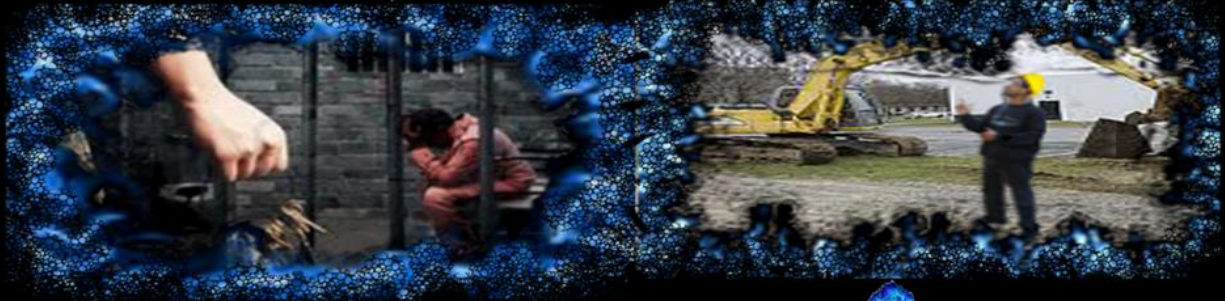


DIVINE G ENTERTAINMENT PRESENTS

No ther Love



A Novel By Divine G

NO OTHER LOVE

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Novels:

Baby Doll (Published by Q-Boro Books)

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NO OTHER LOVE ®

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Dedication

This novel is dedicated to the numerous family members, friends and associates who were very instrumental in helping me to get this novel written, edited and published. The list of supporters is so huge and extensive, I am very apprehensive about attempting to mention names, because from past experience, if anyone is inadvertently left out and feels he or she should have been mentioned, it creates a lot of bad feelings. So, this time, I am taking the safe road by sending out a universal dedication to all those who played a part in the success of this novel, without itemizing each individual name. If you were there, by my side, had my back, and was supportive, then you are the person I am referring to when I send out this dedication. This novel is dedicated to you for being there when times got extremely rough, rocky and raw. Once again, thanks for all the support, love and understanding.

CHAPTER # 1

Dinasia Whitman sat at her desk, reading and taking notes from a chapter in her biology textbook, which dealt with amoebas and their evolutionary process.

She suddenly heard the sound of keys jingling. Her head nervously rose from the pages. Dinasia sat her pencil down and focused her attention on the noise that came from down the hall, right outside her bedroom she shared with her foster sister, Valerie. Her pretty little baby doll face, and those enchanting brown eyes, no longer had their youthful, playful like aura.

Seconds later, someone entered the fourth floor Project apartment.

Dinasia glanced at the alarm clock on the nightstand beside the bunk bed. Her heart rate increased when she saw it was a quarter to eleven. "Oh no," the unconscious mumble escaped from her lips. She quickly turned to see if the bedroom door was locked. When she saw none of the locks were activated, she frantically shot out of her chair and raced to the door.

Her five foot two inches, one hundred and five pound slender frame moved gracefully across the room. She was dressed in a purple sweat suit, and dangling from her neck was a leather necklace, which had a matching medallion with "Super Ninja" written in yellow letters.

After slamming the sliding bolt lock into place and turning the knob lock button, she sighed and went back to the desk.

Dinasia picked up where she left off.

Thump! Thump!

The sudden, excessively hard knock on the door caused Dinasia to spring into a standing position, dropping her book to the floor.

"Open up this damn door, girl!" Kirk Shepard slurred, his beer belly wobbling as he tilted the bottle of Wild Irish Rose red wine up to his lips and took a huge gulp. The cheap wine bubbled in his stomach. Ever since he left the corner with his drinking partners, after the liquor store closed, the alcohol had been telling him he had to treat himself to a piece of this pretty young thing tonight.

"Go away!" Dinasia shouted, trying to make her squeaky, childish sounding voice appear threatening, but failed miserably at the attempt. "I'm warning you--"

"Come on now! Barbara and Valerie's upstairs . . . All I wanna do is show you how to be a real woman." He giggled, violently rattled the doorknob and banged harder on the door.

Dinasia hastily went to the top bunk and snatched the huge carving knife from under her pillow. The way she stood in the ready position, waving the weapon, she looked like a Zulu Warrior Princess. No one would've believed she was seventeen years old. Growing up parentless in the New York State Foster Care System had its way of enhancing such inborn survival attributes, and Dinasia was no exception to the rule. But her heart still raced nervously in her chest, despite her constant exposure to these rape attempts.

