spine. Alicia Key's "A Woman's Worth" came on and our bodies began to sway to her melodic piano. I was gone, zoned, my body took over,

and my mind shut down. My arms lifted with his and my shirt came off. Every kiss he landed on my arms, my neck and my back were like silk. As he kissed my neck, I could feel him maneuver his sweats off. He pressed up on me and I could feel the silk of his boxers.

"See baby, Mr. XL is right here waiting for you."

At this point, do you honestly think I could respond? Not with words, only with a deep moan.

"Mercedes," he whispered in my ear, "I am not going anywhere on you, please don't go anywhere on me."

His hands ran everywhere on my body, as he pressed his body against mine. He slid off my panties leaving another trail of silk kisses. He wouldn't let me make one move on him. He was in total control of everything. "Don't move. You're perfect where you are at."

I turned my head to watch him slide off his boxers and put on a condom. He moved in and kissed my cheek, his hands again in motion removing my bra and once removed he began rubbing my chest as he slid up and down my back.

"Mercedes do you even know how long I have waited for us to be like this?"

With that his hands pulled my waist from the table and he slid deep inside me. My mind was spinning from his words. Alicia had me zoned. His movements inside of me had my body on an energy high. Just when I thought I could take no more, he came in close, and whispered, "I love you Mercedes. I won't ever let you go."

As if those words unlocked every part of my spiritual essence my body became one with his as we climaxed together.

I was breathless as we lay on the floor next to the table. Xavier told me he loved me and didn't even want to hear my response. What do I do now?

I looked at him, as my fingers traced his body I realized that everything in the room was perfect from the coloring of the room, the mood it created, the music, the lighting, to us lying naked on the floor. What am I going to do? My heart was silent, is this a sign?

No answer.

X opened his eyes and began stroking my body, kissing my lips and I could feel the fire rise again. "X...."

"Shhh...."

He moved us into the bedroom and made love to me all over again.

When I woke up it was midnight. I looked over at him, I wanted to stay, but I had to leave. I have to go in so early tomorrow is all that kept going through my head. My body remained motionless.

C'mon, Mercedes you have to leave. You have to work in the morning. I closed my eyes and my body remained motionless.

Mercedes, you gotta go, another time, now isn't it. Don't put yourself deeper into this.

I leaned in and kissed his cheek, moved from the bed, gathered my things from the new game room, dressed quietly in the bathroom, and telephoned a cab to take me home. I walked back into the bedroom and stood next to X...damn what am I going to do. "Sweetie wake up. I have to go."

His hand reached for mine, "Stay with me."

"I can't. I mean, look it is another week of hell for me. I need to go. Another time, I promise."

His hand released from mine, "I understand. I'll get dressed to take you home."

"It's okay, I already called for a cab, we are both exhausted, and I don't want you driving."

He looked at me sharp and closed his eyes. "Alright." He dragged out of bed and walked me to the door.

As I hugged him goodbye he again whispered in my ear, "I am not going anywhere Mercedes. I won't do that to you."

I moved back to look at him and put my fingertips to his lips, "I know Xavier, I know."

I walked down the hallway and looked back at his door. What am I gonna do? I exhaled and got on the elevator. The cab was waiting for me when I got downstairs, as if someone over me just knew that I needed to leave there so that I could breathe and figure things out on my own.

The ride home was quiet and peaceful. The streets of Chicago were quietly awaiting the cars, trucks, buses, and pedestrians that the morning would bring.

I walked into my building and sat in the lobby for a moment staring out the front doors. My mind was zoned, my body exhausted and staring into the darkness behind the glass in this open public place made me feel safe. I was out in the open, for once I wasn't hiding. I knew where I was and what I was doing. If it was only that simple to make my heart feel the same way. It did for a moment when X and I were making love. I was open; I was free, with my emotions free and not bottled up. Everything exposed, how I didn't end up crying was beyond me.

The man said he loved me and expressed it in every way, so why can't I express it back through words? Not even my expressions or actions seem to do this. I tell Visean that I love him all the time and I feel it. This isn't how things are supposed to go; none of the boys that they loved me and were creepin around with somebody else. They couldn't have, they would have stopped. Wouldn't they?

I hung my head, inhaled, and brought my head up, my eyes meeting the darkness behind the glass windowpane, I exhaled. Just like the darkness, the light will come. The only thing stopping me as I sit between

things men do, women do the same

them is that which I refuse to see as the wall that separates it all.

♂ *another day* ♀

I walked into my apartment to find another new message on my machine. Damn, Visean. I looked at my watch to find it was only 1:10 a.m. so most likely this wasn't him.

Beep. A very tired voice began to speak, "Hey Mercedes, this is Xavier, call me and let me know you made it home okay. If I don't pick up, leave me a message. Love you. Bye."

My heart sank. I was filled with the questions of what I was going to do with the person who was so much of a reality that I hadn't experienced in a very long time.

I went to pick up the phone to call Xavier and let him know that I was home safe; as I touched the phone it rang. It must be him calling me back. Without even thinking I said, "I made it okay. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Hello?"

No! Visean! Dammit! "Visean?"

"Yeah Mercedes, everything okay?"

"Yeah. Sorry I thought you were somebody else." Ugh! That's it Mercedes, just give it away that you were up to something tonight.

"I can see that and I can also see that you are wide awake. So you are just getting in from where?"

Think Mercedes. Think. "Miranda's." No, no, no. She never stay's up this late, especially on a Sunday night.

"Really?"

I could hear the distrust in his voice. Think quickly, make this okay. "Yea I know Miranda is never up at this time of night. Especially because of it being Sunday, but she once again had man trouble and then we got into watching a movie and now it's after one in the morning and I just got home."

"Un-huh."

I could still hear it in his voice; he wasn't sold on this quite yet. Don't over explain or you will be screwed. Think. You can do this. "So did you just get out of the studio?"

"Mercedes, the tone you used to tell the person who you thought was on the other end of the line wasn't a tone you would use with your girl. If you were out with one of your male friends you know you could tell me that right?"

In what reality could I tell you that? Breathe. "Visean please, I know I could. It's just that I am tired. You know how that girl gets when she gets all in her 'my man did this' zone. Homegirl wears me out and then the movie made me sleep. I just dragged in here and wasn't even thinking" *that is no freakin lie*, "when I picked up the phone. All I know that if it was her and I sounded tired she wouldn't try to get her second usual wind and start the whole thing over again. So are you on your home from the studio?"

"Well I thought I was but then Jason called and asked for me to stop by and pick up some music that he wants me to perform this Friday night at the club. So now, I am going to do that, go home, try it out, and then get some sleep. So I thought I would call you while I was in transit of all this."

"Man Visean, when does your day ever end?"

"It doesn't, which seems to be the problem."

"Yea no doubt."

"Well I will let your butt get into bed so that you can get up and get ready in the morning."

"No that's alright, I'm okay."

Dumb ass. Hello, that was your way out of this.

"With my braids I can get ready in half the time it used to take me."

"Braids? When did you get your hair braided?"

"Saturday. Didn't I tell you that?"

"Girl if you did I am not surprised that I don't remember you telling me. You know how my memory is and my life is for that matter."

"That's okay."

"So how do they look?"

"Good. I really like them."

"Well I have never really noticed women who wore them, but if they are on you they must look good."

Smile, "Thank you sweetie."

"So your girl, what happened this time?"

My girl? Oh. "Some guy that left the office a couple of weeks ago for another company called her and asked her out. Man Visean, he was wrong man."

"Why? What did this one do?"

"Chile please. This man tries to come to her all proper, talkin about how he had been attracted to her all along but didn't feel it right to date somebody within the work place. Now that he has left the company, he wants to talk to her. So he starts taking her out to lunches and dinners and such and everything is cool until the usual drama hit."

"What? Homeboy was married?"

"Nah man more twisted than that. This man was talking about how he didn't find it proper to date anyone you work with, well come to find out he was in Miranda's office; it was just kept on the down low while he was there. Now they had broke up and he left for another company because it was too hard to be around this other woman. So now this other woman, who in general would have nothing to say to my girl on a regular basis, let alone a professional one, starts coming around to talk to her."

"Let me guess, she found out about ol' boy trying to talk to your girl."

"Un-huh. C'mon you've met Miranda, she gets all excited when she thinks somebody new has entered her life and she let's everybody know about it. So homegirl catches wind that it is her x-man that is

getting my girl all thrilled and decides to find out what is going on. Well my girl must finally be learning from me because she got a little suspicious and asked homeboy about this woman and her insistent inquiries about the two of them.

At first, he acts all innocent about it, but then during dinner one night he gets a call from this woman and asks to be excused from the table to take the call. Of course, Miranda had no idea that it was her but when he comes back, she found out. Check this out. He comes back to the table and tells her that it was his ex on the phone. So my girl was like, okay; and?"

"Oh no."

"Yep, homeboy tells my girl it had been awhile since he had talked to her and all, but now this girl wants to talk things out with him. He claims he hasn't called her since he started seeing Miranda because that wouldn't be right and he was moving on."

"Yea right, I know what that so called brother was really up to. Did he also take Miranda to bed to try and get over this other woman?"

"Thankfully no."

"I am sure he wanted to at some point."

"Umm-hmm. Please he knew Miranda would start telling everybody about her and him and that it would get back to ol' girl and wah-lah, she starts calling about lets see if we can work this out. Men, man...."

"Don't even go there Ms. Thang. This man sitting on the end of this phone wouldn't do you like that. Number one, when it is over it's over. You can hate me if you have to but whatever you do just don't call me. Sisters still have to try a man though. You know men, once they had you in the sack, ain't nothing wrong with another hit when it is over cause it's still over. So don't start your men thing with me."

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever."

"Don't whatever me girl."

I laughed, "So anyway, he went ghost after that phone call and my girl is once again crushed. I told her that he was a punk and that she should get him back in some way for using her like that, even though he'd probably claim that he wasn't. Talk about a smooth way to operate, dag."

"No doubt. Well girl, it is way past your bedtime and I have been sitting in Jason's driveway for two minutes now, so let me go and I will talk to you tomorrow or sometime this week. Okay lover girl?"

"Okay Visean."

"I love you Mercedes. Don't let these other fools derail you from that okay?"

"Why would you say that?"

"Girl, as usual I don't have time to explain, just know that you can believe in my words."

"Thank you Visean." Again my heart sank. "Goodnight sweetie, I love you to."

"Night."

I hung up the phone and went into the bathroom to remove my makeup when it hit me, oh my God what did I just do? How could I have done that so easily? I just sat there, without a thought about what I was going to say to cover my ass for being with Xavier tonight, and told Visean a big, very believable, story about where I was, who I was with, and what went down tonight. Not only with me tonight but also some bull story about my girls life. Oh my God! I mean it wouldn't be so unheard of for something like that to happen to my girl, but to just say it like it were the truth, that is wrong. Man, Mercedes what are you doing?

What are you doing? Girl what did you want to tell him? Hey I just got back from Xavier's and my dream about him creaming me all over a pool table came true. Hello!

I took a long hard look at myself in the mirror. Who was the person that I was looking at that knew how to cover for herself so well with lies and stories without a

moment of thought? Who was the person who didn't feel it in her heart to tell a man the truth about her feelings?

The truth about your feelings? Mercedes please, look at yourself, look at your life and all these sleazy good for nothing men that got you to this point where you are coming home alone. Shoot, maybe you never wanted to be married girl but hell, you at least wanted somebody to be in your bed at night. That ain't a lie and you know it! Consider yourself good for what you just did and know that you couldn't have pulled that over on X because he is here and knows more. So learn from that so you don't mess up when it comes time to do to him what you just did to Visean.

Oh my God, I am really planning this. Am I really thinking all this through? How do guys do this on a daily basis? How do they return from their lover's bed into their homemaker's bed every night? That is just straight up sick; and I am trying to become one of them? This is just too much.

I threw the towel across the counter and watched as it slid down to the floor. I started taking off my pants and felt the exhaustion and soreness of my legs. Dayum, sexing someone while standing up is a freakin workout for real! I tied my braids back, flipped off the light in the bathroom and flipped on the light in my bedroom. I looked around my room and entered my closet when I realized laundry does not get itself done.

Damn. I picked up the stuff that I had thrown off every night of the week from coming in so late from work and then leaving so early. Lord knows I have clothes but the basics have to be cleaned and they weren't. Freak it, tomorrow I'll just make a special trip to Victoria's and then drop my laundry off to be cleaned. That will be expensive but it's my own fault. Next weekend I will try to catch up.

I flipped the light off and crawled into bed. I stared up at the ceiling and wondered who in the hell it was

that I was becoming. Why can't I stop doing what I saw myself doing and just do what is right. I had just closed my eyes when my phone rang in the living room, I plugged in my bedroom phone and heard X's voice on the other end, "Baby you okay?"

"X. Sorry. Sweetie you wore me out. I was going to call you back but I passed out. Sorry." There I go again with no fault or flux in my voice.

"No problem baby, just making sure you are safe. Call me tomorrow."

"Okay. Night."

"Night Mercedes."

* * * *

To begin to say where my day began the next morning would be a joke and a lie. I have no clue as to what I am doing with anything or anyone around me. I would love to admit that I am in control and running things but the fact is that I am not. Things are spinning not out of control but just spinning. Or is it that that they are just moving at a faster rate that I am just not used to. Whatever it is, was, or may be, I need some time. Ladies and Gentlemen, time is something that is in short and high demand right now.

I sat at my desk and looked around. No new client files awaited me this morning, which was a relief. My email was not overflowing and neither was my voicemail. If I can just work late nights until Wednesday, I should be back to normal. See I would take this work home and work on it, but please we all know it won't get done. The television will have something good on or I will surf hours to find something good. The phone will have to have somebody that I can pick up and call that I haven't spoken to in years. The kitchen will have some new item that will magically appear after about my tenth trip to the refrigerator. Let's not forget that I will want to be comfortable so I'll

work in my bed without falling asleep because I will keep the lights on. Yeah right.

Mr. Wallace walked in my door and I immediately scanned to see if his hands were empty. Thankfully they were. "Hello Mercedes."

"Hey what's up?"

"You look exhausted."

And you look like you want to nurse me back to health. "Long nights last week, plus Saturday. By Wednesday night this week, things should be okay. Everything is caught up and up to date, just want to do that little extra to stay ahead."

"I'm impressed."

"Thank you."

"You did an excellent job this season with your clients. You kept billable hours to a very profitable rate while keeping the client very satisfied."

"Thank you, it is something that Vicki and I have been really striving for."

"Of course I hope to see that only continue." He walked over, sat down in the chair across from my desk, and smiled.

What is that you want this time? "We plan on it."

"You know there is a position that will be opening up in the department that handles our MNC clientele. With your hard work and effort, I think you would be a strong addition to that team. You should talk to human resources when it posts to submit for it. I, of course, can put in a good word for you also."

"Really?" When I was in school, I dreamed of being on a team of accountants who handled large corporations. The suits, the travel, the business meetings, the stress, but after so many years of working with small businesses and building relationships that went beyond the office door...I no longer felt the desire to become a signature on a piece of paper. Small business owners appreciated the time, for the most part, that you put in to help them out. They were more

concerned with business instead of just the bottom line. The young dot COM owners were sometimes too funny for words but serious when it came down to the business side of things. "Is the position in this office?" Don't ask me why I was inquiring. I guess I was just being polite by entertaining his offer.

"Actually no it isn't. It would be in the New York office. The salary of course would be generous due to the higher cost of living, moving expenses would be provided, and the company can set you up with housing for the first six months until you become aquatinted with the city. Have you ever been there? It is the city that never sleeps; you would enjoy that being that you are still young and single."

I just smiled; an escape route was being laid out in front of me. I could run and hide in NYC. X would never even think about moving there and neither would Visean, although he does have family in that area and does a lot of recording sessions in New York. Yet I am not one to run, especially not to a city more crowded than this one and where car owners strip their own cars down to nothing so that they won't be stolen. I can't lose my baby. "No, I have never been to New York. I am sure that I will visit one day, but I think the streets of this city and its population is enough for me. I will however remember to consider that as a place to go when I am looking to have a vacation with little to no sleep."

"Well, I just wanted to let you know the position was there. I do consider your work worthy and I feel that you can move upwards if the right opportunities were presented to you."

Right opportunities? Never mind. "I simply enjoy my small business clients that I have here. Some are easier to work with than others, but I am a face and voice to them, not just a signature on a piece of paper. You know?"

"Yes I do. What do you think kept me here?"

"Well I am glad to know that feeling is shared."

"Well then we will just have to keep our ears and eyes open to other opportunities that can help advance you in your current career."

Why did that statement make me feel a bit uneasy?
"Agreed."

With that he got up and walked to my door, "Mercedes, if you ever need to talk to me about anything, you know you can right?"

Where did that come from? Did I look that zoned out when he came in here? Does he think I am hiding from something in my life by staying in the office late at night and on weekends? "Well actually there is something I would like to discuss with you." Something inside nudged me to let me know that now wasn't the time to discuss this topic.

"Really? What would that be? Everything okay with you and your coworkers?"

"Yes of course, everything is fine there, no problems. Actually," *Mercedes don't go there yet with him, you don't even know if this is a reality yet,* "I was wondering if I could work a bit of a flexible schedule during the off season."

"What are you proposing?"

"I would like to take a day or two off during the weekdays once a month, which I would cover by doing what I have been doing."

"Payroll doesn't allow for that."

"Yes I know they don't, but you do."

I gave him that sly smile, that smile that made him feel like all the company power was his and his only. "I'll consider it."

"That is all I was asking for sir."

"It would help to consider it over a meal sometime."

I got this. "You're right; we'll grab some doughnuts and coffee from the lunch room on Friday morning and discuss it. I don't really eat too much anyway."

He just smirked at me and walked out the door.

He can drive me so crazy. I looked at the clock and decided that I had better get some more work done since Darri was headed up here at 5:30. Speaking of which, I had better call to get him educated as to where I am at in this city.

"Hello."

"Hey Darri it's me, Mercedes."

"Hey girl waz up? How was it with your man, oops I mean you friend last night?"

"Man Darri, whatever." Yea right.

"Right girl, I know."

"Sure you do." *I bet he does.* "I was just calling to make sure you knew how to get here tonight."

"Uh yea about tonight, I am not going to be able to make it."

"Why not? Something wrong?"

"Yo, my cousin is trippin. He tells me that he wants me to get it together and then he tells me that I can't go out tonight because he has to work late. Since I don't have a key, what is the point, right? Man this sucks."

"Darri what exactly happened that Sheldon won't give you the key to his place?"

"Yo man, it's a long story and the drama is too deep."

"Well then what do you suggest. You have to be bored from sitting home all day and now what seems to be all night." Sheldon should trust this brother; I mean he could just leave the house to go out for a little while with the door unlocked so he could return. Obviously, he is smart enough not to pull something stupid like that.

"Man, I don't know."

"Well does Katrina have a key to his place? Maybe she could swing by to let you in."

"Yo girl, the woman doesn't even give a second to speak to me, let alone help me out like that. She's a real trip."

"What is her problem with you?"

"Baggy pants, timbs, t-shirts, rap, hip-hop, cornrows, you name it and she finds it a problem."

"Sheldon's perfect woman."

"No doubt about that ish. I am just into trying to keep it real. What does anything have to do with how I dress anyway? That makes no kinda sense what so ever man."

"I agree. Why do you think your cousin Sheldon couldn't handle a party that I purposely took him to?"

"Yo, what party?"

"My boy Li'l C threw a CD release party at his old place while your cousin and I were together. It was tight, all kinds of people I knew from clubbin were there and there was your cousin, in tight ass jeans, loafers and a button down shirt."

"My cousin looked that whack?"

"Yep. Yep. You know what killed was that everybody up in there was cool with him but he wouldn't give them the time of day. So we had it out that night and that was the end of the miserable relationship."

"Yea he be like that."