This time it would be worse because she could hear it in his voice. He was pissie drunk, and when he got that way, he became insanely bold. "Kirk, leave me the hell alone! I'm tryin' to study. I got a test tomorrow and I--"

"What'd you say, I just lick on it a little. I promise you, you'll like it." The thought of how sweet her young juices would taste made him drool. He wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his dirty navy blue jacket.

As Dinasia dragged her bookshelf in front of the door, she shouted. "I got my knife and I swear to God I'll cut your ass again if you come in here! Now, leave me the fuck alone!"

This made Kirk stop and think. He instantly caught a flashback of the time when Dinasia cut his hand. He looked at the six-inch scar in the palm of his hand and the alcohol took control of his mind. "You bitch!" He mumbled under his breath as the rage, mixed with drunken delirium, mounted. He began kicking the door with the sole of his worn-out black work boots, wobbling about intemperately.

When the thunderous banging started, Dinasia felt the knot of anxiety in her stomach transformed into a hysterical fear. Each time her Foster Uncle Kirk kicked the door the walls trembled violently, causing her to wince while making a flinching involuntary sound similar to someone being poked with a lit cigarette.

This fear wasn't entirely linked to this rape attempt, since she'd learned how to handle the knife quite well. The root of her anxiety was the possible involvement of the police. If a neighbor called the cops, and the law got involved, she would be sent back to the institution, away from Tislam, and that scared her more than anything. This catch 22 predicament was the reason why she never reported the numerous other rape attempts to the police.

Dinasia took long deep breaths when she saw the doorframe started to give under the grueling force of the pounding. With the knife trembling in her right hand, Dinasia braced herself for the inevitable.

Suddenly, the door crashed open, flinging the bookshelf out of the way as if it was made of papier-mâché. Books were scattered all over the room.

She saw Kirk standing in the doorway with the bottle of wine in his hand, huffing and puffing with exhaustion, looking like a deranged bull that just ran a two mile sprint. The pungent aroma of the cheap embalming fluid like wine was the next thing to attack her senses. The odor was so penetrating it smelled like he had bathed in the stuff. Kirk stammered rapidly towards her.

While jabbing the knife at the air, she shouted. "Don't come near me, you--"

Kirk faked like he was going to toss some of the wine in Dinasia's face. When she ducked to the right, he timed his next toss of the bottle so perfectly a river of red wine splashed her dead in the face.

Dinasia screamed as the burning, stinging sensation in her eyes registered. She also screamed because she knew without being able to see it was impossible to defend herself. Swinging the knife wildly, with both eyes shut tight, she felt a blow to the head that buckled her knees. Stumbling backwards, she tried to open her eyes. The scorching sensation made her change her mind.

She shrieked when she felt her wrist being viciously twisted. A couple of her knuckles cracked as the knife fell from her grip. The fear of what was about to come next created a blinding urgency inside of her. The terror-stricken feeling was identical to the emotion that a cornered wild animal experience upon realizing it was trapped and death was only seconds away. She kicked, punched, scratched and even tried to bite at anything that touched her.

Suddenly, the wind was knocked clean out of her by a blow to the stomach, which took her straight to the floor. After two additional kicks to her side, and a solid punch to the side of her head, she couldn't breath. Her head started spinning and she felt like she was hurled into a dream. Through a partially conscious mind, Dinasia felt

Kirk turn her onto her back, forced her legs open and got on top of her. The weight of his body made her feel like she was being smothered to death and she struggled to get air into her lungs. He grab both her wrists with one of his huge hands and pin them to the floor over her head, restricting her ability to gorge his eyes out of his head. His free hand began fondling her.

Oh, God no! Please don't let this happen to me! Dinasia heard her inner voice cry out as she struggled desperately to get a bearing on her punch-drunk mind. She had to think of a fast way to get out of this, and judging from all circumstances, an escape didn't look very likely. Kirk was twice her size, she was weaponless, her foster mother and sister were upstairs smoking crack, she was hanging onto consciousness by a string, and her head was still spinning with pain and dread.

The tears of frustration flowed because if her foster brother, Prince, hadn't gone away to college this drunken, alcoholic, dope fiend, slime bucket would've never tried this to her. When she felt Kirk trying to pull her sweat-pants down, Dinasia spoke softly. "Okay, okay, I'll do it. Let me take 'em off."

"That's the oldest trick in the book. If I let your hands go, you'll start actin' up." He tugged harder at her sweat-pants, causing them to slide down to her knees. His hand went for the panties.

She started squirming. "No, no!" she screamed. "I promise I won't act up." She continued thrashing, squirming and kicking frantically. "Let me do it!"

Kirk giggled because her sudden violent movement really excited him. When he felt her pubic hairs, his shaft started throbbing. His breathing escalated and his blood began to boil. Instead of pulling her panties down, he ripped them off in two swift jerks. He guided his hand down to her vagina and began his perverted massage.

Dinasia felt nauseous when he began touching her down there. After she saw him sniff his fingers and then started licking them greedily, the nausea turned into the urge to spit in his face.

When he began hastily unfastening his pants, Dinasia knew if she didn't do something within the next couple of seconds, she might be counting her last days on this planet. Kirk shot drugs and didn't believe in condoms during his many episodes of promiscuous sex, which she knew made him a prime candidate for exposure to HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

Dinasia started breathing hard, pretending to be sexually excited. "Kiss me first, Kirk, please." She said sensuously. "It'll make me wet. You like it wet, don't you?"

"Ahh, yeah baby, you like this shit don't you? I knew you was a little freak on the down low." He puckered up his lips as he guided his mouth towards hers.

Dinasia felt a surge of energy come from an unknown reserve inside her soul. The thought of dying from a disease such as AIDS created a fear that produced a willpower that was beyond this world. With every bit of strength she could muster, Dinasia head-butted him on the bridge of his nose while simultaneously turning her body.

Kirk hollered explosively.

Dinasia wrenched her hands free without difficulty because both of Kirk's hands involuntarily went up to his bloody nose. She shoved him aside, sprung to her feet, pulled up her sweat-pants, and kicked Kirk in his head.

As Kirk made an effort to get up, Dinasia looked around desperately for something to use to stop this drunken maniac. After only two seconds into her

terrified search, she saw an excellent object. She raced over to the dresser, picked up the twelve-inch television and smashed it on his head. Upon impact, there was a small explosion as electrical sparks, glass and plastic flew everywhere.

Dinasia ran towards the door, but when she jumped over Kirk, her foot made contact with his shoulder, which caused her to trip and fall face first. She blunted the impact of the fall with both of her hands. "EHHH!!" She moaned loudly from the sharp pain that shot up her left arm. The source of the injury was the wrist and there was no doubt in her mind it was sprain.

As she scrambled back to her feet, clutching her wrist, Dinasia noticed Kirk was now on his hands and knees crawling towards the desk with his back to her. She saw the perfect way to put out his fire. She charged at him and kicked him square in the behind, making extra certain her foot impacted with Kirk's testicles.

The loud cry Kirk released instantly told her she would die if he somehow managed to get his hands on her. The ear-twisting holler also told her this apartment could no longer be a home for her under any circumstance, unless she wanted to die a miserable and expedient death, of course.

As Kirk laid in a fetal position, moaning and groaning while clutching his crotch, Dinasia almost tripped over the bookshelf as she ran out the room. As she was retrieving her coat from the hallway closet next to the kitchen, she heard something behind her.

She turned and saw Kirk crawling out of the room, muttering curse words a mile a minute. "Don't run now," he said as he tried to stand; then he shouted. "I'm gonna kill you, bitch!" But the pain brought him back to his knees.

Dinasia put on her brown ski-coat and raced out of the apartment. She went straight to the staircase and ran downstairs two steps at a time. She was hoping and praying her best friend Keisha Anderson could help her. When she reached the ground floor and opened the outer door of the Project building, the February night cold made her realize she should've snatched up some extra clothing.

"Come here, you bitch!! Don't you run from me!!" Uncle Kirk yelled down the stairs, just as Dinasia stepped out of the building. A brittle cold gush of wind touched her way down to the bone and brought tears to her eyes as she headed down the street.

* * * *

Shateek Davis was behind the wheel of the brand spankin' new cranberry colored 1994 Accra RL, cruising down Blake Avenue. He was bobbing his head to the bangin' beat of Biggie Smalls' "One More Chance." Dressed in an expensive tan wool sweater, brown jeans and a raccoon fur coat lying on the side, his high yellow complexion and sleek curly hair made him look like a cross between Gregory Abbott and Malcolm X.

But unlike the usual pretty boy type, Shateek had a vicious knuckle game and a no nonsense attitude and temper to match. On top of that, one of his brothers was the biggest drug dealer on this side of Brooklyn, the oldest was a police sergeant with New York's Finest while his mom and dad were the owners of a multi-chain franchise and Shateek was the baby of the family who was spoiled rotten on a proceduralized basis.

The heat in the car was turned up so high his rollin' partner Trigger had a two inch crack on the passenger window. Trigger was almost the complete opposite of

Shateek. His rough neck, scary and hard facial features along with his bulky, tank like body was extremely intimidating, but in actuality, he was easy going, and was always inaccurately prejudged as a troublemaker.

In the back seat, Watch Dog was sipping on a tall can of Ballantine Ale, and he was short, dark and partially handsome. He rightfully earned the title as the "quiet storm" since talking wasn't something he did very well in light of the speech impairment that made him sound as stupid as a drunk, retarded republican on acid laced crack. So, wisely, he let his action do the talking in most situations.