"Hmm, let me make a phone call or two. What time is he supposedly returning home tonight?"

"He said about nine. I know how busy you are that is why I didn't assume that I would be with you that late."

Dag he is polite for his age. Sheldon could learn a lesson or two from him. "A'right, give me a chance and let me see if I can hook something up."

"Cool then. Holla at you later."

"Out."

Vicki had walked in during my conversation and just gave me that smirk. "Strange way to end a conversation with a client don't you think?"

I just started laughing. Hmm should I tell her or do I let her hang? I choose hang. "You know our dot COM

clientele. So Mr. Wallace came in here to thank us for a good job this past season."

"Yes, he mentioned a little something to me before he walked in."

"Good. Since we work as a team I think we both should hear praise from the boss's mouth."

"Agreed."

There was an odd moment of silence. "Everything okay Vicki?"

"No, I just forgot what I came in here for."

"You forgot what you came in here for? Okay, what is wrong? You are the type of person that does not forget anything within a minute."

"Hmm. Oh yea, sorry, did you need me to stay late tonight?"

"Nope. I got it handled. Thanks to all your help last week, I am caught up and now getting us back a little ahead of schedule."

"Mmm, that is good."

Something is definitely on her mind. "You are sure that you are okay, you seem out of place today or something."

"Well there is something that I would like to say to you."

"Okay. Go ahead."

"I would like to say a word on who I would think would make an excellent choice for this years mentor program."

"Great, who are you thinking of?" Give me ideas; take the weight off of me, no problem. See I am managerial material already.

"Well remember that one young lady who came in, Miss. Tanisha Walkins."

"Yes, but from what I remember she wasn't the most qualified for the position here."

"Yes I know, but she has something in the way she carries herself. When she was here I chatted with her

and she came across quite intelligent until Mark came by."

"Mark, what did he do?"

"Nothing...that is just it. She saw Mark and just closed up. I introduced her and explained her reason for being here and she barely spoke to say hello to him. I found it all rather disturbing."

Mark is on the IT support staff. He keeps everything running and constantly reminds us to keep our workstation virus free. He was young, maybe 23, Hispanic, cute as all hell, with a wife and two kids. "Maybe she knew him from around the hood." Oops. Okay, not on phone with Darri, switch back to corporate mode.

"Maybe."

"Anyway, why do you think that she should be offered the position?" You know what really sucked is not being able to offer them all a position.

"Just a feeling."

"A feeling? I am surprised Vicki, usually you are very methodical with your reasoning, how else could you keep my work load in such great shape?"

"I really think the girl needs some self confidence, she is very attractive, but like you said not very qualified but after speaking to her you couldn't tell that she was not qualified. What impression did you get from her?"

I thought back. A workweek from hell, late nights of balancing two men, and now I have to remember a teenager that was supposed to impress me. Uh, hmm. I kinda remembered. I didn't want to look at my notes with Vicki standing right there, thinking she might consider that rude. "I remember she held her head up and presented herself very professionally for someone her age. She seemed confident and able but when asked about school she got very quiet."

"Well in my personal opinion," *Oh boy here we go, if you thought I could state an opinion, you ain't heard anything yet,* "she is very intelligent and that her grades

will never show the real knowledge that she has due to the fact that boys are probably on her case about being a smart girl, a pretty girl and probably too good for anyone. She seemed very goal oriented to me, wanting something more out of this summer mentor program than we could see."

"You're probably correct in your thinking. Am I to assume that your theory is that if she does mentor here and that she does work around men who encourage her intellect that she might carry that back to school with her?"

"Yes. I think it would benefit her greatly. Boys can be so petty at that age, more concerned with their genitals instead of their brains and the brains of others."

Vicki just said genitals? Damn. "Well my decision has to be made and submitted to the program by Friday, I will definitely consider your thoughts on her. Was there anyone else that stood out to you?" Watch this.

"No." Then she walked out of my office.

Once Vicki has her mind set, that is it. No twisting of words, no talking things out, nothing could change her mind. Hell it even drives me nuts sometimes, but it works and if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Now how am I going to get this situation going for Darri? This is simply ridiculous. I looked around for Sheldon's work number and couldn't find it. Then I couldn't remember the name of the company he even worked for. I think he had changed before the breakup or was it after, or was it only talk of changing companies. Dag can't remember. Hmm, well I will be here late tonight so why don't I have him come up here later tonight instead of 5:30. Yea, that should work. I gotta eat, so I will just take him with me, show him some of the city, and get to know him better so that I can help point him in the right direction.

I called him back. "Hey it's me."

"Dag girl, I've only known you a couple days and you already got it like that with me?"

Huh? "Got it like what? You are the only person in the house Darri."

"Right girl, right. So what's up? Did you figure out a plan for me yet?"

"Yes I did, cause you know I am just that good."

"No comment on that yet."

Okay, why are Sheldon's words ringing through my ears about not sleeping with this man? "You're funny. Tell you what leave the house at six and come up here and we'll go get dinner together and figure out what it is that you would like to do while you are living here."

"That sounds good but it wouldn't feel right cause I don't have any funds to pay for dinner."

"Who said that you would be paying?" I felt like Visean saying that. "Please, I'll get the money from Sheldon later on. He should be treating us anyway."

"My cousin don't treat nobody to nothin. My moms is surprised that I am even here."

"Knowing Sheldon, I think everybody is surprised. Got a pen so that I can give you the address and directions? Do you have money for a cab or bus fare?"

"I got about twenty on me."

"Cool that is enough if you stay away from cab fare and don't worry I'll get it back to you for coming here. Now this is only a part time deal alright. You're gonna owe me after this."

"Bet. No problem."

"Just call your cousin and let him know what is up."

"No problem. He'll probably be happy to have this place to himself for a little while anyway."

I gave him the address, looked up the mass transit schedules, and told him to talk to the security guards when he arrived so they would have me come down and bring him up to my office.

I tried to return to my work but the phone once again rang, "Good afternoon, this is Mercedes."

"Good afternoon Mercedes, I see that we are answering our phone this week while we are in the office."

"That would be correct Mr. Lawrence. So how is your day going?"

"A bit boring but better since I got hold of you."

"Glad that I could help."

"You helped last night."

"Yea and I am feeling it today."

"Good, it will keep the memory fresh in your mind."

"As if it needed any help."

"So can I interest you in dinner tonight after work?"

Here we go. "Sorry, I just made plans with Darrius, Sheldon's cousin, for dinner tonight."

"I thought he was coming to see you early in the evening."

"He was, but Sheldon is working late. Darri didn't want to take up my night until he could get back in the house, so I told him to come later and that way he would be back after his cousin got home."

"Oh."

Silence. Great. See this is what I was afraid of. Forget that I am doing what I am doing with Visean and X; this time in between going to the next level is what I hate. It is probably the entire reason I have stayed away from a "real" commitment all this time. "You could always join us. I mean I know I am down with a lot that this guy has interest in but a man's view of how to come up in this city would be very helpful don't you think?" And the answer is?

"Yea, at some point."

Great, here we go. "Well if you have any ideas in the meantime please pass them along. So far I know he graduated high school and has no interest in attending college."

"Well that doesn't leave him open to much."

"I wasn't finished."

"Oh."

"He has a strong interest in music and imports."

"And?"

"Well there are some good mechanic programs in this city he could get into, once you are ASCE certified you can make good money."

"If he sticks with it."

Okay what is up with X? "If he sticks with it..." as if he knows Darri's total life work history. Do I detect a bit of jealousy? Lord knows I cannot handle that. "Honey he is only 22 or 23, I forget, and trying to figure out what it is that he wants, he'll probably change his mind a million times like the rest of us have. Of course, his cousin Sheldon probably has never had that problem and that is why he is offering him a new start but no guidance. He never could handle uncontrollable situations."

"Well that is good, because otherwise you would be still with him and I would have to save you."

"So are you implying that I am uncontrollable?"

"No other way to better state who you are."

"Really." Dag, I never thought of myself that way.

"Not saying that you don't have control or are unmanageable, just saying that you got it and no one else can tell you what to do with it. I am just trying to sneak a direction in there for you to consider. Like the one I sneaked in there when I slept with you that first night."

Oh, so that is what you saw yourself doing that night. Did I take it or....

"Well hey I got to go, I have another call waiting. I love you and call me after you get in tonight. Be careful."

"I..." with that he hung up. Why is he so scared of hearing my response when he says things like that to me? Although I do admit, I love the free exit because I truly do not know how to respond to him. I mean I have been in love with Visean for years now, but now

that Visean has sneaked his own direction in there how could I say those words to anyone else? Does Visean see me as uncontrollable?

Well that is an easy answer Mercedes. Hell yea he does. The man from day one has given you nothing but freedom but at the same time has let you know, through various means, that he is interested and watching what you do and whom with.

Yea, the black list he keeps on me is proof of that. Well at least I can say he pays attention with a reason.

I looked at the clock on the wall, it was nearing 3:45 and I had things to concentrate on other than these men so that I could keep up the work that my boss had recognized me for. Yea, more pressure. Well at least it is doing something that I enjoy, well most of the time.

As usual, Monday's were just yick. As hard as I tried to zone into my work, my mind zoned me back into reality. Question after question about X and Visean went through my head. It was like I was watching TV as I remembered the dinner that night with Visean's family and friends. Every time I flashed on our last night together I had to cross my legs to keep control. Dayum that boy can...uh!

Where I am going with all this? What I am doing? Who do I want to be with more? Oh my God I remembered that story I told Visean that night.

I got up from my desk and walked down to the break room. I opened the refrigerator door and just stared inside.

"Gee and I only thought we only did that at home."

I recognized that voice; it was Tony, a strong Italian male who is one of the company's top actuarial employees. The man could turn numbers into risks in a heartbeat. From what I heard through the office gossip network that his current status is that he and his wife had divorced and the battle for the children took over two years to complete. "Yea, maybe they shouldn't give us kitchens in the workplace; I am just as distracted

here as I am when I try to work at home." I still stood there staring into the refrigerator waiting for something to jump out at me.

"What was it my mother always said? Something like, anything in there isn't going to make itself, so get out or get cooking."

"Yea, mine always said, if it wasn't in there in the last five seconds it won't appear in the next five either."

He started laughing, "Well at least your mother had food that you could probably grab and eat. Not my mom she is a true Italian in every sense of the word. The only food that was to be anywhere in the house was food that needed preparation and in large quantities. I swear my kids go over to their grandmothers with so much junk food stuffed in their bags just to survive."

Closing the refrigerator door, turning to him I said, "They like her cooking though right?" and began to open the freezer door. It seemed to be the natural progression of things. Nothing in the fridge meant there had to be at least something in the freezer that could grab my attention.

Tony just started laughing. "Look at you."

"What?"

"Let me ask you a question. Do you even have food that you bought in there?"

Food? Bought? Me? Uh. I just turned and gave him this puzzled look, "Umm, no."

He started laughing harder.

"No, I mean, no. I wouldn't take somebody else's stuff and eat it if that is what you were thinking. I mean, I wouldn't because that would be wrong." Man I am so out of it.

He just looked at me. "Well I myself have a few snack items in there if you would care for some."

"I am not hungry."

"Hmm, let me see, not hungry, staring into fridge proceeded by freezer. Ah, I know this one; marriage

did clue me into a few things. Okay, I'll get brave and ask, is everything okay?"

"Huh?"

He just looked at me.

"Yea, I mean last week was pure hell on me and now its Monday, and I can't seem to focus and well, here I am staring into a fridge for no other reason than it is what I am doing. Yea. Did that make any sense?"

"Completely."

Then I noticed how he was looking at me. Brother man was looking me up and down with a slight smile on his face. You're kidding me right. I mean this man is older than me but younger than Visean and he is Italian. It is probably just me.

"When did you braid your hair?"

"Actually not to long ago. Like I said I've been under major stress, so one less thing to worry about."

"It looks nice. Did it take long?"

He noticed my hair. Men never do that. Well now I know he was definitely looking at me and taking note.

"Thanks. Nope, not long at all."

"How long will that stay in for?"

Now see, I am not at all disturbed by these questions because he is inquiring about something that means a lot to my culture. "Well the size of the braid depends on the time that they will stay in. The heavier the braid the less the time because it pulls on the root and then your hair grows out and what looked fly will now make you want to run and hide."

He started laughing. "Well you look nice."

"Thank you. So how are things going for you? Done any great traveling lately?"

He walked over and stood right in front of me, he was a bit taller than me and just looked straight into my eyes and said, "I would like to tell you over dinner some night if you don't mind."

"Sure."

What? Mercedes!

Well you should have seen the way he was looking into my eyes. I didn't stand a chance of saying no to him. It is just dinner and for a White man he is not bad to look at, I mean not bad at all.

Girl, what are you digging yourself into now?

Well hey at least at the end of the night I won't end up in bed or dodging questions.

So you hope.

Please, so I know!

"Great. Thursday night. Six o'clock. I would ask for a weekend night but I have my kids this weekend and well they are not that great of company at dinner. Some how they just never like the food or something about anything wherever we go."

The man was still dead set on my eyes. Okay. "Umm, yea, sure. I'll make a note of it."

"Great, we'll just leave from here."

I heard heels clicking down the hallway towards us, with that he leaned in a bit closer and said, "I'm looking forward to it" and left the break room.

It was then I noticed that Tony had bad breath. The spell that he had me under broke quickly as I started laughing bringing myself back to the real world. Well nothing to worry about with him, because I am not letting this man get that close to me again. Not that I have the greatest breath in the world or anything and maybe he just got back from eating lunch or something, just the man had bad naturally bad breath, more than food related. Eww.

The heels got closer and Summer walked into the break room. "Hi."

"Hey Summer, how are you?"

"Fine. I saw Tony leaving just before I walked in."

"Yep." And?

She walked over and whispered, "Fine as all hell but the man's breath, no way."

I laughed as I walked out of the lunchroom and headed back to my office. At least one thing made me smile today.

Some how and in someway when I got back to my office I got into my zone and was cranking out work like I had some deadline to meet. Actually I did. The Greenburg's had to schedule another meeting for tomorrow due to another piece of their ever growing puzzle that had fallen out and we had to find a way to put it back quick. They were already going over the estimated time of what they thought it would take to file their extended return.

I was just about to head to the bathroom for a quick break when I heard a knock on my door; Marcus was standing there with someone behind him.

"Hey Mercedes, I was down in the lobby and this guy was asking security for you, so I brought him up."

Ladies behind him stood a very nice looking man. Wait. I know you are thinking, "Mercedes you think every man is nice looking". Black men, Latin men, Italian men, probably some Asian men to, and you're right. So girls, let me tell you, n-i-c-e.

"Mercedes right?"

Out from behind Marcus stepped a red bone brother who stood at about 6'1". His body was solid, not muscular, but solid. He had on dark blue baggy jeans, tan timbs, a loose white shirt, and some kind of cap on his head, holding a black leather jacket.

"Darrius?"

"Yep, that would be me."

Marcus just looked at me smiling. "So he is here for you. Alright brother, nice meeting with you and have a good night."

Darri turned to him and shook his hand. "Thanks man and I'll keep what you mentioned in my head tonight."

"Cool man. Later."

"Bye Marcus." I watched him walk out the door and tried not to stare too hard at Darri. "So I see you made it."

"Yo, you're not mad cause I am late, are you? Traffic is a B-I in this town. I thought Jersey was bad but damn!"

"Late? You're not late." Then I looked at the clock on the wall, it read 7:10 p.m. "Oh, I guess you are. Well no, I mean not in a bad way, I mean...."

"So you're not upset then right?"

"Right. All I know is I was having trouble zoning into work, then I went to the kitchen and this guy with bad breath asked me out, wait, did I say that?"

"Yes you did, but you didn't deliver the answer to me yet."

"Oh. Yea. Right. I mean before I knew what I was saying, I said yes. He was just staring at me, I couldn't think, then I noticed the bad breath thing, then I came in here and just zoned, I look up, and here you are. Hi Darri."

"See I get it now, that is the problem with women trying to play big dawg games, you think you can hang, but you can't."

"Huh?"

"See men know what they are out after and what they are going to do to get it. Once they got, it that's it, no more thought about it. Women? Nah man, you all can't hang like that."

"Darri what are you talking about?"

Darius walked around my office looking at my little comfort stress relief things, walked behind my desk and sat in my chair. This brother is bold. "Girl you know exactly what I am talking about. Something is going down with all these friends of yours and that is why you are all, 'I can't zone and then I did zone.' You know what you are doing; just make sure you do it right. Look, trust me you don't want to be caught on the wrong end of things, you lose big time if you do; and

yo, it ain't worth the loss sometimes. Sometimes though, you wish it had all gone down sooner so you could start again."

"Start again?" This man had me sitting in my own guest chairs across from my desk as he picked up things, checked out files, and continued to talk.

"Yea, like yo, you get with one, you find another and get with that one and then yo, damn look at that, so you get with that one to. The problem is though that one of them is going to turn out to be someone you don't want to lose. One of them will be so ghetto that if you kick her azz back to the curb she will be sure to cut the other two out. The third one, well she is either in the game like you or out to take over your world, kick everybody else out and still stick around. You gotta look out for that one; she'll tear your world up! Well maybe not you because you're a female but you know what I am sayin. Those are the one's trying to get pregnant, move up all in your house, get the keys to your ride, bring over personal items like toothbrushes and body sprays so that if any other honey walks in they automatically know what is going down in that house and bam it's over before you even get some. So then when it blows up and even if you lose that one that you thought you couldn't, you are usually glad that you did cause how special could that one be if you still with the other two. Right?"

"Right." This man had me trippin. "So um, all that from one minute of knowing me."

"Please girl I saw the look on your face when you saw me. You think I am cute don't you?" With that, he leaned over my desk, stared into my eyes, and then fell back into my chair smiling. "It's okay, cause I like what I am looking at too."

"Darri you're a trip and yes I did like what I saw but not in the way you think I do." Please come off the way I want this to, because I really did like what I saw. "As far as trying to hang with the big dawg's, honey I

can hang. Ain't no thing to hang with the big dawg's. Don't you even begin to try to tell me that men don't feel the stress of the game. You even admitted to that when you said that there is one in the crew that you don't want to lose. Therefore with that stating in the game you will do like I do, zone in and zone out while your mind tries to figure things out." With that I kicked my feet up on the desk and waited for his reply. It is good to date a lawyer, they can teach you to argue persuasively.

"Yo girl you are straight up cool. I can see why my cousin and you didn't work out. I know his punk ass couldn't handle someone as confident as you are. I just know you are runnin game and wanted to school you a little about the aftermath that happens on the other side of the wall."

"Funny, I didn't think anything happened to the other side."

"What you think we do? Just wake up the next day and be like, on to the next."

"Yep."

"Girl, I ain't gonna lie, sometimes we can but sometimes we can't. "

"More times than not, you can." With that, he just scrunched up his face like *you're probably right*. "You know what, I am hungry. How about you?"

"Starved. Nice office by the way."

"Thanks, I would give you the tour but I think you got it."

"Well I didn't get the whole tour" and proceeded to look me over.

What do you want me to do strip naked and sprawl out over my desk? "Darri you're a trip man. Nice to finally meet you in person." I put my feet down and extended my hand over the desk.

Darri shook my hand, "Nice to finally meet you Mercedes. Let's eat."

We walked out of the office building and stood outside as we figured out what we had a taste for so that I would know the direction to head us in.

Darri just stood there talking and looking all around him. "Darrius, you haven't seen any of the city yet have you?"

"The answer to that would be yes and no. Shel took me out a few times to go get some things, so I saw the city then but only at night. Today, I am getting to see it from the outside of a car window."

"Well there is a lot to see. Let's catch a cab and head over to Navy Pier, it will be easier than me driving and re-parking. There are restaurants there, you can basically see the Chicago skyline and we can talk."

"Yo, I didn't know what to wear; will I be alright in this?"