The three of them had just come from the pool hall over on Logan Street and were calling it a wrap for the night. Shateek glanced at his 14-carat gold plated watch and saw it was ten after eleven o'clock. As he turned onto Linden Boulevard, heading for the Pink House Projects to drop off Trigger and Watch Dog, he stopped moving to the beat and started beating himself up mentally because he knew he should've been home at least an hour ago. He still hadn't done his homework assignment for Ms. Lewis's social studies class, nor did he even take a peek at his biology notes for tomorrow's test. Now he would be up until one o'clock trying to get his shit together.

With his eyes on the road, Shateek saw a girl in a brown ski-coat up ahead, on his right side; her back was to him and she was walking very fast. He could even see her hourglass shape through the coat she wore. In light of the fact it was 20 degrees with a wind chill factor of 2 below zero, and extremely too late for a sister with such a juicy booty to be out on these dangerous streets, the young lady definitely got Shateek's attention. He noticed Trigger saw her as well. As he drove pass, Shateek tried to get a look at the girl's face without any luck.

"Yo, hold up!" Trigger said as he turned the volume knob on the CD player all the way down. "That looks like that girl that got you strung out, Sha. I think her name is Shanasia, Rahasia, or some shit like that."

That's Dinasia, Shateek realized and immediately applied pressure to the breaks while double parking next to an old black Volvo. He quickly put the gear in park, hit the electric window button and pulled the passenger window all the way down. The agonizing cold shot inside the car and attacked their faces.

"Dinasia!" Shateek shouted across Trigger just as she walked pass the car. When she kept walking without answering, Shateek realized she never saw this car before because it was his brother's newest ride. He hastily opened his door and got out. "Yo, Dinasia it's me, Shateek."

Dinasia stopped and turned. "Hey, Shateek, how you doing?" A surge of relief cascaded over her mind and body since she wasn't in the mood to deal with any more drama.

"Come here," Shateek said as he walked towards her. He felt his heart turn to silly putty because Dinasia was the only girl he had ever truly wanted, but couldn't get. "What you doin' out here this time of night?"

"I'm on my way to Keisha's house and--"

"What the hell happened to your face!?" Shateek eased close enough to see the traces of blood on her chin. Then he saw the swelling on her cheek and the rage brewed in the pit of his stomach. His demeanor became stern and dangerous like. "Don't tell me Tislam been beatin' on you."

She sucked her teeth. "Now, you know Tislam ain't into that." Shivering uncontrollably, she glanced at Trigger when the music was suddenly turned up inside the car.

"Come on, get in the car. I'll drive you there." he was about to head back to the car, but she didn't move.

"I can walk the rest of the way; it's only about ten more blocks." She saw Watch Dog was the other person in the car with Trigger. Boy did she truly dislike both of these losers. Plus, she knew Shateek wanted to get with her and she didn't want to start leading him on or causing him to get brain locked into any wrong ideas. Her heart was Tislam's and Tislam's only. She was about to walk away, but Shateek gently grabbed her arm and held her in place.

"It's freezing out here, Dinasia. Plus, you know how crazy these streets are at this time of night. And look at you. You're trembling." He wanted to embrace her, comfort her, and most of all, find out who did this to her pretty little face so he could break the motherfucker's legs, arms and all other limbs.

Shateek let go of her arm. "Come on now, as much as me and you be kickin' it in biology class and during lunch period, I thought we was mad cool? Ain't we peeps?" He noticed she was cutting her eyes at Trigger and Watch Dog, as the two rocked their heads to the pounding bass. "Don't worry about them; I'm just giving them a ride home. And if you want," he paused with a comical facial expression. "I'll kick 'em out right here. That's my word, just say the word."

Dinasia giggled. She loved Shateek's crazy sense of humor and got a thrill out of how some of the toughest hard nose guys were afraid of him. She never saw or heard of fine looking guys being able to intimidate the rough looking ones until she

met Shateek. She wanted to insist on walking the rest of the way, but deep down she knew she needed a ride; ten blocks was too long of a distance to be walking in this cruel and vicious cold, especially since she wasn't properly dressed. A sudden angry gust of wind lashed at her back and shoved her a couple inches closer to Shateek. "Okay, you can take me there."

"You want me to kick 'em out?" Shateek said seriously, heading for the car as she followed.

"Of course not," she said.

Shateek pulled open the passenger door and initially said nothing to Trigger, who looked up at him stupidly. After a moment he said, "What the fuck you want, an invitation or somethin'? Get'cha Bozo ass in the back."

"It's all right, Shateek," Dinasia chimed in. "I'll get in the back."