I proceeded to look him over the way he looked me over earlier and said, "Yes, that will do just fine considering I am going to look like your mother all dressed up like this."

"Well I just had to say that your suit is off the hook. Fits you well."

"Riiight. Ready?"

We grabbed a cab and headed for the pier. Darri tried not to act like too much of a tourist but did talk about a lot of what he saw and asked a couple of questions. "So uh, do you think we can hit a club tonight?"

"A club?"

"Yeah."

"Sweetie, it's Monday, I can't even think about a club."

"Just so I know, are there clubs on Monday to go to?"

"Yep because of all the tourism," my cell started going off, "they pretty much have something to do all week long."

I looked at the number and saw that it was Ori. "Hi Ori."

"Alright I got you now; tell me about the weekend with Visean."

"No you don't have me now because I am on my way to dinner at the pier with Darius, Sheldon's cousin."

"Sheldon's cousin? Is he cute?"

"Yep."

"Do him cute?"

"Yep."

"Is he anything like Sheldon?"

"Nope."

"When you gonna hook me up then?"

"Want to come out tonight?"

"Can't."

"Well then."

"Forget it for now; call me tonight when you get home."

"How late?"

"Eww, somebody is already thinking of not listening to Sheldon's personal request."

"Girl please, how late?"

"You know. Bye."

"You know" meant when I get in, no matter the time, even if she is amongst the dead.

"That was my girlfriend Orianna, she is cool as hell. We will all go out one night."

"I'm doing good already. Move from Jersey, come to Chicago, my cuz hooks me up with his ex-girl, who is fine as hell to show me around, and now she is going to introduce me to all her fine friends. It gets no better than this."

I just started laughing. When we arrived we walked around, found a restaurant that we both agreed upon and waited the half hour for dinner.

"Yo Darri," which I realized must have sounded really stupid considering how I was dressed tonight, "you can't keep your eyes off of women can you?"

"Nope."

I started cracking up.

"Well uh Ms. Thang, I don't see you checkin anybody out."

"I'm picky."

"Un huh, that is why you have so many friends in your life right now because you're picky."

"Man, whatever. Look, I can take a look all around here and maybe find one brother that I think would be worth approaching."

"Let me guess, you are looking at the clothes, the labels, the ice, the hair, the shoes, the walk, the car keys, etc."

"No. I am looking for the face, the shoulders, the weight, the height, and the walk. The clothes yea, I admit I am. To me a man doesn't have to have the look of money, because if they do they won't treat you right, i.e. your cousin. I'll like what I see on the outside but if nothing is clicking away on the inside, I gotta bounce."

"What about the man's ride? I know you gotta be lookin at that."

"No doubt. First of all, if you are rollin an H, yo we gotta hook up, especially if you are modding it out. If you are rolling any other import, we can chill and we can talk modifications. My boy X has a Beamer that he thinks is just so off the hook, but really it isn't. He needs to update and if he thinks he is going fast, he needs to upgrade. Lord knows there is much more you can get out of a *BMW* engine."

"Check you out Ms. Gearhead over here."

"Darri, one thing to know about me, I am a driver not a rider."

Darrius started laughing. Throughout dinner, we talked imports, music, movies, life's drama episodes,

past lovers, everything. We finished dinner and walked the pier, went back to my office to grab my brat and I drove him home. Needless to say that I didn't feel the need to walk him to the door and say a courteous hello to his cousin. Instead, I gave Darri the receipts to give to Sheldon for payment. I know he had the money to cough up. After all, it was the very least Sheldon could do for his cousin since it was so impossible for him to do anything without a key to the house.

"Mercedes tonight was tight. I can see why my cousin told me what he did before he introduced us."

Oh no, you are kidding me. "What exactly were you told?"

"My cousin thinks I am some kind of major playa. Which back when I was 17 or 18 I was, but 21 hit and I realized, money should be mine and not spent trying to keep a lot of girls around. So he told me not to sleep with you."

I busted out laughing, "You know that fool told me not to sleep with you either."

"Oh that is foul, my cuz tried to cock block me. Damn he ain't right."

"Chile please, I got enough drama in my life but always room for friends if you are down."

"Hell yea, cause you might make me one of those friends with those special privileges like those others got."

Why was my body saying, yes Mercedes, please? "Man whatever. Goodnight Darri. I'll have Marcus call you tomorrow about that lead on the job."

"Cool girl, thanks." With that he leaned over and gave me a hug and a small kiss on the cheek. "Oh yea, this car is fast, but it needs more modifications."

"Damn the snow."

"No doubt. Bye."

"Bye."

What the hell? Ugh. This is it, no more. I am not sleeping with anyone until I figure things out.

Yea right.

Seriously, that's what I need to do because when Darri gave me that hug and kiss my body went, he could be a toy. I know one thing for sure...hormones suck.

I plugged in my headset and dialed up Ori. If I was even going to attempt to tell her about my fabulous weekend with Visean, I knew it would have to start with the whole X story first. The least I could do is start now and not later so I could make it to bed at a decent time. Dammit! I forgot to go to Victoria's today. Wash, rinse, dry, and wear for tomorrow. Well at least I remembered to drop off the laundry.

"Hello."

"Ori it is only eleven and you sound like you are dead asleep already."

"Umm, call me back tomorrow."

"Call you back tomorrow?"

"Yea."

"Does Ori have company that made her go nighty-night?"

She got very quiet and then giggled, "Yea. Night."

"Bye."

That girl is bad. I know what I should have said, "Did Tonya make Ori go nighty-night?" That would have had her jumping out of bed screaming! He. He.

I dialed up X to say goodnight now so when I got home I could go to bed, tomorrow was another early start.

"Hello Ms. Sexy."

"Hello Mr. XL."

"How was your night?"

"Fun and yours?"

"Could have been better if I wasn't lying here alone."

"Where is your teddy bear Pookie?"

"Very funny Mercedes."

"I try."

"So where are you?"

"On my way home from dropping Darri off."

"Got time to stop by?"

"Sorry, the Greenburg case came up again and I am going in early tomorrow to finish preparations for the meeting. I think they are going to give it to someone else after this, it is getting way too complicated for what I can handle."

"Well no disrespect to you but I hope they give it up soon so that your mornings can start early with me."

Could I really do that? "Well you never know."

"I'll call you tomorrow, because you and I are seeing each other tomorrow and I don't like to have you on the phone while you are driving."

"Okay."

"Goodnight Ms. Sexy."

"Goodnight Mr. XL."

Since I was on a roll of dialing up people and about another five to ten minutes from the house I called up Visean and as usual got his voice mail. "Hey Visean, it's me. I took my boy Darri out tonight to get him situated to Chicago. Did I mention him to you? Hmm, did I? Nope, probably not. Anyway, it went cool. Marcus gave him a lead on a job and a school for mechanics. Darri is into import modifications like I am. Well gotta go, I love you. Don't work too hard and get some sleep baby."

See I could admit to hanging out with Darri to Visean, I'll get around to admitting spending time with Xavier at some point. I just won't be able to go into detail about it. Plus, neither Visean nor I have made set plans for our next encounter together. I mean he calls me back when I call him because we are still in that, I just saw you phase. Give it time it will fade and then I can stop trippin so hard about Xavier and maybe take a dip trip with Darri.

Mercedes! Quit being so bad.

I know...it's just so funny to think that I would. Well I know Orianna will definitely give it some thought. I would simply die if Miranda and him hooked up. Though is she really his type? Truthfully it didn't matter if anyone hooked up with Darri or not. It was just nice to meet someone I could trip out with and not have to deal with the, "what am I going to do with you now" drama. I just hope I can find a reason to give X of why I won't sleep with him.

Oh yes, I am sticking to that decision. I need to. I can't do this anymore. I'm beyond my point and I know I can save myself before there is no return. I won't do that to myself, I don't know why I am so weak right now but I won't let it continue. There is too much at stake.

Well, I definitely need to set up a night out for all of us. I'll even invite the perfect couple but I know they won't pay patronage to our little gathering, as I am sure it will fall below their standards as a night out.

I parked my baby, said goodnight, and headed up.

♂ *full of surprises* ♀

As I approached my door I noticed a piece of paper stuck to it. On my way in I grabbed it off the door and set it on the counter thinking it was probably another menu from somewhere that charges too much to deliver. I dropped my stuff, got ready for bed in the bathroom, and went back to the kitchen to grab my phone when curiosity got the best of me. I opened the piece of paper to see what restaurant had something new to offer our building. Except it wasn't a menu, it was a note:

Hey you,
Don't wait up for me tonight,
and don't expect to wake up on time tomorrow.
Love, Me

Huh? I looked at the note over again. Who's me? Don't wait up for me tonight and don't expect to wake up on time tomorrow? Thinking there was somebody in my apartment playing some sort of twisted sick game I dropped the paper and immediately grabbed a knife to go into my room to grab my gun. Hey don't act so surprised on the gun thing, I already told you about my previous life with Marcel. I crept into my bedroom, reached under the bed and grabbed my gun, locked and loaded. I went from room to room, closet to closet and found no one. I grabbed the note again trying to recognize the handwriting but couldn't. Maybe it belonged to one of my neighbor's and the idiot who wrote it was so drunk he put it on the wrong door. I put the knife and gun away, rechecked the door, and went to bed.

I woke up to a phone call at 2 a.m. "Hello."

"Hey lover girl."

"Hello?" Pure zombie material.

"Mercedes. It's me Visean wake up!"

"Hey sweetie let me call you tomorrow I got to get up in three hours."

"Well if you call me tomorrow where do you think I am going to stay tonight?"

What? Huh? "I don't know...your house?"

"Do you expect me to walk there?"

Walk there? What is this man talking about?

"Visean is this you?"

"Yea, Mercedes wake up."

"Visean I am tired. If there is something wrong with your SUV call a tow truck and call me in the morning. Maybe I can figure out what happened to it before the garage does so they don't try to screw you over again." That's right; my man calls me, a girl, for engine diagnostics. Well at least Marcel was good for something.

That is when I heard a knocking on my door. "My truck is fine. Mercedes wake up."

"Yea I am going to have to; there is someone at the door."

"Girl who the hell is coming over at this time of night? Keep me on the phone, you got your gun?"

I jumped up, oh my God the note. "Oh no! Visean someone left a note on my door tonight when I got home, saying that...oh God what did it say?"

"Girl just get your gun, keep me on the phone, and go to the door."

"Alright."

"You can do this, just don't point the gun at the door, because if it is some drunken fool you don't need to be going to jail for shooting someone over some note you found."

I took a deep breath. Freak it! I got this. I got up from bed, grabbed the gun, locked and loaded, and crept to the door. I whispered, "Visean, you still there?"

I heard nothing. Dammit, his phone must have lost the connection and if he calls back while I am trying to creep, I'm screwed. Whoever it was at the door knocked again, but did so even louder this time. Maybe it was just X, but wait, wouldn't he call first? X is too busy of a man to be coming over at this time of night for a booty call anyway.

I got to the door, looked out the peephole, and saw nothing. Good he probably went away. Just as I turned to go back to bed there was another knock at the door followed by, "Dag girl just wake up and open the door."

I stopped dead in my tracks because I knew that voice. I walked back over to the door, gun at my side and looked out the peephole again. Nothing. There was no one in the hallway. Okay, look last week this would have made sense due to how zombie I was, but this week, I am not even that tired to be trippin out this hard. What do I do?

The phone rang. I looked at the caller ID it was Visean calling back. "Hello."

As sure as I heard his voice on the phone, I heard the same muffled words come through the wall, "What does a brother have to do to have you open the door?"

"Visean?"

"Girl, open the door."

I walked over and looked out the peephole and there was Visean in the hallway waving his hands at me. I just about dropped to the floor. Oh my God he's here!

I opened the door and Visean just looked at me, "Girl, I thought I was bad, but you're a whole other story." I just stood there. "Mercedes. Hello. That is you right? Cause right now you're as white as a ghost and if it wasn't for your braids I would swear I am at the wrong place."

Huh? What? Mind freeze. Visean, standing in hallway. No. Yes. Wait. Oh my God.

I saw him walking towards me and felt him hug me but my brain was still frozen. "The way you actin girl you must have a man up in here. Where he at?"

Xavier! Snap. No wait, he is at his place. Breathe. "Visean, nobody is here. Well wait, you're here. How?"

He walked back out into the hallway and grabbed his bags. "Well I got a call from a producer who wanted me in Chicago ASAP, I didn't even have time to pick up a phone to call you, so surprise baby girl."

Mercedes come out of it, c'mon! Exhale. "Visean, you're really here." This huge ass smile hit my face.

"Now that is more like it." He gave me a hug and kiss and then walked into the kitchen. "Girl I had you goin huh? Oh," he looked at my right hand, "you can put your gun away now baby."

"Huh? Oh. Yea, sorry."

As I walked into my bedroom to put my gun away safely I could hear him saying something about how he got me better than he thought because I didn't recognize his handwriting on the note. I scanned my room quickly. Oh God had I even washed the sheets from the last time Xavier and I had sex in here? Think. No, I didn't wash them but I did change them. Whew! Is there anything in the bathroom of his? What about clothing? No, no he has never left anything here. Okay. Breathe. Inhale. Exhale. That's good. Now go clobber that idiot in the kitchen who just scared the hell out of you.

I walked back into the hallway and saw the television on and Visean's feet at the end of the couch. "Want me to bring you some pillows and a blanket?"

"Only if you bring them for me and you."

"I think I'll take the bed, what about you?"

"I'm all for that."

I sat down next to him and he pushed over so that I could lay with him. "You know me girl; I can't sleep at this time of night, it's way too early."

"Yea, whatever Visean."

"So are you surprised?"

"Duh!" and hit him with my elbow.

"Good. I would have called but as soon as I got in I had to get over there. I was supposed to go back tonight. I wasn't even sure I would have time to say hi, so that is why I didn't call. Then I felt bad, so I took a short break and came over here. Just as I got up into your hallway the producer that I am working for called and asked me to stay through Friday. So I was like of course and that is when I left the note on your door."

"What about your schedule in Minneapolis?"

"That is the weird part, it all got cancelled due to something those two had to do out of town. So all that is going on is the mixing by the techs and some local recording stuff so I was off and then this came through. See youngin, we were meant to have this time together."

I snuggled up next to him and closed my eyes, "It feels so good to have you here Visean."

The next thing I knew I was waking up to my alarm clock. I rolled over to shut it off and ran into someone's body next to mine. What the? I jumped out of bed and hit the light switch to see whose body it was. There was Visean reaching for the alarm clock to shut it off. "Hey girl, turn off that light."

So last night wasn't a dream because in my bed was Visean. I looked over at the clock it was 5:15 a.m. Man, I got to get ready for work.

"Mercedes shut off the light and come back to bed."

"Sweetie I can't, I have to go in early today. Did I forget to mention that to you last night?"

"Nope, but can't you go in later?"

"No, but I can get off early."

"No good, I'll be in the studio until late tonight. I probably won't even be back here until around the same time as last night. If it is too much I can always get a hotel."

"Whatever. Let me think."

"You can think all you want, just please shut off that light."

"Sorry."

"Come back to bed and I'll help you think."

"Visean."

"Girl get your mind out the gutter, I just want to hold you. C'mon."

If I lay down now I will never get back up. Then again, how can I pass up an offer to be in my man's arms? My man? Forget it; it is way too early to start this whole argument over again.

I shut off the light and went back to bed to be in Viseans' arms. "So tell me what is so important at work that you need to be in so early?"

"There is this case that I have been working on for months and months and what seems to be endless months now. No matter how many times we think we are ready to file something else pops up and it's back to square one again. So we are having another meeting and hopefully it will be put on someone else's desk that can get them through this more quickly. The client's are great and have been manageable throughout all of this, but I just want it off my desk."

"Interesting."

"Yea right Visean."

"No really. So uh, when is this meeting?"

"Today at 10 a.m."

He started pushing me out of bed. "Then woman what the hell are you still doing in this bed? Don't you know you have important work to do? I'll be here until Friday, so get up, get out, and get going."

"Yes sir."

Just as I sat on the edge of the bed Visean pulled me back down. "But first I just want to do this" and kissed me. "Now go before you get something started."

"Un huh sure."

I walked into the bathroom and got into the shower. I cannot believe he is here. Man I am so lucky that I didn't spend the night over at X's last night. Dag, talk about a mess that would have been; like it is going to be any easier having both of them in the same city. X was telling me last night that we were going to see each other today. Great, how am I going to work this?

I got out and dried off. I did my regular makeup regiment, headed for the bedroom, and got dressed in the closet. What I am going to do? Visean is here and X wants to see me tonight. I am almost pissed but then again I am not simply because he is here and he wants to be with me.

Mercedes please, you heard the man last night, he didn't even have time to call you and was just going to come and go. He probably would have called you the next day to tell you how he was there and how sorry he was that he couldn't find time to at least say hello.

No, that was the old Visean. Now he is here. Hello. The man took a short break just to stop by here to see me. Knowing Visean, he probably gave some story to the producers so that he could jet for an hour or even thirty minutes, just so that he could try to be with me. Just so he could surprise me. Now look at him, he just looks so peaceful.

I watched him from the closet doorway; he amazes me when I am with him. It is like he changes, not like his personality or anything, just this sense of calmness from the craziness comes through.

I carried my shoes with me over to the bedside, speaking of which homeboy was on my side of the bed, and bent down to kiss him. What am I saying?

The whole bed is my side since I am single. "Hey girl, you all ready to go?"

"Yep. I am so sorry Visean that I can't stay with you here this morning. What is your schedule like today?"

"Well, I have to be back to the studio by eleven. I don't know from there but I will call you at your office. Like I said, I will probably not be back until late tonight again."

I picked up the alarm clock and set it for 9:30 a.m. This brother loves the snooze button like we all do. "Alright sweetie, I set the alarm for 9:30. Call me at the office and take the spare key from the freezer, it is under the only thing I have real in there."

"What ice cream?"

"Ha! Ha! Okay so you are right. Take the key incase you want to come back and chill. I will work late tonight so that tomorrow I can stay here and we can leave together."

"Mercedes you are so beautiful."

"I already know this."

I walked out of the room and prayed to God that X for some reason didn't decide to call me early today or show up with some kind of early breakfast since he mentioned starting mornings out with me last night. What in the hell I am going to do?

I walked into the kitchen and opened the freezer to make sure the key was in its hiding place. I would have taken it out and placed it where Visean could have easily have grabbed it, but if I changed plans now Visean would be lost forever looking for a key that was right in front of his face.

I picked up the note off the counter and laughed, how could I have not recognized the handwriting. Sure Visean doesn't write me many letters, just a few postcards from time to time, but I guess I was just out of it last night. Walking around here with my gun acting all tough, how silly is that. Oh what a week this is shaping up to be. Well at least I can cancel dinner with

homeboy. I mean its not like Visean will be available but like all the other times, he is available as an excuse.

I walked into the garage and started up my brat. "Brat, Visean is here. What are we going to do now?"

I drove down Lakeshore towards downtown and tried to figure out how to juggle all of this. All right here we go. Number one, Visean is going to be tied up in the studio until possibly two in the morning again, so that leaves me with practically a normal day and night. I can work until eight tonight, see X (only if I cannot get out of seeing him), not sleep with him and come home and be in bed way before midnight. Yep that is all it will take. Now watch, Visean will get out early or have an extended dinnertime and request my presence down at the studio.

Actually, that would be really cool. There is usually something going on there and it is nice to hear the creation of music as it happens. Still if the break happens at like nine or ten then I am screwed because I will most likely be with X. No matter how good I am at playing things off, I don't think I could play off the surprise of, "Hey honey, Visean just called and is in town. I am going to go and visit for a little while. See you in a few okay." Right. Not going to happen. Because I know X would want to head down there with me. Why wouldn't he? X wants to be my man, my only man. That should be a good thing but it isn't.

Okay, Visean is in the studio, I need to work late, if I am lucky Xavier will be available for lunch, and then I won't have to see him after work.

Hold it Mercedes, when have you ever known Xavier Lawrence to be available for lunch? He is always with clientele that way his nights can be spent away from work.

Okay, Visean is in the studio, I have to work late, and Xavier and Xavier and Xavier. Exactly!

Wait, I know. Xavier and I go for an early dinner like Darri and I did last night. Even better, we can have dinner in my office.

And what if Visean visit's your office as a surprise?

Ugh! Traffic, Visean, Xavier, Darri, Tony, mentor program, Greenburg, ugh! I let out a loud scream in my car. Don't worry brat; mommy is okay, as soon as she sees how to untangle the ever-growing ball of tape in front of her.

I blasted my *DJ Tiesto* CD and headed into the parking garage. Music blaring focused in on a spot I didn't even notice my boss standing and staring at me while I parked. I didn't even notice him trying to come up behind me as I headed for the garage elevator.

"Bad start to your day Ms. Dominace?"

"Huh? Oh. Good morning Mr. Wallace I didn't see you."

"I am surprised you can even hear me as loud as you were playing your music rolling in here this morning."

What the hell is your problem? I can play whatever I want as loud as I want; it is just a freakin parking garage. I have had it up to here with men!

Mercedes! Watch your attitude, he was probably just joking.

Breathe. "You know, there are just some mornings when you do not want to hear yourself think. Guess this is just one of them."

"Wow so early to be so upset. Does somebody have a bad case of road rage?"

"I wish!" Dag, it would be simpler than trying to figure out the mess I have to figure out.

"Well whatever it is I hope it gets better for you."

It was then I realized that Bernie and I were in the elevator alone. So far he was being a gentleman, not that I thought he had it in him to be anything but. "So how are things for you?"

"Good actually. Connie and I just received news that our oldest has plans to be married this fall and that our youngest has been accepted into an Arts program."

"That's great. I know how important it is to see children succeed."

We both stepped out of the elevator. "You're right it is. Connie and I had no idea what type of reaction we would get trying to raise biracial children in our suburban community but it went well. We concentrated on us, believing in if we are solid then so would the people surrounding us."

"That is an excellent analogy."

"So what about you Mercedes, going to have children one day?"

Hell no. What the hell is he even asking for, isn't that a stupid females job to ask me those redundant idiotic questions.

Mercedes! Once again, check your attitude girl.

Breathe. "You know what Bernie; I have never had any interest in having my own children. Guess the whole motherhood thing just isn't me."

"Well I will say this, and I know you probably won't be expecting to hear something like this from someone like me, I am glad to hear that you know what you want and don't want. Mothers can come in many forms, so it is good that you know what form you come in."

"I kind of understand what you are saying."

I laid my keys and briefcase on Vicki's desk and proceeded to hear him out. "Take the mentoring program this summer. One might say that is your mothering instinct. You care enough to want kids to have a chance at a better future. Maybe that is your contribution to the world by helping children succeed in their lives."

Damn. What did Connie give this man this morning? I mean usually he is on the up and up and very nice

and has nice things to say, but this is a whole other level. "You know what, thank you. Usually I hear the speech about how I will want them and yadda, yadda, yadda. It was nice that someone can look beyond the norm and see that there is another purpose at work."

"Well Ms. Dominace, people should look beyond the norm. So you are in early. Am I to assume that you are here to get ready for our meeting?"

"That would be correct. Look, if you as management want to remove this case from me I understand. I like the Greenburg's, but there are things that they don't tell us and then drop on us at the last moment. Maybe someone with more experience in auditing should be on this case, incase they are trying to hide things from us."

"Well, to say that they are hiding from us is speculative...."

"I didn't mean to say..." Bernie held up a finger to let him finish.

"But I do agree that from what I have reviewed things do keep dropping in when they should have been outright. Considering that these people have been in their business for over five years now there should be no hesitations with what they are coming forth with. While I cannot assign an auditor to the team, due to potential client conflict, I can keep a closer eye on it. After all, it is our names are going on their returns. Have a good morning Mercedes. See you at eleven for our meeting and please have Vicki order some snacks for it will you?"

"No problem, but I thought the meeting was at ten?"

"The schedule change is probably in your email. See you at eleven."

So much for having that case removed from my workload. On top of everything else, this should be the least of my worries. After all, it is only work, I do enjoy it, and if I properly align myself with this situation, I can

make it a great opportunity for advancement. I grabbed my stuff and walked into my office. I already had voice mail; someone must have called after I left last night. The recorded time of the message was today at 5:45 a.m.; who would call me at that time? X.

"Good morning Mercedes. Did you sleep well?" *Oh God, my heart began to race, did he call the house? What time did I leave?* "I was going to call the house but figured that you were probably already on your way in. I tried your cell but that was off, so when you get this call me. I'll be in the office after 8:30 this morning."

Okay breathe. Maybe he really didn't call the house and just here. What time was I in the shower? Let's see it was 5:15 when I woke up, okay, and wait, no I was able to hear the phone ring at that time and it didn't. Whew. Whoever is watching me from up there, thank you for not having him call the house this morning. Oh my God, thank you.

Great I got this stupid meeting this morning and instead of being all concentrated on it, I have drama with a capital "D" happening. I mean, I am not stupid, I knew things would blow up sooner or later, like months later, not weeks later. Ugh! Well I know Visean won't go looking through my stuff, not that there is anything to look through anyway. So that part should be calm. X didn't call the house and is expecting a return phone call from me so that part is calm. He said my cell is off and yes I do have it with me, so that part is calm. Now to figure out how to make the rest of the day calm.

If I can just get X to agree to an early dinner and then a quick, no not quickie, goodbye, then I am good to go. I turned on my computer, opened several file folders, and turned off the soap opera that was playing in my head. When Vicki got in, I had her order brunch type snacks for the conference room to be delivered by 10:45. At 9 a.m. I called X and thankfully only got his voice mail. I told him that I had a meeting I was

working on, that I would call him later this afternoon and to think of having an early dinner tonight and in our world that means around 7:30. At 10:43 a.m. I finished all materials needed for the meeting and started out of my office only to be caught by the phone. Yes I know, I could leave it to voice mail, but you don't leave a ticking time bomb in the corner where you found it, instead you keep a constant watch over it.

"Good morning. This is Mercedes."

"Yes Mercedes," *oh not now Sheldon*, "I would like to know why it is when my cousin walked in the door last night he handed me receipt's for the nights activities."

Good for you Darri, I knew you would do it. I heard a knock on the door it was Mr. Wallace pointing towards the conference room. "I am sorry that you caught me at an inopportune moment but I need to go to a meeting, may I call you back later?"

"Now you sound like what I would have loved for you to sound like the rest of your life."

I bet you would. "Thank you for understanding. Good bye."

Breathe and go off later! I hung up the phone and followed Bernie down to the conference room. Vicki was already in there with notepad in hand and the snacks already set up. She is too good for me. I watched to see if Bernie would make himself a snack or even a cup of coffee. He poured a cup of coffee and I followed suit. We sat, we waited, and we each had a snack. At ten after the hour the Greenburg's finally decided to call and let us know that they were running late. Bernie just shot me a look that he may be starting to believe in some of my suspicions. Twenty minutes after their call Mr. Wallace's secretary, Annette, showed the Greenburg's in and the meeting got underway.

By two o'clock, way after the time any of us had expected to have the meeting end at, Mr. Wallace was in agreement that the case needed to go on to a different division. He consulted and convinced the Greenburg's that by doing so their return would be filed by the extended deadline. The Greenburg's case was officially off my desk and out of my hands. They weren't mad at me for not being able to handle their situation either so score one for me.

I walked out exhausted and starving. We offered to take the Greenburg's out as sign of good business practice but they refused knowing what was ahead of them.

"Mercedes, I didn't want to say it this morning, and not because I didn't believe you, but good work on that case. You were able to catch a lot more than I did because of your personal contact with the client. It is important to read the client as it is the numbers; good job."

"Thank you, both Vicki and I appreciate that."

"Now can I take you ladies to lunch?" To which Vicki and I both responded an equal yes.

Lunch was great but also lasted longer than expected. It was nearly 4:30 by the time we got back to the office. I know I should absolutely love days like this but I hate them because they are out of the norm and that leaves me out of whack. I looked at my desk, I organized it, and I did my electronic filing so that things could be moved to the new project manager upon request for this case. I checked my messages and there was nothing from Visean and nothing from X. So far, so good. Having felt accomplished, I headed down to the lunchroom to buy my afternoon chocolate.

I didn't see Tony or anybody for that matter which was nice. Usually at the end of the day we have one or two situations that take place around here. Either people are all in their offices trying to finish work that

should have been done yesterday or everybody is roaming around finding out the latest office gossip. Today was thankfully a busy day because I have enough of my own drama to think about.

I walked to the bathroom to freshen up. Hey I know I am being a slacker but you know what kind of life I have had since that trip I took, I deserve to slack. I freshened up, grabbed my candy bar, and headed back to my office where I proceeded to drop the candy bar to the floor when I saw Visean sitting at my desk with his feet kicked up.

"Visean?"

"No it's you behind this desk doing a really bad impression of me."

"Ha! Ha! Very funny." I walked over behind him and kissed him on the cheek so that I could have my eyes on my office door. It was only a little after 5 p.m., where the hell was Vicki.

"So Ms. Thing, I have the rest of the night off, ready to hit the town?"

You have the rest of the night off. Why? This is not good, then it got worse, my phone rang and Visean went to pick it up. What is he doing?

"Good afternoon, Ms. Mercedes Domanice's office, how may I assist you?"

Don't let it be X. Don't let it be X. Please, oh please don't let it be X.

"Why yes she is, one moment please."

Visean covered the phone, "Mercedes, it is some guy named Darrius, do you want to speak with him?"

X or Darri, which could be worse? "Yep, he is the one I told you about last night. Did you check your voice mail today?"

"Girl how could I not, you know my phone is always blowing up."

I took the phone and waited for Darri to start in on me. "Hey man what's up?"

"What's up? You're the one that needs to be telling me what's up with some other man answering your phone; that is what's up girl!"

C'mon people this is Darri; time to teach him how an older playa can handle her business. "Chile please, that wonderful man that just answered my phone is Visean. Did a good job didn't he? Just so sweet."

"Girl you have done lost your mind. What would have happened if I had been one of your other friends?"

"What if?"

"Un-huh, we'll see."

"Yea, yea whatever. Your knuckle headed cousin called me today about the receipts from last night" Visean just turned and gave me a look of *huh*, "but I was on my way into a meeting so I politely brushed him off."

"Man Mercedes when I gave him those receipts last night he blew the hell up. He was all like, I can't believe this woman this and that. Crazy, just mad crazy. I just went to my room so that I could bust out laughing. That busta brings me out here and doesn't let me do anything and his woman can't stand me for no reason and so he doesn't even do what he said he was going to do when I got here with me; so yo F him and thank you."

"Dayum!"

"No doubt girl."

"Well look, just get the cash from him and we'll use it to go out again. Marcus left me a note with a number on it for you, got a pen?"

"Dag, your friends just be looking out for people for real huh. Nothing like the peeps at home."

"Well they know how big I am on giving people a good start. When they know something relates to me they try not to mess around."

"No doubt, no doubt. A'right I got a pen, lay it on me or should I not say that with one of your men around playa?"

"Man skip you. Write this number down, 555-6324 and ask for Troy."

"For real, thanks Mercedes. Have a fun night and do what I am dying to do."

"Really Darri, I didn't think you played for the other team."

"Awe hell no. Not only does she have to deal with all these men right now but she also thinks she can handle crackin on brother's. Un uh Mercedes you ain't right."

"Yes I am. Learn. Bye."

"Yea playa, bye."

"What was that about receipts from last night?"

"Oh you have no idea what I have in store for somebody do you?"

"No, but I would like to. What is my little devil up to now?"

"Well, see, Sheldon has been a real azz to his cousin ever since he moved here. He asked Darri to move here to start a better life and Darri knowing how good his cousin had it believed that he would start him off on the right track. So he takes him up on his offer and moves out here. Well he gets here and Shel won't give up a key to the apartment, then his woman doesn't like him, and then he insists that the only reason he wanted Darrius out here was to start a higher education. Darrius has no interest in a higher education; his interest is in mechanics. Well we all know what Shel thinks of lowly blue collard workers and in his usual fashion kicks Darri to the curb. Not out of the house mind you, just doesn't give the boy any time and no access to improve his life."

"So what's up with the no key thing?" Visean swung my seat around and pulled me down to sit on his lap.

Please don't let X come up to the office. "I don't know, some drama from the past that I feel if Sheldon couldn't get over then he shouldn't have extended this opportunity to Darri."

"So what's up with the receipts?"

"Oh yea, well last night anything that I spent money on I gave the receipt to Darri to give to Sheldon for reimbursement. See Darri doesn't have a job because he can't get in and out of the house. Since he doesn't have a job, he has no money, and he doesn't want me to pay for this whole orientation thing. Since all of this falls back on the no key situation, let Sheldon pay. I am not asking for my portion of the money to reimbursed, just his. Understand?"

"All I know is that I better not screw this up with you; you are harsh on a brother afterwards."

"That's right you better not screw this up with me. I can't even believe that you are here."

"Neither can I, it just worked out."

"Yes it did." I gave him a long kiss. It felt so good to be in this man's arms.

"Mmm, you're gonna start something that we can't finish since we can't even close the blinds in here, and knowing us we'd have the whole office talking."

"Whatever Visean, you just need to try and keep your mind out of the gutter."

"Right."

"Hungry?"

"Yea maybe a little."

"Well it is past breakfast, don't you usually eat now?"

"Maybe."

"Man whatever."

"Don't whatever me girl."

"WhatEVER. Whatever. WHATEver."

"You think you are funny don't you."

"Hmm, the answer would be yes."

"Well would that be up for debate?"

"Let me think here, hmm, no. It is not up for debate."

"Fine c'mon then." He pushed me off his lap, got up, and started to lead us to the door when I stopped him.

"Visean, I got some things to finish up, give me a minute okay?"

"No problem. Where are the bathrooms up in here?"

"Down the hallway to your left."

With that he walked off, I in turn immediately picked up the phone and got Xavier's voicemail at home. It was only a little after five so I knew he wouldn't be there yet. I was about to leave a message when it came to me that talking to him directly would be my better option, so I dialed up his cell phone.

"Hey sexy lady."

"Hi. How are you?"

"Actually I am on my way to see you; since you can't leave the office tonight I thought I would bring dinner to you."

No! Please no. Think. Breathe. "You know you are just too nice to me" my eyes kept scanning for Visean, "but I have made other plans and that is what I was calling to tell you."

"You're not hooking up with that brother again tonight are you?"

"No." *So then what am I doing?* "Actually I have been invited to dinner by my boss for the case that I told you about last night."

"The boss that is always hitting on you? You accepted a dinner invitation from him?"

"Well this one was after an accomplishment, not just one of his invites from out of the blue."

Cut it short Mercedes here comes Visean.

"Well I..."

"I am sorry but I will talk to you about it tomorrow."

"Well call me tonight after dinner, no matter the time; it shouldn't be that late anyway."

Great now I am having my time watched. Visean stepped through my door. "Talk to you then. Bye" and hung up the phone. Exhale.

"And I thought I was the one who had my phone blowing up all the time."

"Business."

"Well it is after five and I am available and that makes you available and we should take our available selves out."

"Really?"

"Really. Ready?"

"Yes." Visean walked over, took me in his arms, and gave me a kiss. It felt so good. See when I kiss Visean it is like there is this peace in it and when I kiss Xavier it is like this, I don't know, like this yearning feeling. Does that make any sense? With Visean, I can feel safe, at peace, calm, and...look I've already told you about this and about X also. I don't know why I am doing this; maybe this time with Visean will make me stop. After all my fantasy is coming true isn't it?

We decided to eat at our favorite pizza place off of 127th Street and Western Avenue, *Beggars Pizza*. Unfortunately this choice also meant taking the Dan Ryan which meant heavy traffic, so we went back to my place to change and just relax for awhile. Besides their pizza being worth the drive, it is also outside the downtown area which means no running into people that I didn't need to be running into, and you all know who those males and females are.

We drove back to my place so that I could change into some normal gear. Of course, Visean being the way that he is had to change outfits to match what I was wearing. "Hmm, if you are going to wear that out tonight then I am wearing the *Bulls* jersey that you gave me while we were home that weekend." *While we were home?* "Now I know I said that I wasn't going to

bring it on the road with me but since I was coming to Chicago I couldn't resist."

"Speaking of which Visean, how is it that you were only coming out for one day but brought clothing with you as if you were staying for a week? I think somebody was telling me a story when they said they would only be here for a day."

"Woman, do you even begin to know anything about the type of work I do in the type of business that I am in?"

"Yea a little."

"Well then know this, when you are going out of town for anything in this business expect not to come back on the said date because something always gets added in or delayed. Always. No tour goes off perfect; dates are always added in, changed, cancelled or extended. No studio time lasts the amount of time that it is originally set for because the artist might be a diva and want it perfected before she leaves. The producer may try to get the right sound out of you after a dozen times of the same chord. Sometimes it is cut short because the miracle of studio/artist magic all comes together in less than the time allotted. Like a hole in one on the golf course it is rare, but it does happen. Notice I got my sport right this time." He just looked at me with this huge ass grin. "So you just never know but you always come prepared. Kind of like the Boy Scouts you know?"

"I definitely do now, that is for sure."

"Well baby girl the only final touch that I did not bring nor buy for this outfit is the jacket, got anything?"

"Now let me ask you something Mr. Visean, when it comes to sports outfits who always has the full gear line in her closet?" I walked over and pulled out a Bull's jacket that matched what he was wearing and showed it to him like some sales person at a high-end store.

"Eww, I might just have to keep that."

"As stated in my in home visitation policy, as I am sure you have read and can remember, all baggage will be checked upon departure to make sure that no items have been removed from the premises without prior permission."

"Dag girl, is one of your friends that you be with a lawyer or something?"

"Actually I do have a friend who is a tax lawyer."

"Tax lawyer? Hmm, well I wouldn't have to worry about you ever hooking up with him."

Huh? "Really? Why not?"

"A brother who is a tax lawyer...please he is probably conservative, you're not." *Well maybe I am a little.* "Boring, you're not." *Well not run the streets type fun but definitely better than Sheldon fun.* "The brother probably irons his t-shirts because he is so up tight about everything, and you're not and you don't."

Does X iron his t-shirts? I mean he never has ironed any t-shirts that he has borrowed from me. Has he? "Visean I know you have this person down on your list of people that I talk to."

"Oh really and which of your friends is the lawyer that we are speaking about?"

"My boy X."

"That cat? Huh. Well I still don't think he is anything that you need, so I am no worried about it."

"That's good. Now ready to hit the major congested highways of Chicago?"

"It's after 7; do you think we are going to hit that much traffic?"

"Without a doubt. So let's head out now so we won't be crawling into the place due to starvation."

"You're driving and I'm buying."

"Bet, now let's go."

We headed out and dealt with the left over rush hour traffic on the Dan Ryan Expressway. You know the left over guaker's blocks, the drivers who don't know where they are, the people who tried to be smart like

us and wait for traffic to let up. No matter, it gives us that extra quality time together. Although Visean's phone went off more than once with the usual business calls, the in-between time was nice.

We finally arrived and were seated quickly due to it being a weeknight and ordered our favorite pizza. "I miss this pizza when I am not able to come out here so much."

"I see I have you addicted. Good for me."

"This is not all you have me addicted to." With that Visean got up and moved over to my side of the table to sit next to me in the booth. It is so crazy that we act like a couple that just started dating. That is just how it is between us, crazy. We don't follow the norm, we just go for what we know and feel.