"Picture that," Shateek said to her as Trigger eased into the back with Watch Dog. He smiled at Dinasia as she sat in the seat. That funny feeling he got whenever she was in his midst increased significantly. He wasn't normally a sucker for love, but Dinasia was different. The first day he laid eyes on her, he wanted her and been on a mission to win her heart ever since. He closed the door, went around to the driver side, got in and pulled off.

During the short ride, Shateek said very little until after he dropped off Trigger and Watch Dog. They both lived in the same Projects as Dinasia, but on the far side, about four blocks away from her building on Crescent Street.

Shateek already had an idea what the situation was with Dinasia's injuries, and since he lived at an extremely high pitch of emotions—especially for those he harbored a strong liking for—he couldn't resist the urge to meddle into her business.

It shattered his heart to see Dinasia holding her wrist, trying to pretend she wasn't in pain. "Dinasia who did this to you?"

Dinasia never told anyone else besides Keisha about Kirk's rape attempts and suddenly felt awkward when she contemplated telling Shateek what happened. During numerous lunch breaks at school, she and Shateek had talked about all sorts of things, and he even shared a lot of his personal business with her. She now felt like she was acting unfairly by not doing the same. Her anger told her to tell him, but her conscience insisted she not do it.

She knew Shateek would probably do something quite vicious to Kirk. His eyes had that mean, deadly serious look. For the sake of maintaining the brotherly love she had for Prince, and because she wouldn't be able to live with herself if her conduct was the cause of harm to another human being—even involving a scum bag such as Kirk—she held back. "I don't wanna talk about it, Shateek. It's a family thing. I don't put my family business out on the street like that."

Shateek nodded his head, realizing she had just told him everything he needed to know in order to figure out who did this to her. "I can respect that. But . . . like I said before, if you ever need someone to talk to, a shoulder to lean on, or if you need anything handled . . . that includes money, whatever, I'll be there for you, Dinasia."

There was a long moment of silence while Shateek observed Dinasia looking out the window. His yearning to win her heart uncapped an eruption of sudden memories. All those vicious rumors he heard flooded his mind. Months ago, after hearing about Dinasia being attacked by Kirk, Shateek did his own investigation, which led him to more gossip.

Now, as he glanced at her through the corner of his eye, Shateek realized the rumors were indeed true. He was furious and had to focus in order not to reveal this anger to Dinasia. He wondered what's the best way to punish ole dope fiend Kirk for tryin' to violate my future wife?

Then, suddenly, Shateek realized he might be able to kill two birds with one stone. With a wicked smile trying to come to life, he thought hard about the idea and realized it might just work.

For the past eight years, he'd been trying to come up with a way to get Tislam out of the picture. Everything he tried up to this point failed miserably. As long as Tislam was on the scene, Shateek knew Dinasia would never allow her love for him to become true love in the man and woman, husband and wife sense. He was deeply mesmerized by Dinasia's undying devotion and loyalty to Tislam, and his jealousy was about to skirt the edges of sheer hatred. The three fights he had with Tislam—two of which he loss—did nothing but make his emotions even more compelling.

He wanted Dinasia so bad, he even contemplated murder on many occasions, but now with this new idea brewing inside his head, he could feel it was going to finally work. The intricacies of the plan percolated powerfully in his mind and the step-by-step details slowly began to fall in place.

Shateek smiled as he stopped the car about two houses from Keisha's. The private houses that lined the block were noticeably well kept and had middle class written all over them.

"Thank you, Shateek. I really appreciate the ride." She opened the door and got out. When she saw Shateek get out as well, she said, "I'm okay now, I can handle it from here."

"Once you're safely inside, then I'll break out."

She saw Shateek wasn't taking no for an answer and so she shrugged her shoulders, and headed for the house. She opened the gate and tiptoed towards the back. All the lights were out since Keisha's mother was strict about going to bed early. She went to the basement window where Keisha slept and tapped on the window very lightly.

After waiting a minute, she tapped again. She was on the verge of panicking. What was she gonna do if She couldn't get inside? She tapped a little harder. When the first floor lights were suddenly turned on, Dinasia quickly tiptoed around the corner since she knew it was Keisha's moms. After waiting a couple of minutes, she peek around the corner and noticed the first floor light was turned off.

As she headed back to the basement window, Dinasia heard the door open. Paralysis instantly gripped her whole body since she just knew Keisha's moms caught her. She turned and saw Keisha.

"Come on, girl." Keisha whispered while waving for Dinasia to come to her. The oversized green night coat made her pudgy and pleasingly plump body look thin and petite. "Hurry up, it's cold out here."

Dinasia quickly entered.

After Keisha patched up her wounds, and the two got comfortable, Dinasia finished explaining how Kirk attempted to rape her once again.