The pizza came and of course, Visean had to start feeding me like he usually does. We cracked jokes on each other and Visean tried to get me with his usual bar games that only he knows how to win. Sometimes I think he cheats and changes the rules to be in his favor. It is just different this time because we are not trying to catch up with each others lives. This time, the time period in between has been shortened, and we get to just be a couple. This is so nice.

Visean's phone went off again; he looked at me, and then looked at the number. "I don't have to answer that one."

"It's okay Visean; I understand when you get calls."

"I know that. That phone call was from some major crackhead that thinks I owe him money when I don't. He is just trying me because he wants money and thinks I am the one that is going to give him some because his girl won't. I would try to explain that but it would be a waste of our time and not of any importance."

"Okay. So what wouldn't be a waste of our time to talk about?"

"You and me."

"Well I..." my cell phone started ringing, I looked at the number it was Xavier. I looked at the time it was only nearing 8:30. This is so damn ridiculous. I don't have to answer to him and I don't respond well to people who watch my time. I know that I am doing something right now that shows I shouldn't be trusted but damn. I hit the silence option on my phone and let the call go to my voicemail.

"Are you going to answer that?"

"No, no need. I can call back later."

We finished our pizza, had the leftovers wrapped up and headed out to the car. "Well Visean, at least the weather is starting to get warm up here. How is Minneapolis right now?"

"Minnie who? I wouldn't know I am hardly there or get to stay there when I am there."

"True."

"Here give me the keys I'll drive us home. You look majorly exhausted, so I'll drive and you rest."

Now everybody, ready for this? I gave the keys over to him. Don't go into too much shock. The fact is Visean and my brat get along. He has respect for my car and so I let him drive him. Not so much during the busy time of day, when traffic is a complete mess, only when the streets are chill because this brother has more tickets than one sheet of paper can handle. As for parking tickets, let's just not look into that complaint area shall we.

Now of course I couldn't be all chilled and laid back with him driving, I did pay attention and he did do a good job. He parked my brat with care and we headed up. I had the strangest thought, what if X is at my door because I didn't answer his phone call earlier. No!

Wait, I cannot start thinking like this, I cannot be all paranoid. I mean c'mon how many playa's out there are doing what I am doing and thinking of what I am thinking of? Well duh, exactly, like I said in the

beginning that is how they are caught, they don't think to clean out the litter box.

When we got off the elevator, I looked down the hallway to see if anyone was by my door or if anything was on or around my door; the area was clean. Visean and I headed in and after about ten minutes of us adjusting for the night, he headed into the shower. As soon as the water ran I immediately picked up the phone to talk to X. Now it is nearing 10 p.m. and I got his voice mail. No! So I called his cell phone and went straight to his voicemail meaning his phone was off. There were no messages on my home answering machine and I don't remember seeing one on my cell phone either. Well he is probably pissed that I ignored his telephone call earlier so I decided to leave a message on his home number. "Hey baby, are you home?" Pause. "Well I was just returning your call. I just got in. Sorry I missed it earlier but I had my ringer off throughout dinner and forgot to turn it on until I got here and then noticed that I had missed your call. Why didn't you leave a message? Anyway. Hope to see you tomorrow." *You must be out of your damn mind for saying that one.* "Goodnight."

I walked into the bedroom and changed into something sexy for bed. I picked up the phone and dialed my office and told Vicki that I would be working tomorrow, just in and out late. I heard Visean finally get out of the shower, hmm. I walked over to the bathroom and as expected Visean had the door open while he stood there looking in the mirror completely naked. I definitely liked what I saw.

"Don't you know it is impolite to stare at a person?"

"Who said I was staring, I think of it as admiring the view that I see in front of me. Let me just say it is very," my eyes headed lower, "very nice."

Visean turned and looked at me, "I like what I see already."

"Really." I slid the straps of my negligee off my shoulders and let it slide off my body. "And now?"

"I just see an angel."

With that he led me to the bed, laid me down next to him, and held me. That's it; we fell asleep naked on the bed. Later when I awoke, I moved us under the covers. There is just something about sleeping naked, I feel so exposed I can't sleep. Not one phone call came the entire night, hmmm, maybe this won't be so difficult after all. Still wouldn't Xavier have called me back tonight when he heard my message? Maybe by not picking up the phone when he originally called I made him more than upset.

Mercedes, there is a man next to you who you have been to hell and back with so many times that not once has he lost faith in what you two had. If Mr. Xavier is going to get all out of place for you not picking up one phone call, girl leave it behind.

I rolled over and whispered in Visean's ear, "Goodnight Visean, thank you for surprising me like this, I love you so much."

"It's like I told you angel, things are going to change."

I smiled, snuggled up next to him, and fell asleep. Things are going to change. For once, I may have started to believe that they could and that I would to.

♂ cue the dark ♀

I jolted awake about 7:45 a.m. freaked that I was supposed to be at work until I looked over and saw Visean next to me. I know he has been here since Monday night but I am still not used to having someone in my bed besides myself. I got up to use the bathroom and for some reason wanted to check my cell phone for messages. I finished my morning bathroom routine and walked out to the kitchen where I left my backpack last night but couldn't find my phone. Great, please do not even begin to tell me I even left it up at the pizza place last night.

I walked back into the bedroom where I quietly entered the closet to throw on clothes so I could go look in my car for my phone. Please let it be out there, this is not the time to have things not under control. When I walked back out into the room Visean was still sound asleep, that brother is going to sleep through Armageddon when it comes. He'll wake up and be like, "Wow! Cool sky color" and go right back to sleep.

I sat on the couch to put on my tennis shoes and noticed a note on the coffee table; it was probably one belonging to Visean. The man leaves paper everywhere. I swear a *BlackBerry*, an *iPod*, and all the other electronic gizmos in the world might actually make his bags about 20 lbs. lighter when he travels.

Yea I know I shouldn't be reading the note but when I got up from the couch and looked down I could read it. Oh my God, Visean got a call back from the producers he has been trying to work with from New York for his own CD. I almost screamed in excitement.

See Visean has played for damn near everybody, but he also has been writing his own stuff for years. He has always talked about stopping and doing his own thing for awhile, probably in the jazz genre. This is so

great; my baby is another step closer to fulfilling another one of his dreams. Go Visean! Now how do I get him to let me know about this exciting news without telling him I recognized the names on the note he left out? Hmm.

I grabbed my keys and headed for the garage. When I searched my car there was my cell phone buried between the two front seats. The battery was still good and it showed I had two messages. I dialed up my voice mail and started heading back when I was stopped dead in my tracks by hearing Xavier's voice.

First new message. Voice call received, Wednesday 7:00 a.m. "Hey lady, it is 7 a.m. and I tried your work and now I am trying your phone. I'll try you again around eight."

Second new message. Voice call received, Wednesday 8:03 a.m. "Hey lady it is me again, I talked to Vicki and she mentioned that you are running late hours again today. You're probably sleeping in; you must have really impressed your boss last night for him to let you have a late start time today. Well if I weren't so busy I would come over and join you for some morning coffee but as it is I am already at the courthouse. Call me when you get this, if I don't answer leave a message. Bye."

Whew. Well at least he is not on the way here to check up on me. Wait, he didn't leave me any reason about what was going on last night that he didn't answer the phone or return the call. Well wait that is good that he didn't but still.

I rode the elevator up and couldn't stop thinking, are things going the way they are so Visean and I can be more real or is something else going on? I wonder if Xavier is seeing anyone else. Well at least that would be a weight off my shoulders but that isn't X's style. Not that it is really mine either, ok so lately it has been. You

know Visean and I haven't even had sex since he got here. What is up with that?

I was about to step off the elevator when it occurred to me that now would be a good time to call Xavier. I was about to push the lobby button and then decided trying to talk to him in the elevator wouldn't work due to lousy reception so instead I headed for the top level of the parking garage.

"Hello?"

"Hey X, can you hear me okay?"

"Hey Mercedes, how are you?"

He must be at the courthouse to be this professional with me on the phone. "Good, just woke up...."

"Hold on a minute okay."

I heard a voice of another man approaching him in the background then X got back on the line. "So you just got up huh? Well I just found out that my case has been delayed, seems the judge also decided to sleep in. What time are you starting work today?"

Uh? "Around eleven."

"Great. I'll grab breakfast and see you in about thirty to forty minutes; I need to talk to you about something."

"X...."

"Bye sweetie."

I looked at my phone. Thirty to forty minutes? Visean can't be gone in forty minutes. Hell, I can't be gone in thirty minutes. Here I thought I was seeing a clearing for me and Visean and now I am looking at the start of a traffic jam on the Stevenson Expressway when it is under construction and it is always under construction. Dammit. Ok, think quickly. You need to get out of this. Think.

Yea. No. Wait. No. Got it.

I hustled down the stairs to where I parked my brat, got in and hauled ass for a visitor's parking space on the top level of the garage. Since X should be taking public transportation over here this should be safe. I

called X back but he didn't pick up so I was forced to leave a message. "X, hey it's me. Sweetie it would be great to see you but you didn't let me finish. I am not going in until eleven but I have some errands to run and I won't be here. I really hope you get this message in time. I'll call you later from the office, lo..." *No Mercedes, that won't clear this up so don't say it.* "Later."

I hauled azz back down to my floor and quietly entered my place, as to be expected Visean was still sleeping. I made sure every ringer in the house was off and shut my cell off. I walked quietly into the bedroom and stripped down to my bra and underwear. Damn, the answering machine. I quietly walked out of the bedroom and raced to the answering machine and turned the volume off. Whew, now on to phase two.

I brought the standing fan out of the closet and turned it on high inside the bedroom. Now you can't hear the fan in the living room when the bedroom door is shut and you can't hear someone knocking at the door when the fan is on high and the bedroom door is shut. Trust me, I have freaked out both Miranda and Ori in the past when they have come over and I haven't answered the door because I couldn't hear them knocking. When they saw my car was in the garage, they called and found my phones were off, and they couldn't get me to answer the door I really had them worried about me. It was just another one of those times in my life.

I looked at the clock, 8:30, I had finished right on time. Xavier probably wouldn't be around here until 8:45. I climbed into bed.

"Are you trying to freeze me out or something?"

"Well you know there is one way to keep warm."

"Yea, turn off that fan."

I picked up an extra pillow and hit him on the head.

"Oh really."

With that, he started to try to tickle me. No, I can't scream, ugh!

"Visean, if you stop I'll make it worth it."

His hands stopped and still holding me said, "Oh really."

"Come hear I'll tell you how."

Visean looked around the room, then came in closer still holding me down, whispered, "Nope" and began tickling me again.

No! Don't scream. "Visean you are going to have to make me use the bathroom."

"Oh really, well I already went while you snuck off so that's okay."

More than okay, it means you won't hear Xavier knocking at the door. "Visean please."

"Or you will do what?"

"Umm, something to make you feel really good."

"Well my clothes do need to be washed and I do need the stuff in my bags to be organized."

"Visean..." I started to move my hips, "Not in that way, in another."

"Girl please; stay still and don't move." He released me and got up from the bed.

"Where are you going?"

"To the living room, I need something from my bag."

No! Wait. Don't sound anxious. "Sweetie what do you need to grab from your bag for what I want us to do?"

"You'll see."

See? Please, chile all I can do right now is pray. Pray for a traffic jam, a power outage while he is in the elevator, a malfunction with his Beamer, long lines at wherever he went for breakfast. I looked at the clock it was closing in on 8:45. It seemed like forever before Visean came back to the room.

"Did you find what you were looking for?"

"Yep. Hey I could have sworn somebody was at your door because it sounded like they left something

next to it. I would have checked it but uh," Visean was standing there naked, "I didn't think the neighbors would appreciate my unique dress this morning."

"You're probably right." I looked over at the clock, figures I would have correctly estimated the time that X would be here. Well at least that hazard has been avoided.

Yea avoided but turned into a huge drama.

Hey, I did leave him a message about what I would be doing today. It was up to him to assume that my morning could be spent with him and I already know the drama I am going to have to deal with later. At least he wouldn't find my car still parked in the garage.

Visean crawled into bed and pulled me to sit between his legs where my back rested against his chest. His arms came around my body and presented a black box. "I want you to have this."

"Visean...."

"Shhh, let me finish. I know you were wondering what pops and I were doing all that time we were gone while you were there and well, this was part of it. I wanted to give you this and I needed him to help me find it. See in my family when you give someone you care about jewelry it is something special. The way my great grandfather stated it to my dad was, 'Son you can pick up any piece of jewelry, good or junk, from anyplace at any time, but a real gift of jewelry is one that she won't forget. It is the one found out of thought and given out of meaning. No matter the price of the piece, hell it could even be one of those little wire rings you get in a box of popcorn, she'll always wear it and keep it dear to her heart. Not just put it in some box and look at it when cleaning.' So while I can't tell you what is in this box, because like you it is indescribable, I can tell you the reason that I am giving you this."

I laid my head back onto his shoulder; I cannot believe this.

"Mercedes, I have known you longer than I have known most people since I have been traveling. That day in the record store was more than either you or I even knew it was going to be."

Tears started forming in my eyes.

"Here we are years later and you still talk to me and that is an accomplishment to be rewarded but that is not what this gift is about or for. Mercedes, I love you, I fell in love with you, and it was before you even knew I did. I have watched you and listened to your scattered relationships for a long time now. All I could do is stand back and make note not to do whatever the hell that brother did to get you so pissed off."

I started laughing.

"Still somehow I managed to piss you off from time to time and you know you have done the same to me. So many times when I was overseas I would think that when I got back I would be over you, I found out I was wrong. Woman, you have built a house in my heart, and I want to build on that foundation that you started there probably without you even knowing that you have.

I've told you that I wanted a change and I mean to show you a change in this relationship, knowing that it will not be easy to find our new boundary's with each other. Simply put, the door of freedom is still open but how we handle who is walking through it will be a lot of work for both of us I am sure."

I shook my head in agreement.

"Exclusivity is still on the agenda for us to talk about, I know that and I understand that. Pops got on me way more than what you saw and heard. He and I had a discussion about you and it made me think a lot after I left. My life Mercedes is not perfect. My life is far from normal, but a part of my life has been with you since the day we met and that is something that has been growing for a long time. I only hope that you have felt that from me."

I shook my head in agreement; tears were now streaming down my face. You would think the man is about to propose to me.

"Knowing all this, my father and I set out to find a piece of jewelry that would truly follow our family tradition. Amazingly enough we found it; cause girl you are impossible to describe to anyone. I mean yeah, beautiful, strong, independent, sexy but the part of you that is in my heart, I'd have better luck teaching a deaf man to play guitar."

I started laughing, wiping my tears from my face, fighting to stay together.

"Success was ours outside of town, about two hours outside of town actually, at a jeweler that made art forms into jewelry, pieces that make statements. Now don't worry it is not gaudy or tacky or something you'll hide in public because it makes you look like some eighty year old woman, it is something that is you. How the hell this man knew you is beyond me, so I guess to describe you to people who have not met you I will say that you are a piece of art. A piece of work too, but simply a piece of art."

My tears were flowing as I was trying not to break out into a full cry.

"Maybe that is why we fit so very well together." With that he opened the box to reveal a beautiful indescribable silver band choker. The artwork on it was African in nature. It had two small pendants on each side and in the middle a beautiful marquise diamond pendant. It was gorgeous. "It is called the diamond of Africa, which makes sense since you are the diamond of my heart."

I broke out into a full cry.

Visean just held me so tight, "I guess this means that I got it right and that you won't be hiding in that closet of yours."

Through choked tears, I barely got out the word, "never." I started taking the choker out of the box.

"Here, I got that angel." With that, he put the choker around my neck.

Through my tears I said, "I don't have a mirror in here."

"Let me." He pushed me up and led me to the bathroom to see the beautiful and intricate creation he had put around my neck. He whispered, "You look like an angel. I knew this piece was you."

I turned around, hugged, and kissed him. "Thank you Visean, thank you."

"It's all there Mercedes, just like that choker, it is all there if you would just let it come out."

I couldn't stop crying. He knew what he had done; he had unlocked the pain and wanted to have it come out so that I could cleanse it from my soul.

"This is too unreal Visean. Just so unreal."

"Don't you know Mercedes, not everything is a moment in time like you like to think. Those moments can build up to something, something worth having. Something worth keeping. I know because you have shown me that."

We headed back to the bedroom where again he held me until we fell asleep. A very short while later we got up and got dressed. I wore my dark gray pantsuit to match my beautiful gift. I finished getting dressed while Visean was in the shower when it occurred to me to check my messages. The answer machine blinked with three new messages, my cell phone showed four missed calls.

Then I remembered...the door! I ran over to it and opened it up to find a bag of cold food awaiting me with the words angrily written on it, "Where the hell are you now!" I grabbed the bag and set it on the counter. I am sure the messages on the recorder followed suit to the words on the bag so I listened to the beginning of each message and immediately hit erase when I heard Xaviers' voice. The shower had just shut off so there was no time to go through my cell phone

messages. So I deleted my missed call history on my cell phone just in case and cleared the voicemail icon as well. If you clean out the box, you won't be caught. I hope Visean hadn't noticed any of this when he was retrieving this gift for me.

Visean walked in fully dressed this time and looked at the bag on the counter, luckily the words on the bag were facing towards me. "I guess I was right about somebody leaving something at your door."

"Yea and whatever it was smells awful. I guess the delivery man got the address wrong again, it happens a lot here." I grabbed the bag, crumpled it up and dumped it in the trash. "Time to take this bag out." With that I grabbed the bag from the container, put a twist tie on it and replaced it with a fresh bag. Evidence, gone.

"Here I got it."

"Visean please, the incinerator is right down the hall, we can get it on our way out." Damn, the car. How do I explain why I moved it? No!

Please let this work. "Ready Visean?"

"I will be in a minute."

You always are predictable when I need you to be. A minute in his life is more like five to ten. "Okay, tell you what. I will drive you to the studio this morning so that you make it on time. I'll go and get my brat, so meet me down in front of the building."

"Alright. Sure you got the trash?"

"Please. I got it."

He gave me a small kiss on the cheek, "That choker on you is more beautiful then I thought it would be."

"With so much meaning to it, how could it be anything less?"

I kissed him on the cheek and out the door I headed. I hit the elevator button, threw the bag down the chute, bye-bye evidence, and hauled ass back to catch the elevator. Rode up, got my brat (no notes on the windshield meant X didn't find him), and headed

down to pick up Visean. We threw his equipment in the trunk and I got him to the studio with only a moment to spare. Well he could always say he couldn't get a cab.

On my way to work, I plugged in my headset to hear the ugly messages that awaited me. There were four, one for every missed call. Joy.

First new message. Received at 8:50 a.m. "Mercedes, this Xavier, where the hell are you now? I was at your door; I called your home line because I thought I heard movement in there. I know you called me back but I couldn't answer. I am leaving the building right now. Call me when you get this." Delete.

Message deleted. Second new message. Received at 8:54 a.m. It was mom. "Good morning sweetheart where are you? I called the office but you weren't there. What's going on? Your phone is ringing but you aren't picking up? I'll try the house. Is everything okay? Call me when you get this. I love you." Delete.

Message deleted. Third new message. Received at 9:07 a.m. "Mercedes this is Xavier again. Look I took off out of your building pissed off and then I remembered that you left a message. I'm sorry. I should have asked you if you were available before I assumed that I could come over. I called your house line a couple times while I was there, so do me a favor when you get home tonight and delete those messages without listening to them." *Consider it already done.* "I should have listened to yours first. Honestly I thought you called me back to tell me what you wanted me to pick up for breakfast and I was talking with my client about the delay of the hearing when you called and didn't pick up. Well...call me. Bye." Well my cover story worked but the fact remains that he thought he heard someone moving around in my apartment, that person being Visean. Delete.

Message deleted. Fourth new message. Received at 9:13 a.m. "Mercedes it is Xavier again. Look I really

need to talk to you about something that went on last night. Like I said the court case was delayed but if you have some time today call me, I really need to see you tonight. Bye.” Dag, I wonder what is up. I hope everything is okay. Delete.