"Dinasia," Keisha's sympathetic, sleepy eyes were truly pained. "You gotta do something to stop that creep . . . If you don't, he'll keep doing this to you. Hell, he might even kill you in the process . . . If I were you, I'd tell Tislam and let him whip the living shit out of him."

Dinasia enthusiastically shook her head no. "You know Tislam got a crazy temper. He wouldn't just hurt Kirk; he'll probably kill him for doing something like this to me. I would never create a situation that would cause Tislam to hurt himself or anyone else for that matter. Not only that." She sighed because what she was about to say made her feel silly after all the pain and suffering she'd been through. "I wouldn't wanna see Kirk dead. It's the drugs that's making him act crazy. Before he started getting high, he never acted like this. If anything, the man needs help."

Keisha burst out laughing, which brought a confused expression to Dinasia's face. Through snuffles, Keisha spoke. "You said you don't wanna see him dead? That's kinda hard to tell with you busting him in the head with a damn television."

They both laughed.

Keisha brought her laughter under control. "You're a better woman than I am because if that motherfucker tried that with me, I'd have that nigga's ass either in jail or six feet under . . . And your crack-head moms deserve even worse. You told her what Kirk is doing, and she threatened to send you back to the institution is just plain evil. She ain't nothin' but a wicked bitch. Whether she's on drugs or not, that shit is foul."

Short pause.

Dinasia felt drained and chronically depressed just being reminded of the fact she had no real family. One would think, after spending a lifetime without a family, she would be used to it by now. But, the truth was, she needed that sense of family in order to feel like a part of the human race. "You're right. But that don't stop the world from turning. Right now, I'm focusing on finishing these last four months, graduate and put that scholarship I won to full use."

"And it's a damn shame your crack-head sister is acting like she don't know this shit is going on either, especially after she walked in on one of the incidents . . . This shit got me tight as hell because they know Kirk is a fuckin' pervert and they could stop it if they wanted to."

"That's exactly why I can't go back to that house. The way Kirk screamed when I kicked him in the nuts, I think he'll kill me if I ever go back there. I need to stay here for a while. Can you help me?"

Keisha smiled. "Girl, we ain't best friends for nothing. Of course you can stay, but how are we gonna hide you from my moms? Sooner or later she's bound to catch on."

Dinasia had already structured a plan during her trip here and quickly explained the scheme to Keisha.

"Girl, I see why you wanna major in psychology. With that shrewd ass attitude of yours, you picked the right future occupation because you got one helluva sneaky mind."

They both giggled.

"I think it'll work." Keisha caressed her shoulder. "Let's go for it, girl."

CHAPTER # 2

Tislam Parker was pulled out of the daydream when the A Train conductor announced Euclid Avenue was the next stop. He had been imagining how lovely it was going to be on the cruise he and Dinasia planned to take after they both graduated high school in a couple of months. He stood sluggishly and forced his medium size physique towards the sliding doors. It was a little after four o'clock and the train was almost filled to capacity.

He eased pass the straphangers and could smell the strong odor of garlic, which seemed to come from the breath of just about everyone on the train. When he reached the doors, Tislam saw his reflection in the glass window plate. The image told him he needed a break.

Going to school and working part-time afterwards at a trunk loading dock in Queens had begun to take its toil. The bags under his eyes made his naturally pleasing and dignified facial features look aged and visibly worn-down. But his light brown skin complexion contrasted with his meticulously groomed high top fade continued to give him the look of elegance and self-assuredness. At only seventeen and five-sixths years of age, he looked a little older and conducted himself as if he was three times that number.

When the sliding doors opened, he briskly stepped off the train and put his hands in the pockets of his black bubble Northface, heading towards the token booth. He caressed the 16 shot 9mm Ruger, and the weight of the gun made him feel safe and secured.

After exiting the Euclid Avenue station while heading down the Street, Tislam began to imagine Dinasia's face when she surprisingly saw him. He took a day off

work just to see her and since they hadn't seen each other for a week and a half, his emotions were revved. He actually wanted to meet Dinasia at her High School (Maxwell High) over on Pennsylvania Avenue, but in order to accomplish that he would have had to cut his last class, which was general science. The SAT's were only weeks away, and if the teachers were telling the truth, everything taught these last couple of months would, in some way, appear on the tests.

"If you miss a class," he remembered Ms. Barrington say, "you will miss out on something of extreme importance on the SATs."

Unlike most high school students, Tislam didn't hate school. Certain aspects of school he did, of course, despise; like getting up in the morning, having to put up with open and flagrant racist teachers, the one-sided and often false and racist information the American educational system force fed its students, the violence and rampant drug use, and so on. But nevertheless, the whole process of constant learning and expansion of the mind had an addictive effect on him, and it showed in his grades and perfect attendance.

Learning was the love of his life, second only to his love for Dinasia. His foster family (the Burtons) proudly looked upon him as a dream child, primarily because he was a young Black male living in America, who had some discipline and enough intelligence not to fall for the many traps constantly being set by the system.

As Tislam turned the corner of Logan Street, the phone call he got at work yesterday from Dinasia telling him not to come visit her this Saturday, suddenly entered his mind. The same tension he felt upon hearing this heart-breaking news resurfaced. She had never canceled one of their Saturday get-togethers before, and the reason she gave for doing this had a strong ring of insincerity to it. She said that she

and Keisha were invited to a party at Keisha's cousin's house, and Mrs. Anderson, Keisha's moms, would be there with them, which was the reason why he couldn't attend the party.

He could tell there was something bothering Dinasia. Since he grew up with her in the institution and knew her so well, he could almost tap straight into her emotions, reading and interpreting them with profound clarity. Dinasia sounded upset, shaky and unsure.

He also sensed she was hiding something from him due to the unsteadiness in her voice, which completely compelled his decision to take a day off work and pay her a surprise visit.

Ten minutes later, Tislam saw the Pink House Projects come into view. He increased his pace. As he neared Dinasia's building, he noticed an approaching red colored car suddenly slowed down to a crawl.

When the car was right upon him, he saw Shateek looking at him piercingly from behind the wheel. He felt a growing anxiety in the pit of his stomach, and as usual, an eruption of memories was uncapped. The three fist fights he had with this "trouble making, piss colored punk", re-enacted themselves in his mind. Also Shateek was the reason he was forced to carry a gun.

After being robbed at gunpoint on three occasions, while on his way home from visiting Dinasia—during the last robbery he was pistol whipped, and force to flee barefooted and partially naked—he vowed to never get caught out there in that fashion again. Although he knew for certain he didn't have it in him to shoot anyone, but he also was aware of the universal fear that guns bestowed upon people.

"All you gotta do is show those stick-up kids you're packin' a burner and that'll stop them cold in their tracks," Tislam remembered a guy named Squirrel said to him when he purchased the gun while they were in their home room class at Jackson High in Queens. Tislam agreed totally with Squirrel's common-sense analogy.

But on the other hand, Tislam was definitely not the docile, punk type that would run from or duck a fight. A lifetime spent in the New York State Foster care system, where he was forced to fight or settle for daily abuse, obviously had its way of hardening him mentally and physically.

Also, his self taught skills in the martial arts, Tai Chi in particular, put him in a frame of mind that made him obsessed with winning his fights, since he very rarely loss any. In fact, as Tislam grew older, he thought of the experience at the institution as a blessing in disguise.

"God bless the child who can hold its own!" was Tislam's golden rule. He couldn't think of any better quote that fit his situation, and so he utilized this saying in his approach towards just about everything he did in life.

Tislam watched the car cruise out of sight and he continued on his way. He entered Dinasia's building, got on the elevator and was surprised when his nose wasn't assaulted by the smell of urine.

He got off on the fourth floor and went to apartment 4D. Knocking lightly on the door, he felt his usual anger come to life. He wanted to take Dinasia away from all of this confusion, but there were so many stumbling blocks. Tislam knocked again, this time slightly harder.

"I'm comin'! Hold your fuckin' horses." he heard Valerie shout from a distance, approaching the door. "Who is it?"

"It's Tislam."

She unbolted the three locks, opened the door and stuck her worn-out, skeleton looking head out the door. "Dinasia ain't here. And what the hell you knockin' on this door like you ain't got no damn sense."

Tislam ignored her remarks. "You know where she's at?"

"Give me five dollars and I'll tell you." Valerie smiled, displaying yellowish brown teeth.

"I already told you, Valerie, I'm not gonna help you kill yourself with them drugs--"

"Fuck you! You just a cheap, stingy ass bastard! That's all it is!"

Tislam sighed hard. "Did she say she was going to Keisha's house or the library?"

"I don't know. She ain't been home in two days. I thought she ran away to live with your ole sorry ass. And if you see her before I do, tell her I said she's gonna pay me for tearin' up the room before she left and make sure you let her know . . ."

Tislam headed for the elevator while Valerie was still complaining about her room being messed up. Hearing that Dinasia hadn't returned home for two days, and her room was left in disarray, filled his whole body with a rush of anxiety.

When he thought the elevator was taking too long, Tislam raced down the stairs. He knew she had to be at Keisha's house, and he suddenly felt the urge to run. His mind started rapidly putting the pieces together and his gut instinct told him there was something wrong.