By the time I got into the office it was almost 11:45 a.m. What a messed up way to start the day. Well even if Visean does get off early today, he will have to enjoy the comforts of my place alone because I have to get several things started today. I walked up to Vicki and got my messages.

“Mercedes is that new?”

“What the suit? No.”

“No, the choker, it is breathtaking where did you find it?”

“I didn’t, it was a gift. I didn’t know you were into jewelry.”

“Only things that catch my attention; someone must really be trying to impress you.”

“More like keep themselves in my thoughts.”

“Well I’ve had a couple of phone calls come though from people wondering where you were at.” She raised an eyebrow as if she wanted to know also. With Vicki though, she has respect enough not to ask. She knows that if I want her to know then I will tell her. “The lady from the mentor program called wondering if you had made a decision yet. Have you?”

“No, but I will by the time you leave today.”

“Very good. In addition, Quentin Barclay was looking for you; he has been assigned the Greenburg’s case. I set up a meeting for you with him at two o’clock today.”

“Thank you. I am looking forward to moving that off of both of our desks.”

“Yes the Greenburg’s were such good client’s for so many reasons, but something just isn’t right about how they are handling things with this years return.”

“Agreed.”

"Oh and before I forget, a Sheldon stopped by this morning inquiring where you were."

"Sheldon? What did he want?"

"He left this envelope and asked for you to contact him with any further needs."

"Any further needs?" *Oh.* "Really?" Damn, homeboy is going to give up the cash for his cousin. About time. "Anything else?"

"No. Your phone was ringing non stop but since eleven it has stopped."

"Thank you Vicki."

I walked into my office, set down my things, and opened the envelope. Enclosed was a check for the receipt and a note.

Mercedes,

I don't know how you do this to me but some how you do. My cousin and I got into it the other night about how things have been for him since he arrived. You giving him the receipts to have me pay for that night was a reminder of what I was trying to do when I asked him to move in with me. Thank you for that Mercedes.

Here is his portion of the money from the other night. Just so you know I have also given him a key. The past can change a man.

Thank you and I hope you will continue keeping contact with him.

Sheldon

Sheldon has a heart? What? Sheldon has a conscience? Who knew! It would seem to me that Darius is doing the job that I couldn't with Sheldon by giving him a taste of reality. Or is it that I cracked open that door and Dari has the ability to have Sheldon fully

open it? Either way, congrats Sheldon, you're becoming a better man as well.

I looked at my desk, started my computer, and realized that I was absolutely starved. I was about to walk out and ask Vicki what she was doing for lunch when my phone rang. "Hello."

"Hi. Everything okay?"

It was Mom. "Depends how you look at it."

"Mercedes, do I even want to ask what it is this time?"

"Well you could because you love me."

"As if that was even in question; what is going on?"

"I want to talk to you in person about it."

"Well today is your lucky day sweetheart, I am downtown right now about to head home but I thought I would call first."

"How come you are not at work?"

"Everybody needs a play day."

"Mom you are so bad."

"This I already know. Can you meet me somewhere?"

"No because I just got in. Hey I know, I will order something for us and we can have it here in the office. Where are you at?"

"Over by the train station."

"Do you have enough money for a cab?"

"I am the mother and you are my child, quit worrying so much. See you soon."

"Be careful. Hey, wait, what do you want for lunch?"

"Sandwiches are fine dear."

"Okay."

Vicki was already gone for lunch; I picked up my wallet and headed downstairs to order some lunch for my mom and me. What a day this is turning out to be, I guess the actual start to my day today will be that meeting I have at two.

I went downstairs to our company's lunch area, got into line, and accepted the menu from the employee walking by; from the looks of things it was going to be awhile. What is it that mom likes again?

"Looks like you are trying to make a tough decision there. May I suggest the Italian Beef sandwich with red sauce?"

I didn't recognize the voice so I turned and looked at this average in looks Middle Eastern, mid-twenties, male talking to me. I thought they didn't eat meat.

Mercedes that's pork not beef and that is only if he is Muslim. Quit stereotyping.

What? That was a cultural question. "Thanks, but I don't think we are that hungry today?"

"We?"

"I have someone joining me for lunch."

"Do you work in this building?"

Who wants to know? "Yes and yourself?" The line finally moved.

"Just started last week."

Yep and I bet I know what your thoughts are. You are going to try to meet all the new women you can. Forget about having girls in different area codes, most men that start here fantasize about having women on different floors. Typical. "Really? What company?"

"The law firm of Botix and Associates, we deal with international law, we are on the tenth floor and yourself?"

Don't you pick up quick? Sorry, I don't give to much information my brother. "The tax firm on the fifteenth." Okay so we are on the twentieth but there is another firm on the fifteenth, I know because they have courted me with a job offer on more than one occasion.

"I see."

Well nothing else to say. "I hope you do well there."

"I should, I just graduated and I am ready to dig in. I am into corporate law you know, mostly setting up companies overseas."

I could have been impressed by that, but I'm not. I could throw up Xavier for the sake of conversation, but heck I am nearing the order counter, so why bother. "Very good." Can I look at my menu now?

"Thank you. I would really like to buy you lunch today if you have sometime to talk. That choker by the way, I can't keep my eyes off it. It is very unique."

"Thank you, so is the man who gave it to me. And thank you for the offer of lunch but like I mentioned I am already meeting someone for lunch today."

"Another time then."

You mean another world. "Never know." Get the hint.

I ordered my food, waited another 10 minutes for it to come up and headed back up to my office. Fortunately homeboy ran into some of his new officemates and was distracted by them while I made my way out of there. Well the choker is definitely a hit. I won't even say anything to my mom to see if she even notices it.

I got back to my office, dropped off the food, headed to the lunchroom, and got us some diet pop for our lunch. I headed back, cleaned off the desk for us to eat, and caught up on my email until she arrived about fifteen minutes later.

"Hi Mom." The presence of this woman always makes me smile.

"Hello there, you haven't been waiting long have you?" I gave her a huge hug.

"Nope, I got it handled."

I walked over, shut the door, and pulled a chair for her. "My daughter the gentleman."

"Whatever."

"So now, what is going on? Wait. What did you get for me to eat?"

"A Rueben, some pasta salad and a piece of chocolate cake for desert."

"Bad like me. I thank you although my hips won't thank me later. So what is up?"

"Ok so I went on that trip with Visean and it all went great, including meeting his family and friends."

"Except when you passed out."

"I told you that?"

"You really need to save copies of the emails that you send me in the sent folder since you have such a selective memory."

"Yea, yea, I know. Anyway when I got back and I know I didn't tell you this, Xavier was waiting for me at the airport."

"Excuse me?"

"Miranda innocently gave him all my flight information and when I got to the gate he was there."

"And?"

"Well let's just say that he doesn't know where I was or exactly what I did on that trip."

"Skip the details Mercedes." *Uh oh.* "Where does this man think your relationship with him is as of now?"

That is my mom, always cutting directly to the chase. "I am not sure."

"Is he in love with you?"

Ouch. "Yes."

"Did he give you that choker around your neck?"

"No."

"Who did and don't lie."

"Mom, why would I lie?"

"Sorry honey, don't make up a story like you did when you were little."

Leave it to mom's to bring that up. "Visean gave me this choker."

"When?"

"This morning?"

"He's in town?" Her facial expression was one of total surprise.

The food was going untouched by this point. "Yes he is. Actually, he has been here with me since Monday night, well early Tuesday morning actually. It was a total surprise; he was in town for only a day and it turned into a week."

"And Xavier, what does he know about all this."

I winced, "Nothing."

"How are you keeping this from him with Visean staying with you?"

"Well that takes skill and so far I am up to par."

She let out a deep breath. "You know Mercedes when you took all those pictures of different guys to keep me up with you I thought it was funny but this...honey you could seriously hurt someone."

I hung my head, "I know."

"Do you know who I am concerned about you hurting the most?"

I shook my head no.

She reached across the desk and lifted my face to meet hers. "You. You are the one I am worried about getting hurt. Don't do that to yourself, you don't deserve it."

"Then what is it that I deserve Mom? How many times has this same thing been done to me?"

"That doesn't make it right."

"It's their game Mom; it is how it all works now."

"How what works now?"

"Dating this century, heck even marriage. This is how it goes. This is all any of these so called men have ever shown me, so guess what they got a new player on the team."

"Really?"

"Really." She looked away in distaste. "Look Mom, I do know this isn't proper or right and that you raised your daughter better than this but none of these so called mother's out there knew how to raise their sons; probably because it wasn't their job to do so. It was all those run away father's responsibility to make sure their

son's knew how to treat a woman right. Well if you ain't there because you have to run off to do what you gotta do then consider the lesson taught. No matter how many times you claim that you will never be him, you end up just like him."

"Mercedes, no matter how you say it nor how you plan this out, you are going to get hurt and hurt others and I don't want that to happen to you."

"This isn't my fault, Mom. Visean was not supposed to bring this so called fairytale relationship into reality."

"Now he has."

I hung my head again. "Yes, he has."

"So when he did, and I am assuming it was on that trip from what you described, why didn't you stop the movement of the relationship with X?"

"I don't know. It started before I left on the trip and then when he was at the airport I was thrown and then he was at my place...."

"And in your bed Mercedes?"

Look at your mother Mercedes.

No.

Give her and show her respect.

I looked up and took a deep breath, "Yes."

My mother got up from her chair and walked over to the corner of the office. "Mercedes, I won't stand here and tell you that I am perfect. To quote a phrase, 'I was young once to.' To tell you the lesson I had from that phrase is simple, out of all that were involved, my pain was the worst. The biggest blessing out of all of it is that I have had time to look back at what I did."

"Mom you played around?"

"Never on your father, in fact, it was long before I even met him. I was in high school, it was my senior year, and my girlfriends and I would go out. I met boys from different schools and even colleges. I thought as long as I don't date anyone from my high school I can do whatever I want. Unfortunately, the brother of one of those boys that I thought I could keep around for

whatever it is that I wanted went to my school. Now I kept things on the, how do you young people say it? Ah yes, the down low." *I tried not to giggle having heard her say that.* "But no matter how you keep it quiet, not everyone can be trusted. It turns out that one of my girlfriends, not my best friend, wanted one of the boys I kept around. Since he had no interest in her what so ever, she thought if he knew the truth about me well then he would be more open to looking her way. Dumb bitch."

"Mom!"

"I'm sorry. Look I love your father, he is a good man, but the one that this so called friend of mine went after is the one who took my heart. Actually, out of all the boys I was dating at that time he was the only one I slept with."

I looked at my mother stunned that she would even admit to me that in high school she was sleeping around.

"No, he wasn't my first, but I did have a rule of not sleeping with more than one person until that relationship was over, everybody else was just a date. It was just that I was young, I was having fun, and I was loving the attention. Oh I could give a thousand excuses as to why I played these men the way I did, but the truth is he is gone because of it. When he found out, boy was he furious. He called me so many hurtful names. Anyway, after the loss of him I kept screwing things up and eventually they were all gone."

"So what was the blessing in all this?"

"First I learned that my pain was not the worst. I only thought so because obviously my behavior was so self-centered at that time. I am blessed to have learned from my experience and I changed my ways. I am able to stand here today and tell you this so that you may prevent yourself from losing the one who has your heart. I am looking at the choker on your neck and it

tells me that you already have someone's heart. Don't ruin that Mercedes, you deserve good things."

I wanted to break down and cry. Am I near that time of the month or something because my emotions have been on a roller coaster ride from hell lately. She walked over and held me, "I love you little girl, just don't do this to yourself or those two men who obviously love you so much. You'll not only feel the pain of losing them, but also the pain of what you will have done to them."

"What am I going to do Mom? This wasn't supposed to happen."

"Do what you have to; just don't lose the one who has your heart."

We sat back down and began to eat. After a few minutes had passed, we were able to move the conversation onto other topics like we always had been able to do. In the back of my mind plans and plots, dreams and schemes, were all coming into play on how to make this work. Visean would be gone Friday afternoon, but that was still two days away and Xavier's wanting to talk to me was not going to be able to wait that long. Besides curiosity of what the talk entailed was getting the better of me. There has to be a way to make this work.

"Mercedes, I can tell you are in your own little zone again. You are thinking of ways out aren't you?"

"Sorry."

"One piece of advice, don't tell anyone anything who may want what you have."

"Got it."

"Alright sweetie. Thank you for lunch, I know you have work to do and I want to catch the next train home. So call me if you need me and just know how much I really do love you."

"Thank you Mommy."

"You're welcome sweetie and when you see Visean, tell him to remember the mother who gave him the

daughter to love when he goes out to purchase jewelry like that again."

"I will and I will also tell you the story behind it soon."

"For someone who none of us thought would ever become real, sounds like this man is taking the right steps."

"He is."

She gave me a hug and headed out, I heard her stop and talk with Vicki before leaving.

That is my Mom, cool as hell.

It was after one o'clock and I needed to start preparing the Greenburg's files to hand over to Quentin. At two I went over to meet with, showed him the files, showed him where I had the electronic files stored on the server and I left him with the words of, "It isn't over until they sign, and that is something they haven't been willing to do." When I got back to my office roses were once again on my desk.

I looked at Vicki before I walked in. "Give it up, who are they from?"

A voice came from down the hallway, "Me." *Woah! Xavier.* "Can we talk inside your office?"

Ok, it is official; I am not getting anything done today. Xavier walked in shutting the door behind him and began walking around my office almost nervously. "I smell food; did you have lunch in here today?"

Who are you *Inspector Gadget?* "Yes, actually with my Mom, she was downtown today and joined me."

"She had a day off of work?"

"Everybody needs a day to play."

"Your Mom has always been like that, I see where you get it from."

"Thanks. So what up? Thank you for the roses, they are beautiful."

Xavier walked over and hugged me. "I am sorry Mercedes. This morning was a fiasco to say the least. "

"Cellular...not the perfect communication."

He laughed, let go and started pacing again. "Mercedes I need to talk to you about something. Why don't you sit down?"

Why is this brother acting like some female who is about to drop the bomb about being pregnant on her man? I took a seat behind my desk; X stayed up and continued to pace. "X, what is wrong?"

"Look there is just no other way to say this so I just will. Mercedes, I saw and talked with Kalani last night."

"Wow, she is back?"

"She really never left."

"Huh?"

"It's complicated."

"Ok. Well you two must have stayed out pretty late last night for you not to call me back."

"Yes, we did."

"Xavier, did you two sleep together?"

He stopped dead in his tracks. Oh my God did I just bust him? He let out a deep breath. "Look, I am not about to lie to you." *No X that isn't your style at all. Hope he never asks me a truth type question because even though it isn't my style, I probably would.* "It came close but in an emotional sense, nothing physical took place at all."

What does that mean? "So you felt drawn to her?"

"Yes and she to me."

"Xavier, us aside okay, I know how much she meant to you and I also know how it tore you apart when she left. Are you okay?"

He stood there silently and then restarted the whole pacing thing again.

"Look X, before you took me to bed we were friends, I want to be that friend to you now."

He looked at me still moving, "How can you Mercedes? How can you be my friend and listen to me about what happened when so much has happen between us." *Easy, Visean. Oops.* "I told you how I

feel. I have made love to you more than that one night...I don't feel right about all of this."

I took a deep breath and let it out. Wow a good guy, how the hell do I handle this? My Mom was not kidding when she said that there would be those who would get hurt in all this, the twist being that it may not be my doings that cause it. "Xavier, just what is it that you are trying to tell me."

"I don't know."

"Alright, what was it that she was trying to say to you last night?"

"A lot of things."

"She isn't back because in some way she found out about you and I is she?"

He shook his head yes.

"Oh so I get it now. Why is she doing this to you after all this time Xavier? Why put you through this pain again?"

"She thought she was pregnant."

"What? When? Now?"

"No. Then, that is why she left."

"Oh my God X, you two would have been okay if she was pregnant. Why did she leave?"

"I don't know." You could see the pain building in his face. "I mean she tried, she really tried to explain it to me last night but I just wasn't hearing her. All I heard was her telling me stuff, I wasn't really hearing her. You know?"

I went over and hugged him. "Xavier she didn't abort the baby did she?"

He looked at me and took a seat in the chair. "No. She thought she was because she was late and by the time everything was through she felt it was too late for us."

"I am so sorry."

"It turned out to be some kind of side affect from the pill. At first she and then she...Mercedes I am sorry, I just can't talk about this."

"Sweetie you have done fine so far."

"I love you Mercedes when I thought I could never fall in love again."

"Xavier, is it possible that this love you have for me is out of friendship?" Okay so I am looking for the stage exit left to try to get out of this mess. Can you blame me? Opportunity knocks. I mean I care about X and yes I love him, but Visean...I mean it is finally becoming real.

But for how long?

"How can you doubt my love for you Mercedes? How can you question it? Is it because every time I see you I take you to bed unlike your musician boyfriend Visean!"

"Wait. How do you know anything that goes on between the two of us?"

"Your girl Miranda loves to tell all."

My mother's words rang through my ears "...don't tell anyone anything who may want what you have."

I exhaled, "When?"

"Various occasions when I run into her. That night she gave me the flight information was not the first. Look she wasn't telling me anything in a bad way, she had no idea how I felt about you." *I know how she definitely feels about you now.* "She was just acting like a happy friend, sharing the good news."

Bringing me down is more like it. Now I am glad I used her name in that story I told Visean. I quickly calmed myself down, "She means well Xavier."

"Look Mercedes it is more than sex between you and I okay, which is definitely off the hook. I love you for other reasons. I know that every time I have seen you I have taken you to the bedroom and that we haven't had much time to talk but that is how it is in the beginning, isn't it? We have been friends for so many years it isn't like we are starting in the middle of things, just continuing on."

Score a point for him on that one. "It's okay Xavier, I don't think anything bad about it. So now that Kalani has told you all of this, where do you want to go from here?"

"I don't know. I need some space."

"Is that what you are here trying to tell me, you need space because she came back?" Did I just sound pissed off? Yep. Who the hell does she think she is?

"No not in that way." He stood there and let out a deep breath. "You and I have had past talks about closure right? How for once having the door shut with reason would be an enlightening and blessed experience. Well here is my blessing, here is my closure, here is my reason and you know what? As enlightening as it may be, it sucks! That is why I need a little space, a little time, a little...."

"I am sorry; I didn't know I was encroaching on all that."

"No." He exhaled. "My God Mercedes look at me going off on you like you had something to do with all this when you didn't. I apologize."

"It's understandable and I thank you for being considerate of my feelings but as I told you earlier, I am your friend above all that has happened between us."

"I know."

He got up from the chair and hugged me. Jeez he is practically turning into a basket case over this. Great. I can imagine what would happen if he does find out about Visean and I.

"Look I have to go. Can you give me the space I ask for knowing that I am not going anywhere."

"Sure baby, I understand."

"That is why I love you so much Mercedes." He kissed me and then left.

The biggest, most treacherous roller coaster ride in this world cannot begin to describe the emotions I have been experiencing today people. Not one bit! I looked at the clock, and it was nearing the end of my

normal work day already, damnit! I didn't think that X had stayed in here that long. I guess I lost track in all that pacing he did. Man this is really ripping him up inside. How could she just leave like that? How didn't she know that they would have been okay? Me and Orianna always felt from talking with her that she felt confident that her and X would be married someday. After she left out of the blue, Xavier had more than several of those scattered relationships Visean claimed me to have and come to think of it, that is when his drinking increased. Amazing, even in all that pain he tried to treat other women good. Is that all he is doing with me?

Ugh! Enough of this madness! Dammit all to hell! I'm done.

I walked out to Vicki, time to take control and clean up some things that could be cleaned up. "Hello. You know what? I have had a very stressful day and I am really praying that the calendar that you make up for us isn't overloaded. You see I have accomplished absolutely nothing and the way I am feeling, it is going to keep going that way. Alright?"

Vicki just gave me this stunned look. I wasn't yelling at her I was just stressed and talking in a very *let's just get this straight* kind of tone. I was taking charge of things, putting things in order, and trying to grab hold again of what was going on around me. "You are such a great help to me, in fact we are a team and I am lucky to have you with me. Okay? So this is what I need you to do for me, choose an applicant for the mentor summer program to bring on board. You already gave me a suggestion so if you truly feel that is the one then please, move ahead with it. Contact the program, inform them of our choice, and send over a letter of congratulations and thank you letters for the rest of the applicants."

"Are you sure?"

"Trust me, you got this one okay. Next, tonight before you leave, please email me a list of all meetings going on tomorrow as I will be in very early to prepare for them. After that please call Tony and tell him I must cancel dinner tomorrow night."

"Dinner with Tony? You were having dinner with Tony. Tony from our office?"

"Was, but I am not now and I should tell him so please cancel that."

"Anything else?"

That is what I love about Vicki, no questions asked. "Nope and thank you. Have a wonderful night." I walked back into my office closing the door behind me and slumped down into my seat. I reached over for my employee index and dialed Tony's extension.

"Hello Mercedes."

"You know my extension?"

"I looked it up when I back to my office that night. I have a thing for numbers."

"Go figure."

"So are you calling me to cancel our dinner date tomorrow evening?"

Straight to the point and right now who freakin cares! "Yes, I have company that came into town today."

"Ah, must be someone special. Rumor is that you received roses today."

Damn the gossip network! Well hell the roses helped me out today didn't they, so thanks X. "Yes that would be true."

"Well enjoy your company and I hope that I can take you to that dinner very soon."

"I am sure you will be able to do just that. Thank you for understanding."

"Enjoy."

Right. "I will. Bye."

Now what else can I clean up? Ah yes, I know. I dialed up Ori.

"Hello?"

"Hey it's me, you on your way home?"

"Not exactly. I am going to meet the dude I had over the night you called."

"Oh and here I was thinking that..." *Mercedes she is in traffic don't do that to her.* "I was important in your life."

"Girl whatever. How is Xavier?"

"Yea well."

"Un-huh! Already? What happened?"

"Long story short, Kalani came back to give him closure but I see it as opening a new door the way he is acting and the way he described how things went down between the two of them last night."

"Why now?"

"Get this, little Ms. Thang heard about the two of us."

"So she came back so that he could move on?"

"Right and I believe that I can buy a ticket on the space shuttle for the same price as an airline ticket to Florida from here during the winter time."

"So what's up? What went down between the two of you because of this?"

"He wants space."

"Space?"

"Yep and its fine by me, makes it easier with Visean here."

"Visean is here where?"

I rolled my eyes and dropped back my head, "Visean is here in town and has been here since Monday, well really early Tuesday morning, and has been staying with me ever since."

"Girl you have got to be going out of your freakin mind making sure those two don't have a head on collision."

"No doubt."

"So how was your night with my man Darrius?"

"Who?"

"Darri. Darrius. You know Sheldon's cousin."

"Oh, it was nice."

"Did you sex him?"

"Ori!"

"Guess that means no."

"Look right now I would sex the hell out of him just to chase out what I am doing but I won't." I started laughing, "Sheldon told him not to sleep with me either."

"You're kidding."

"Nope and I got him to reimburse me the money that I spent on Darri that night."

"Un-uh! Who the hell do I got on the phone with me?"

"Whatever Ori. He even thanked me for making him aware of how he was treating his cousin. Shel actually has a heart."

"Damn, the world is coming to an end."

"So what about this guy you are talking to? More than one night, must be something special."

"Not really, just that good."

"You're so bad!"

"So when is Visean leaving?"

"Friday afternoon."

"And how much time does X need for space?"

"No clue."

"Well playa just be careful and keep up on things cause if you slack, one of them is bound to make a trick move and you'll be screwed."

"Thanks Ori."

"Hey I am already going to hell for what I do, might as well make sure you are in the same hand basket as me so we can party together when we get down there."

"Funny Ori, very funny."

"Some of us have it like that. Well let me fight this traffic and I will be in touch."

"A'right girl, out!"

"Out."

I hung up the phone, laid my head on my desk, closed my eyes and wanted to cry. This is so stupid. Visean shows up out of nowhere and lays more concrete down in this reality of a relationship. X almost finds out about Visean being here with me by being to aggressive with me about how I spend my time, which in turn will make me haul azz out of this. Sheldon shows he actually has a heart and moves to do what he intended to do for Darri. My mom admits she was a playa in her day and warns me of what is to come. Kalani is back, which should straighten things out between X and I, but instead causes major drama with him and his feelings for me.

I let out a deep breath and cleared my throat and whispered, "Visean I love you but please be finished up here before Friday, I don't think I can take much more of this." With that I got up and refreshed myself in the bathroom, grabbed my stuff from my office and hit the road.

I got into my brat, put my foot on the clutch turned the key, and said to him, "I'm done."

I'm done with all the lies and scheming that I am trying to create. I am done with trying to figure out what I really want. I am especially done with trying to figure out what it is my heart really wants. Damn my heart to make one correct decision this lifetime anyway.

I'm done with trying to make sure that everyone's feelings are protected while leaving my own feelings unattended. I am done with my x-husband having the invisible hand of control that pushes my life into these unheard of circumstances that I have gotten myself into. I am done with trying to control every situation I get into. I know it is part of my astrological sign, but I have to release and go with the flow of what I want and not what everyone sees for me.

things men do, women do the same

I wanted Visean forever and a day to be like this with me and now I have it, so what the hell am I trying to screw this up for?

I stared at the open street ahead of me and just screamed in my car, "I'm done. Do you hear me? I'm done!"

♂ *so you thought* ♀

I got home to find Visean not there; thank God at least one thing can go right today. I tried calling him at the studio but the phone rang and then went to voicemail. "Hi Visean. Please call me when you get this and let me know what time you will be in tonight. I had something come up that I have to take care of so I may or may not be here by the time you get in. If I am not here, you know how to get hold of me. Okay? Love you. Bye."

I called up Miranda at her office but she was already gone, and when I tried her home phone she wasn't answering there either. I know she has a cell phone but she is one of those people who only uses it for emergencies and never has it on. I don't know the exact reason why right now, but I want to go and rip her head off. I don't know why I want to I just know that I do. She has no right to share such intimate things about me with anyone, especially one of my male friends. Xavier trying to hold her up by saying she only did it because she was so excited about the relationship I have with Visean was just pathetic. Please with that mess.

Miranda wants Xavier all to herself, well you know what Ms. Miranda? Get off your funky azz and go for it! Dayum! Make it easy on me. Just don't use me and my life to make your move on him. How could she do that to me? Doesn't she realize that some of the stuff that she knows about me should be considered private and confidential? Ugh! Hell Ori knows so what is her excuse?

I tried her again but still no one was home. I am way too pissed with her right now to even try to leave a suitable message. I know she isn't the pure cause for what is burning me up inside right now, but dammit she

gave X information that he used to throw in my face. If there is one thing I hate more than anything else in this world, it is that! Damn her for opening her mouth to him.

I stormed through my place cleaning up everything in sight. Visean hadn't sprawled out everywhere like he usually does when he stays for a few days but I wanted something in my life to be in place and this was the most obtainable.

When I was done throwing and shoving everything into place I tried Miranda's again but still got no answer. Damn, where the hell is she? It isn't like she has a life outside of work. I would drive to her place and wait for her but she lives too far for that. Well then just forget it. Just cut the bitch off, I am through with her sorry men can't do nothin' wrong azz anyway. She never understood one thing I have ever told her and always repeated her own stupid mistakes when it came to men. She just refuses to wake up to the reality that surrounds her and live in it. So forget her, I'm done.

I stood in front of my window overlooking the city and wanted to cry. What am I doing this all for? I wiped the first tear and told myself no more. I felt the choker around my neck and exhaled.

Mercedes, it's going to be alright. You'll see. Just let God handle things and He'll help you see your way out.

What I wanted out of, I don't know. What I wanted help with, I don't know. What I want in my life, I do know. Who I want to bring into my life, I don't believe or have the faith that He will know either.

I started to head for where I left my keys so that I could take a walk or something outside when my cell phone rang. The caller id said the number was private. "Hello?"

"Mercedes?"

"Yes this is she, who is this?"

"Kalani."

Breathe. "Been a long time."

"I know. Look I won't play games and ask you how you are and act like things are normal, have you seen Xavier today?"

"Kalani, that really isn't any of your business."

I could hear her let a deep breath out over the phone. "Fine. Look Mercedes, I am sure you have, I am sure he told you everything, so let me tell you this." *Excuse me but tell me what?!* "I'm back. It is as simple as that. I am back and I want my man back. I don't know what is going on between you two, but there will be an end to it, so I suggest you get over it quick."

I stood there with my jaw dropped. I am not even in the mood for this and then something inside me agreed with that statement. "Excuse me but who do you even think you are talking to?" Before she could even answer, I cut right back in. "Look girl, you left. You left my boy's heart broken. Hear me? Heart broken! He got with so many freaks after you and then came after someone real like me. I don't know what he has told you, but I can tell you what he told me oh so many times, he is over you. Now your little story and stunt has him thrown, has his heart split back open, but X is a strong man, and if you are trying to run game, he'll cut you off. So, don't you dare tell me that I better back off little girl. I don't have to. If you want X to truly be anyone's man, you'll back off and let him make his own decision."

"Don't try me Mercedes."

"Don't try who? You? Girl please, you don't want to go there with me today. You know what is sad. You and I used to be friends. Now you are coming at me like I am some kind a ho you never even met. I didn't take your man Kalani, you left, and then he came to me. I suggest you get that straight in your head. You're just scared because I'm not a rebound. "

"Look Mercedes, I just want him back. Please, just back off."

"Kalani, grow up." With that, I hung up. She had better not even call me back! Who the hell does she think she is? Everybody wants Xavier. Well what the hell is making this brother so damn special anyway? Now everybody is back stabbing and trippin just to be with him? At least with Visean I don't have this mess. You know what I am through with Xavier too. Cause the letter D, for drama, that is in my life has been kicked to the curb.

The phone rang again, this time the caller id showed a number that I wasn't familiar with. "Hello!"

"Damn Mercedes."

Visean! Ugh! "Hi."

"What has you so pissed?"

"I just did something stupid where I hurt myself in the kitchen trying to put something away where I shouldn't have. You know how I can get sometimes."

"Un huh. Well umm, I have some kind of bad news. We wrapped everything up here today and I got a call for some work in D.C. tomorrow. I was wondering if you could book a flight for me to either leave tonight or tomorrow morning."

My heart dropped, Visean was the one strength I had in my corner right now. "Umm, sure. No problem. I'll get on the Internet and see what I can find for you."

"I am sorry baby girl; I'll be home soon so we can have some time before I jet out." *Did he say home?* "See you in about an hour."

"Okay Visean." Dammit. He was the one thing that would have made this all better.

He still is Mercedes. He has to leave for work...he isn't leaving your life.

It feels like it. I went into my bedroom and started up my laptop and thought of all the sites that would be best to purchase his ticket from. Yea, like I can concentrate on this. I picked up the phone and dialed up X but before it could ring, I hung up. What good will it do to tell him what a bitch Kalani is being? He'll see

it. Which makes me wonder if he wants space from me, what about her? Well I guess he is if she is calling me telling me to back off. Oh freakin well, she can have him. If she can get past Miranda trying to get to him first. Maybe I should give Kalani a call and tell her who else should she be harassing since she wants "her" man back so damn bad.

I threw myself onto the bed and felt my heart sinking again. I know I don't know what I want with X, but the very least I have always wanted is his friendship and now Kalani is even trying to kill that.

Fine. I'll let it go. Like I said, I am tired of trying to control things I cannot. If this is what is meant to be right now, then so be it.

I got online, somehow found a one way ticket for under \$250, his usual limit, and booked it. He left tomorrow at 7 a.m., which was perfect. Visean would have to be to the airport by 5 a.m. for his two-hour check in time. Then I can jet straight into work and lose myself the rest of the day. I went into the closet threw off all my clothes when the phone rang again. I was naked and had no time to look at the caller id and picked it up anyway. "Hello."

"Look Mercedes...."

"Kalani, girl you have got some damn nerve calling me back."

"I know. I am sorry Mercedes."

"No you are not. You have something seriously wrong with you. I'll let you and your man figure it out, because I am done. Oh and by the way, if you want to know where he keeps the condoms in the game room, look under the left corner pocket. Although after last Sunday, he may be out." I hit the end button, threw the phone onto my bed, and headed into the shower.

I washed my braids and just let the water fall until my mind was at peace. I got out and toweled off when I

heard Visean's voice calling from the living room for me.

"I'm in here."

"Whew! All that steam should have been a dead give away. What is with you women and those hot ass showers."

"Well it can make you feel all warm inside like when you and I are making love."

"Oh really."

"Yes." With that I opened my towel, let it hit the floor, and grabbed Visean in my arms. I just needed him.

I started undressing him and as I went to go down on him, he stopped me. "Visean, come on. I need this from you. Please."

With his hands under my arms, he lifted me up. "Mercedes, so do I but not this time; this trip is going to be different, okay?"

My head dropped, "Okay."

"Now I am going to pack, get ready and we'll go eat and see a movie or something. Did you get my flight?"

"Yea, all the information is in the bedroom written down next to my laptop." With that, I closed the bathroom door. There I was, hot, ready to go and turned down. What the hell is up with this week? I put the shower on cold and got back in. When I walked out in the living room totally ready to go wherever it was he wanted to go, I noticed that all of Visean's bags were next to the door. I walked over to the couch where Visean was sitting watching television. "Visean, are you leaving tonight?"

"No. I saw the time of my flight and you know we'll never make it if I don't have things packed like I am leaving tonight."

"True."

I started to walk away when he grabbed me and pulled me down on top of him. "Come here you." I

just looked at him. "You're upset with me for not making love to you, aren't you?"

I smiled. "Well I can say that a cold shower works."

"Mercedes, I just want this trip to be a little different."

"Okay, whatever that means."

"Well if you don't know, ask."

I inhaled deeply, not another freakin game. "Okay Visean. What is this whole thing about this trip being different?"

"Mercedes, I think about making love to you more than God would like to hear about. I think he has finally learned to shut off the frequency that he listens to in my brain when it comes to us. I want this trip to be sex free, is that okay?"

"Sure, but you haven't explained to me why."

"I want you to know how serious I am."

"Visean, I already know. We have already have had trips similar to this in the past."

"None like this Mercedes. This is the start of the next step."

"This must be a male thing, because I am down for the sex and knowing we are on our way with the next step."

Visean just laughed, "Girl lets take your horny ass to get some food."

"I got your horny ass for you; just wait until the next time you think you are going to get some."

"Please, try to hold back all you like, but you don't have the strength to hold back like me."

"Yea. Yea. Whatever Visean."

Since it was late we decided to hit a fast food place up the street and then came back to watch a movie that we rented. It was killing me to sit next to him knowing that even if I tried to start anything he wouldn't let me finish it. Sex could clear my mind of all that was going on. This is driving me nuts. We watched the movie and got ready for bed. He held me until we fell asleep. Amazingly enough none of my phones

rang once all night long. This was good because now I wouldn't even know what to say to Miranda.

Thursday through Saturday was just a blur to me. I worked; I stayed and did extra work. When I got home, I zoned out on a movie until I could fall asleep. I cleaned my place like you wouldn't believe. Any laundry that looked remotely dirty was washed, dry cleaned, and neatly put back away. I rearranged my closets from the bottom to the top. I just couldn't stop moving. Visean called when he got to D.C. but after that, I hadn't heard much from him. I wore the choker he gave me everyday and everywhere I went it seemed someone had a compliment on it for me. It kept his love near.

It was Sunday when I finally heard from Xavier. He wanted to talk and invited me over; I could see the pain and joy in his eyes when he opened the door, "Mercedes...." With that he just grabbed me and started kissing me pulling me into his condominium and onto his couch. We stayed there for about five minutes. I couldn't believe it when I felt my heart melting, what is up with me now? I thought he would be ringing my neck for what I had told Kalani; instead, he was all over me. Maybe that was it.

"Mercedes, I am so glad that you are here."

"Xavier," I said while trying to compose myself. "I wasn't expecting this."

"I know. I was so scared that I was taking to long to get through this."

"It's only been a couple of days."

"I know but I was unfair to do what I did to you because of her."

"It's okay X; she came back out of nowhere. What could either of us really do about it?"

"Well I could have done a lot. She told me about the phone call she made to you."

"And?"

"That is when I knew I didn't want to be with her. She has changed. Something changed her. I am sorry that I didn't see it as soon as she came back to me. I'm sorry I didn't see it that night she told me the story of why she left. I guess it was right there in front of me that something wasn't right with her, she wasn't the person that I thought I knew all that time."

"We all thought we knew her Xavier."

Just like you thought you knew yourself.

I don't need to go there right now. "Everybody wants closure Xavier, I wasn't about to deny you of that. You know me better than that."

He just held me tighter. "Mercedes I am sorry. I know I shouldn't be telling you this but I think you should know that I slept with her."

What? You what with her?! I wanted to jump out of his arms and slap the hell out of him. I took a deep breath. I knew that there was a strong possibility that the two of them would, but I thought he had more respect for me than that. After all he said he needed time and space, he didn't say things were over between us. "So I have to ask this, was it before or after she made the call to me?"

"Before, in fact, that is probably what prompted the phone call."

"Before the phone call? Xavier that means that you slept with her the night that she came back to explain things to you."

"I know."

Ladies and Gentlemen, learn from this. Listen to a man and his stories and watch how they build into a lie that you can catch them in. "I asked you if that had happened that night and you told me that you didn't sleep with her that night. Damn, why you gotta lie to me like that? I am not stupid, she is the woman you loved and wanted to spend the rest of your life with, she comes back of the blue, you're a man...of course you were going to sleep with her that night."

He quickly but gently moved off me to get off the couch. "Look, we were in bed, in the middle of passion, that point where your mind goes silent and the next thing I know I wanted to blurt out your name. I stopped right in the middle of things. Right before I was about to you know...I stopped. Needless to say she got pissed off because she knew what happened without me saying a word."

I folded my arms across my chest, tilted my head, and gave him that *you had better tell me* look. "You expect me to believe that? You stopped because of me?"

"The proof is in the call."

You know why I am pissed off right. Well hell if he is going to admit to this then I can finally have a reason to quit this and go for what I know with Visean.

Xavier grabbed for my hands and brought me up to stand in front of him so he could look straight into my eyes. "Mercedes, I didn't know how to tell you that day in your office. I was surprised that you asked and I believed you deserved an answer that was close to the truth, so that when I did admit to this you wouldn't have been so betrayed by my lie. It has been over since then. The rest of the time I used to put this all behind me."

"Xavier, you know me. You know how I am. I came at you as a friend. Can you understand why I am pissed about this? I mean she and I were cool and then I get that call. It is just messed up." I stood there shaking my head.

"I don't blame you. Can you forgive me?"

"What is there to forgive Xavier?"

"I slept with Kalani."

This time I calmed down. I am done with the drama. "Xavier, you were in love with her for a long time, I know you wanted to marry her, okay. It is only natural that if the two of you, if put back around each other,

would have those feelings resurface and end up in bed together."

"The way it would probably go down between you and Visean."

I moved back from him like *I know you did not just bring him up again*. You got some freakin nerve to bring his name up all in this. "Xavier, this is about what is going on between you and I, he isn't a part of this and there is no reason to bring him up. Are you always going to bring him up like this?"

"Like what?"

Can you believe we were starting an argument right then and there about something that had absolutely nothing to do with the subject at hand, which was him sleeping with Kalani. Hello! Does anyone out there agree that when he admitted taking her to bed that I should have hauled all out azz on him? I did but then I calmed down, I reminded myself of my goings on and tried to remain rational about it and this is what I get back? Un-huh. I had to read him like a book.