Tislam barreled out of the building, breathing hard and stopped when he saw Shateek, Trigger and Watch Dog standing near the benches. They were apparently

waiting for him. As they walked towards him, he put both hands in his pockets, gripped the 9mm firmly as he made a violent effort to pull himself together.

"Well, well," Shateek said, stopping about ten feet from Tislam and then folding his arms, with Trigger and Watch Dog on either side of him. "Now what do we have here."

Tislam sighed extremely hard. "I ain't got time for your little bitch games." He started to walk pass them and stopped abruptly when Watch Dog displayed a gun. With his hand still on the weapon, he took a few steps back while slowly and inconspicuously maneuvering the 9mm, pointing it at Watch Dog through the coat.

Shateek saw the bulge and the movement of Tislam's right hand in his coat pocket. He'd been hoping Tislam would eventually strap-up sooner or later, and he smiled because now they could proceed with the next part of the plan. *So far, so good*, he thought smilingly. "Check this out, Tislam." He tried to sound friendly and non-confrontational. "I didn't come here to fuck with you, man. I just thought it's only right you know what's going on with your girl, Dinasia." He paused, searching for a certain facial response. When he saw it he continued. "How could you call yourself a man while standin' around lettin' your girl get raped?"

"And by some dirty dick, dope-fiend motherfucker at that." Trigger added.

Tislam's knees almost gave under the weight of his body. Shateek and Trigger's remarks jolted him in the same fashion as that of a hard slap to the face with spiked gloves. He suddenly had difficulty breathing and couldn't conceal the hurting sensations that dominated his mind, body and soul.

Shateek giggled. "Don't front like you don't know what the fuck's going on, nigga. Her Uncle Kirk been in them drawls for the longest, and I know she told you .

. . . And if she didn't tell you, that thang thang of hers should've. What? Your equipment is so inadequate you can't tell when somebody's been messin' around in your cookie jar?"

Trigger and Watch Dog burst out laughing.

Shateek cut into the laughter. "I know this ain't any of my business, but, ah, it just turns my fuckin' stomach when I lay eyes on a coward, pathetic, weak ass potato chip nigga like you!"

The laughter erupted again.

Tislam was trembling with rage, breathing hard while a sheet of perspiration materialized on his forehead, despite the freezing cold. When he saw the laughter had caused Watch Dog to point the gun downward, Tislam pulled the 9mm. "Raise up!" he shouted. "Put the gun down! I said put it down!" With his eyes wide and wild looking, he started grandstanding, not having to pretend to be crazed by the mixture of rage, anger and a desire to pull the trigger.

Watch Dog dropped the gun. It hit the pavement, making a clinking sound.

Tislam quickly approached the three. "I'm tired of you frontin' on me, Sha! I ain't your punchin' bag, motherfucker! . . . Back up!" When the three didn't move he shouted while jabbing the gun at them. "I said back the fuck up!"

When the three stepped backwards with their hands still raised, Tislam quickly scooped up Watch Dog's automatic. He hit the release button for the clip and the metal container made a similar clinking sound as that of the gun when it struck the pavement. Tislam flung the gun towards the patch of grass on the side of them, picked up the clip and pocketed it.

Tislam stared Shateek dead in the eyes. "Why we gotta always go through this kid shit every time you see me, Shateek? . . . Huh? . . . I ain't got a beef with you, Bro. And as you can see, if I did, your monkey ass would be dead." He saw the twisted smirk on Shateek's face and it made him extremely nervous because it looked like Shateek was truly enjoying this whole ordeal. There was something else in that warped evil grin that was incomprehensible to the naked eye, but detectable by the instinctual vibes. It made a small chill travel down Tislam's spine.

Just before Tislam turned to walk away, he said, "You better raised the fuck up off me . . . Keep pushing me, man, and I might give you what you're apparently beggin' for." He hesitated slightly. "Play with fire long enough and you're bound to get burnt." He quickly walked away as he stuffed the 9mm back in his pocket, over-anxious to get to Dinasia. He felt the urge to run, but fought the feeling.

When Tislam was about twenty yards away, Shateek pulled a 44 Magnum from his waist and carefully aimed at Tislam's back. He spoke to Trigger and Watch Dog. "Should I blaze him and put an end to this?"

"Yeah, let it ride!" Trigger said jubilantly.

Watch Dog shook his head no. "T--Too many W--witnesses."

Shateek laughed because he knew damn well he wasn't stupid enough to shoot a man in the back in broad daylight. Nor did he have any intentions of, or even a desire to, shoot or kill Tislam. That would be too easy, far too easy. And not to mention, outright uncreative and totally detrimental to the thoroughly thought out plan.

As Watch Dog went to fetch the automatic, Shateek put the 44 Magnum back in his waist and headed for the car with Trigger in hot pursuit.