"Like what? Don't even try to go there because you have tried to pull this stupid mess on me twice now." He opened his mouth to speak, most likely in defense of himself but I cut him off. "Every time we have a conversation about the status of this relationship I have you throwing his name up in my face. What is up with this? Huh?" *My blood started to boil*. "Seriously I want to know X. I have male friends, and that is one male friend I haven't seen in God knows how long." *Good thing I was inside, lightning could strike me on the spot for that one*. "All you do is bring him up and the stuff you have heard though my friends. Why? Why do you insist on doing this? What is it that you want to know or that you are trying so freakin hard to figure out?" Yes I am pissed.

With that Xavier hung his head, walked into the kitchen, and slammed his fist onto the counter top. "Dammit, this is not how I wanted this to go."

I walked in besides him with my arms still folded. "Well then how did you want this to go Xavier? You open the door, say my name, we hug and kiss and have your way with me on the couch without a word spoken. I mean really I am surprised you didn't rip off all my clothes and just sex me right there!"

Xavier turned to me with his arms at his sides, "So what are you saying Mercedes, that I was going to rape you? Is that how I made you feel?"

"You know what Xavier, for all that education and intelligence you have, you really are dense." *Trust me; I said it straight to his face.* "Did I get pissed when you told me you slept with her again? Yes but then I calmed down, I reminded myself to be understanding. What do you do in return? You throw up Visean's name to try to hurt me! You know what I have had enough. You know what you should have done to make your ass happy?" He just looked at me. "You should have pulled out, ripped off the condom, assuming that you actually used one when you slept with the her, and rammed it back inside of her until the bitch got pregnant again so that you would have the chance to finish living your life the way you originally wanted to."

He stood there in total shock. I couldn't believe what I had just said to him, but some part of me told me it was right to say. I warned you, my words can strike deeper than my actions. It's my self-defense. Time to take care of my feelings, not dance around to keep everybody else's in mind. "Mercedes, how could you say that to me?"

With a more quiet and calmed voice of disappointment, I responded back, "How could I not?"

We stood there in silence for several minutes. I picked my backpack up off the floor by the couch and walked out the door. Xavier immediately followed me out into the hallway begging me to wait; I just held up

my hand and continued my way to the elevator. I have had enough.

Some reunion huh? Not quite the story you were expecting to hear. Well me either. See when I went over there my plan was to jet on Xavier. Seriously because I have faith in what Visean and I are trying to build and to hurt Xavier is just wrong. I was just done with all the running around. I wanted to stop.

I don't know how I ended up on the couch with Xavier; maybe it was just that I wanted to be wanted by him again after thinking that Kalani had destroyed us. Well as usual, hormones take over and we went from my heart melting to me cussing him out.

About a week and a half had past and we had both calmed down enough to speak to each other again. He came over and admitted that he was wrong about throwing Visean in my face constantly and finally got around to asking me more questions about the relationship I had with Visean. Well in his mind "had," in my mind and yours to, "have."

"Xavier, I just don't know what to say about us."

"I know, neither do I."

He reached over, grabbed my hand, and just held it. "We have such a great friendship and then a great romance that fell apart so quickly."

Right, had you known what was really going on, you would have known the romance was over way before her reappearance. I should tell him everything. I should take some of the guilt off him. But just like a wanna be man I couldn't bring myself to do it. I had failed where my mother had warned me to succeed. "Look X, I have valued our friendship for a very long time, I hate to lose it now."

"That is why I am here."

"I know, but X, I don't think it is going to go any further than a friendship this time."

"Mercedes don't say that. It will take some time for us to heal, but we can work through this."

"No we can't. My heart Xavier, I admit it belongs to someone else. You have always known that."

"He isn't around Mercedes, let me help you let him go."

Tell him Mercedes. Just tell him.

Sorry, easier not to.

"No one can do that be me Xavier." I pulled my hand away from his, got up from the couch, and walked towards the door.

"Are you asking me to leave Mercedes?"

I turned towards him, my arms folded, and my head hung low, just say it to him Mercedes. "Xavier, I can't give you what you want right now."

"Fine."

He got up and walked towards me, I could see his arms start to motion towards me but then pull back in. He walked past me to the door and I followed behind him. "Mercedes, there is just one last thing." With that turned and grabbed me in his arms hugging me. "I'm not going anywhere, trust me on that will you."

"X, I know, but I can't, okay."

He pulled back, held my face in his hand, and looked deep into my eyes. "Mercedes, I love you. I am sorry for all the pain I caused you, caused us."

Maybe this is why Kalani and Miranda wanted him so bad; he was a man that knew how to be honest. That is a rare find, but I already have someone like that. "Xavier, I..."

He started kissing me. His body overpowered mine and swept me up in his arms. I tried to pull away but it was useless. He carried me into my bedroom and laid me down. I won't say that I was pleading for him to stop because then it would make it seem that he was taking me against my will. It is so complex to say how this goes down, I didn't want to have sex with him because I wanted this twisted story to stop. At the same time my body was up for it, my heart said he is someone you care about, and my mind was overruled.

I told myself that when he goes for the condom, jet. This didn't work because he put it on while still on top of me.

I am not going to lie to you and say that I was all into it, because I wasn't. I am not going to lie to you and say that I just laid there like some prostitute on her ninth client of the night, because I couldn't. I was just somewhere in between. I love Xavier, I won't deny that, but for some reason, I won't admit that to him either.

He whispered in my ear, "I love you Mercedes" so many times I was starting to tune him out. At some point, my body took over and I went all out with him. When it was finally over he just held me in his arms and fell asleep. I just stared into the darkness. I'll just look at this as my last time with him, my goodbye sex. God why did I do this? No tears, not now.

His arms finally loosened and I went to take a shower. My mind is so damn silent, I can't tell you anything because I am dead. Flat lined. I just stood in the shower with the water running over my body not moving.

C'mon Mercedes, snap out of this.

I just couldn't. I just did something that could have been avoided had I just told him the truth. So why didn't I? I got out, dried off, put my underwear, bra, and a shirt on, and started to reach for the bathroom door, I stopped when I when I heard Xavier's voice talking to someone on the phone. Who could he be talking to? He didn't call her from here did he?

Mercedes, X isn't that stupid.

Wanna make a bet? I cracked the door open so that I could listen in.

"...What do you mean you were just here?"

Kalani came over here. That B-I has some nerve. What is she stalking him now? Hold up, she called here and he just answered my phone? What the....

"Look I don't know why you are saying all this to me. I don't believe you."

Told you Kalani, back off otherwise you will chase him off. You should have listened. Well at least it was her stupid ass and not Visean on the phone. My heart stopped. Man that would be messed up.

"Mercedes wouldn't do this to me. She would tell me the truth about everything."

Now that ho is trying to make him believe that I am a liar. Un uh! That is right X, tell her.

"No I never asked her about it. I haven't even noticed it and even if I did too much has been going on to take the time to ask."

Asked me about what?

"So the choker she has been wearing is from you huh?"

Visean! Oh God no! My heart sank, my stomach twisted, my mind froze. I'm screwed.

"Well just know this hommie, the dick that was just up in her was from me, but it won't be anymore. I suggest you keep yours away from her too." With that, I heard the phone slam down. "Mercedes!"

I backed away from the door. Oh my God, what do I do?

I didn't even hear the door open or realize his body was walking right towards me. My mind was frozen; instinctively I started backing up as he got close to me. He had his clothes in hand and this look in his eyes, oh my God.

"So you haven't seen Visean? You don't talk to Visean that often. You are trying to let him go. All that bull you just told me not even two hours ago and he was just here! He just left from here not even what...maybe less than three weeks ago! You want to talk about me lying Mercedes, at least I can tell you the near truth, you can't even find it. I thought Kalani was messed up, but you are worse than her!

How the hell did you handle both of us being in the same city at the same time? Damn, what are you a male or something? I didn't think women would go this far to hurt someone like this! Why the hell would you want to hurt me? You told me how you didn't want to lose this friendship, so what the hell is this?"

I just looked at him, speechless.

"Can't talk Mercedes? Can't find the words to explain yourself to me?"

Still nothing.

"Good. Cause if I never hear your voice again, that will be good enough for me. Let me guess. I am betting that you probably slept with that other brother too. What is his name? You know the one because you slept with his cousin. Is this what you do to all your men Mercedes, find ways to hurt them for all the messed up stuff the little boys in your life have done to you!"

I shook my head no.

"I am a good man Mercedes. I would have given you everything and let you be. I know how difficult you are because of your past. I know how messed up you see life, but I also know how much you enjoy it."

A tear streamed from my eye.

"Oh don't show me tears Mercedes, I have had years of tears from you as I stood by your side when they hurt you. Don't cry now, you hurt yourself."

I wiped it from my cheek; still no words came to me.

Xavier finished dressing and moved to the middle of the living room. "I remember the first night that we slept together. I was sitting here drunk and thinking, sober up Xavier, the woman of your dreams is right there in front of you. Go for it. Let her know. So I did. I made love to you that night; I invited you in to my feelings for you. My true feelings. Not treating you like one of my boys anymore. I trusted that you, after all these years, wouldn't be the one to stomp on me. And now...."

He was looking around; he saw something and went for it. He picked it up and threw it against my far wall. It hit hard and fell, when I looked down there was the choker that Visean gave me, the diamond missing. I looked up and found him in my living room. My mind snapped and the words flew. "Screw you Xavier. Mr. I am so got dayum perfect Xavier Lawrence. Mr. XL. Not once did you ever stop, at any point to ask me any of my real feelings on any part of this whole thing! I just told you, as you put it not even two hours ago, that I couldn't give more than a friendship and what do you do? You brought me to the bedroom! The only thing you ever did when you saw me was bring me to the bed."

"You never gave me the time to do anything else."

"Please. You just admitted to doing what you do not even that long ago. What, having a convenient memory lapse? When we were friends we would talk, chill, and hangout. Then after one night, all you wanted to do is hear me moan. You haven't wanted to hear my voice for a long time, so don't worry, you won't."

"The sooner the better."

"Hold it." I picked up the choker and held it towards him. "If I don't find the diamond for this, you will pay for another one. You will pay to have it repaired if I do. If you refuse I will take you to court and I am sure that arrogant law firm you work for doesn't want your dirty laundry aired throughout the court system."

"Screw you Mercedes."

"Sorry Xavier, I'm not yours to screw anymore."

Xavier walked to the door, stood there for a moment with his head hung, opened it, walked out and slammed it shut.

Forget you X! I'm done! What the hell did you expect from me anyway!

♂ *you couldn't learn* ♀

I didn't bother to call Visean back after Xavier left. If anything I thought give him time, give him space, what words could I possibly say to him anyway. If I called as soon as Xavier left, it would just make matters worse. It's not like I even had an explanation for what I had done.

My stomach was in torment, I already popped my little pink pill, but the damage was already taking place. I threw on a sport outfit and headed for my brat. I got in, hugged the steering wheel, and just cried. How could I have done this to everyone? How could I have done this to myself? I sat up, wiped my tears, turned the key, and hauled azz out. I didn't know where to go but I knew I just had to get out.

I drove past my parent's house but knew better than to stop due to the time of night that it was. I know my parents love me, but they are not responsible for the mess that I got myself into. I thought of calling Darri, but I couldn't face up to him that a playa had gotten herself caught.

Damn you Xavier. I didn't even want to sleep with your ass anyway. I thought of going over there and cussing him out for picking up my phone, in my house. He had no right to do that! But what would be the point? There would be none. No words would be spoken only screaming of words by both of us to cut us both deeper.

I just drove. I finally stopped at a gas station to grab some ginger ale for my stomach and another pack of pink pills. Something has to settle my stomach down. While I was there a car pulled up, the driver got out, and was looking at my Prelude. I immediately set my stuff on the counter and walked out to confront him. "Nice, isn't he?"

Stunned, he looked up at me. "He? Most people call their cars a she."

"Well I am not like most people."

"Nice ride. Got anything in her?"

"Him. Nope. Stock." This is Chicago, they can look at the modifications that you have on the outside but you don't let them know about the inside.

"Good to be protective of him. Don't worry, I was just admiring. Most females don't know anything about their rides."

"Like I said...."

"I know you aren't like other females. Well um, since you aren't, here is my card, call me sometime."

I do not believe this. "Have you been drinking? I look like hell."

"No. Maybe it is because you don't look like other females that you claim that you aren't like anyway. Just call me."

With that, he got back into his ride, a 1995 Honda Civic Coupe with the obvious sounds of an engine swap, and skirted out. I looked at the card and saw that it was for a local shop that works on imports. Now it makes sense why the idiot pulled up just to look at my car. Well I'm not in the mood to be polite anyway. I went back in, paid for my things, and headed for home.

I finally fell asleep around 4 a.m. and called into work the next morning. I told Vicki she could also have the day off if she wanted but she wanted to get some things done. That is Vicki for you; once she is there she won't leave even when you give her the chance to. I so do not deserve her but I won't turn down the blessing either.

* * * * *

I won't bore you with the details of the months that followed. They were filled with "I told you so"

conversations and questions of what I planned on doing next. Since I had no answer to those questions I worked a lot and drove a lot. I haven't called that brother from that night either. Maybe when I am back up to par we can roll out sometime, but as for now, I just wanted to be alone.

Visean hasn't called since that night and as for Xavier not calling, no surprise there. Darri and I have headed out on a few occasions; he understands what I went through and welcomed me to the other side of the wall. Personally, I think he was more amused at what a woman goes through compared to a man after being caught. He is just too polite to admit to that.

I heard through Ori that Miranda ran into X and apologized to him for giving him my flight information that day. Had she not, she wouldn't have set this whole thing off and was very sorry that he got hurt. I rolled my eyes and just let it go. That woman, even after the fall out, is still using me to gain ground with him, whatever. From what Ori has since heard, Miranda and him have been out a few times. Miranda claims that it is "only as friends" but I say otherwise. Congratulations Miranda, I hope you enjoy him and do better with him than I did. He is awesome in bed and God knows you need it.

It's not like I am totally pissed with her; it is just that I want her to admit to what she really wants and for her to go for it for once. Instead of telling me that you want to be all like my attitude on men, things, and life and then do another. I can respect the choices you make and the things you want and need in your life so don't hide that from me. Since she does, I find it better if we don't talk for a while. As for her and Xavier, he is a good man and she is a good woman, maybe it will work out for them. Though the way she runs her mouth, it probably won't last long with him, he likes his privacy.

Kalani decided to end her drama with all of us and moved on. That was another report from Ori; I swear

that woman has her finger on all of us. She heard through a male friend that Kalani was trying to hook herself up with one of his acquaintances, so he really did nothing to step in and warn the brother. Let's face it unless you have shared ups and downs together no one really listens to advice on who to stay away from in a relationship. Sometimes Ori and I wonder what the hell snapped in her brain to change her anyway. No matter, she is out of all of our lives.

Darri found a job as an apprentice mechanic at a shop through some of the guys he met that are into cars while he takes classes at night. He has been working hard in both areas and Sheldon has actually continued his support of him as well. Speaking of Sheldon I did finally see him at lunch one day with his *borg queen* and it was odd how perfect they looked together. Guess there is a match for everyone. I would have said hi, but when one departs themselves from the collective they don't return.

Don't act like you don't watch *Star Trek*, you know what I am speaking of and if not, go out on *Google* and do a search. Geek yourself.

Anyway, getting back to Darri, one night I was hanging out with him after he got off work and I found myself tempted to kiss him. I prayed that he didn't sense it, and from what I could tell he didn't, but after that night I decided to fill my time with other things. I don't need to screw up another brother's life or my own again for that matter. So I keep our time together limited and mostly spend time talking to him on the phone or IM conversations. He is talking about building a track car now and I know he'll succeed. Hell he succeeded in opening Sheldon's mind to new things, there isn't anything this brother can't do.

The good thing is that he is always talking about some girl that comes into the shop. According to Darri she comes in on her breaks from a neighboring business to get pop from the machine. I keep telling him that

she is there to see him but he doesn't believe me. Hello the girl makes it a point while there to stop by his bay to see what he is working on. Duh. He says I'm wrong; something about her being Spanish and no Spanish girl has ever wanted to talk to him before. He has always wanted to talk to them but not one of them ever talks back to him. Right. WhatEVER Darri. I know he is just chicken. He'll get with her one day.

Well here I am. This is what happens after I have played my games. I was caught. Game over. I wasn't even trying to play the damn game. One thing happened right after another, like an out of control train flying down the track. Every time I tried to pull the brake to get a hold of the track it was like I didn't pull the brake hard enough. The train would slowdown and then speed right back up. I know I am a speed freak, but it was all just ridiculous.

Male playa's would probably have been over this whole thing weeks ago, got the girl back, or be acting like they have a whole other crew to deal with. Not me. Nope, haven't learned to shut off that damn female gene that keeps my heart feeling like it is still broken into a million and one pieces. This sucks.

I am at home, it is Friday night, and I have plans to be nowhere. Some life, right. I started to get up to pop another movie in when my cell phone rang. I am home and someone is calling me on my cell. Probably Darri's stupid azz, he is always trying to drag me out on a Friday night to go somewhere.

"Hello."

"Hey girl."

It was Ori. "Hey girl. What's up?" My voice sounded as drained as it has for the past several weeks.

"Mercedes, it is the nearing the end of summer and your ass is sitting at home on the couch on a Friday night."

"Yep."

"Girl. Get up, put on one of those slinky sexy short skirt outfits, show them legs, throw on that beautiful choker and come out with me." I had found the diamond and Xavier had his jeweler repair it for me. We still weren't talking; this was done through a combination of emails between him and me, his secretary and his jeweler.

"Ori. I am not in mood, okay."

"Of course you aren't. That is why I will see you in twenty minutes. So put that hair into some kind of form and be ready when I get there." I had taken the braids out and decided not to put them back in for a while.

"Ori." *Click*. Great. Well I am not going anywhere and she can just waste her time, money, and gas trying to come to get me. I put in the movie and flopped back down onto the couch. Fifteen minutes into the movie I heard a knock on my door.

Damn I do not need this tonight or any night for that matter. I pushed myself off the couch and yelled at the door. "Damn girl did you fly a jet over here? I told you I didn't want to go out." I opened the door to see Visean standing there. Oh my God. My mouth just dropped.

"Mercedes."

"Visean. I..." I could see him staring at his choker around my neck and I felt like a fool. I dropped my head staring at the floor, dizzy from the moment. Frozen and speechless I lifted my head as I began to hear him speak.

"Now that you have been there and done that, are you ready for the real thing?"

Hello.

Wait, don't yell. Remember when I welcomed you to the first of three parts of our lives, well now you know what I meant. This was part one.

See you've seen enough of my life and heard probably way too many of my thoughts, now it's Viseans' turn.

Think of a camera that has been watching me all this time and now that camera flips and the focus is on Visean. Scary !

know, but you have to admit, it's going to get interesting.

From what I've been told, it's pretty wild and that I would pretty much freak out if I knew the half of it.

Xavia is still listening to us and writing away, so make sure you come back and check out the website and sign up for the alerts because this is far from over. In fact the first 7 chapters have been written and will be available as a preview very soon.

So don't forget about us. I
know I can't forget any of this.

XOXOXO,

Mercedes

Things Men Do...

Women Do The Same

A Novel by Xavia

If good guy's finish last then so do good women. Look, I've been lied to, cheated on, played and God knows what else. I've had my heart broken so many times it's a wonder that it can be put back together.

Not that I am the type who falls head over heels quickly; it's just that when I do fall, I fall hard and I fall deep. That is when it starts, but not this time. I got you now.

I know how you want this to work, I understand. I know the game, I got the skills, and I know how to trip your world up.

So move over, you got a new playa on the team, and this time, my heart won't be the one that breaks.

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