

Sofie
MEDIA KIT



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Biography

Born and raised in Greenville, South Carolina, Vogue's journey through the world of creative writing first began in middle school with poetry and songwriting. While the mix of rhythm and words was the initial passage to self-expression, it was the discovery of prose that opened the door to a world of endless possibilities. An avid reader of Urban Fiction, Vogue felt the need to create literary works that had an equal balance of street lit, drama, romance, and faith-based undertones.

A graduate of Winthrop University (Rock Hill, S.C.), possessing a bachelor's degree in social work, Vogue, first birthed the idea of The Diamond Collection in the halls of her alma mater. In 2003, she put pen to paper and thus was created, *Diamonds In The Rough*, part one of The Diamond Collection series.

By 2010, Vogue had written drafts of the entire ten book series and in June of 2010, *Diamonds In The Rough*, was published for her to share with the rest of the world. Soon followed by *Diamonds Are Forever* in October of 2010, *The Ace of Diamonds* in February of 2013, and *Black Diamonds* on July 4, 2015, Vogue joined the league of other writers, determined to make her mark in the literary world.

Still writing, Vogue released the fifth book in the series, *Diamonds N' Roses*, on December 25, 2016. She is currently studying screenwriting at Queens University in Charlotte, NC, all while drafting her first screenplay and working on the sixth book in the series, *The Diamond Tiara*.

Current Works

The Diamond Collection

Diamonds In The Rough

Publisher: Crown Jewelz Publishing

Genre: Contemporary Urban Fiction, Interracial Romance

Available in Paperback

Release Date: March 17, 2013

Page Count: 240

ISBN: 978-0-9888004-2-7

ASIN: B00BWF4A4O

Diamonds Are Forever

Publisher: Crown Jewelz Publishing

Genre: General Fiction, African-American Fiction

Available in Paperback

Release Date: May 10, 2013

Page Count: 282

ISBN: 978-0-9888004-3-4

ASIN: B00CP8A582

The Ace of Diamonds

Publisher: Crown Jewelz Publishing

Genre: Contemporary Urban Fiction, Crime, Mystery, and Detective

Available in Paperback

Release Date: February 11, 2013

Page Count: 331

ISBN: 978-0-9888004-0-3

ASIN: B00B7LRQSU

Black Diamonds

Publisher: Crown Jewelz Publishing

Genre: Contemporary Urban Fiction, Crime, Mystery, and Detective

Available in Paperback

Release Date: July 4, 2015

Page Count: 215

ISBN: 978-0-9888004-4-1

ASIN: B010RR3EQM

Diamonds N' Roses

Publisher: Crown Jewelz Publishing

Genre: General Fiction, African- American Fiction

Available in Paperback

Release Date: December 25, 2016

Page Count: 144

ISBN: 9780988800458

Book Synopsis

Diamonds in the Rough

Carmen Davenport is living the American dream. Born with a silver spoon in her mouth, she has anything that a twenty-one year old college student would want: supportive parents, a set of fly friends, and an inheritance to one of the most lucrative clothing companies in New York: Flame, Inc. The only thing missing is love, until she lays eyes on Jay Santiago, a Puerto Rican drug lord, who is destined to make Carmen his at any cost. Instantly, Carmen begins to fall for him despite his reign as the head of a multi-million dollar drug cartel.

After securing the rights to her inheritance, Carmen soon learns that Flame, Inc. is headed towards a downward spiral. Too ambitious to allow her dream to go down the drain, Carmen begins pulling at all lifelines to save her company. Putting aside everything she's ever believed in, Carmen soon finds herself entangled in a web of lies, betrayal, and crime. However, Carmen knows that in order to achieve her goal, she must remain focused, no matter how dangerous the road to success may get.

Diamonds Are Forever

After six months of imprisonment, Carmen Davenport is unsure of what awaits her outside the Metropolitan Correctional Facility. Eight months pregnant, she spent the last few months of her life, sitting in a cold cell with only the thought of her unborn son, keeping her sane.

Unexpectedly released from prison, Carmen returns home to discover that her small boutique, Flame, is now a multi-million dollar enterprise. She also learns that Brookstone is home to federal agent, Michael Kane, the man responsible for her stint in prison.

Fast forward seventeen years, Carmen is at the top of her game, managing a fashion empire, marriage, and family. Out of the blue, her world is turned upside down when she is once again reunited with her past. Will Carmen be able to withstand temptation or will she fall victim to her own weaknesses?

Diamonds Are Forever is a reunion with familiar characters and another look into the dramatic lives of Brookstone's finest.

The Ace of Diamonds

Since his release from prison, Brookstone's most notorious drug lord, Jay Santiago, has been hard at work rebuilding his life and empire. With two businesses under his belt and one in the making, Jay is readily known as one of New York's elite men.

While the root of his financial status lies in the newly rebuilt Santiago cartel, Jay is determined to expand his wealth. After reconnecting with an old comrade, he believes that he has found the one thing that could increase his fortune and allow him to leave behind the dangers of his criminal enterprise for good.

However, as Jay's new business venture begins to come to fruition, he quickly learns that the one material object that he loves the most could lead to his biggest downfall yet.

Black Diamonds

Within the last year, acclaimed fashion designer, Carmen Davenport, has witnessed the ups and downs of being romantically linked to one of New York's most prominent men. On the heel of her engagement to Jay Santiago, a Puerto Rican businessman, she learns her oldest daughter has been kidnapped. A direct result of an ongoing war between her fiancé and a disgruntled drug kingpin, Carmen becomes determined to put an official end to the conflict.

She sets out to track down her daughter only to be met with unforeseen obstacles. A criminal investigation, led by her soon-to-be ex-husband, Michael Kane, leaves her fiancé behind bars. Due to Jay's incarceration, Carmen is placed in the care of his estranged cousin, Gully. He constantly reminds Carmen of the price of fame, ultimately forcing her to take matters in her own hands. Determined to bring her daughter to safety, she takes a no holds barred approach to ensure her daughter's return.

Diamonds N' Roses

After battling through the highs and lows of an intense and often dramatic relationship, fashion designer, Carmen Davenport, and business mogul, Jay Santiago, are finally ready to plan their most anticipated event to date – their wedding. However, before they can get down the aisle, they must endure a few unexpected surprises, twists, and turns.

Book Excerpt #1

Diamonds In The Rough

Carmen stood in the foyer of Gardner Hall waiting for Tiara's class to end. The foyer was fairly empty with only three or four other students in the space. With fifteen minutes till the end of the current lecture, Carmen appreciated the silence though it was short-lived. Time flew by and before long; the hallway became filled with chit, chatter, and warm bodies. Only a few doors down from Tiara's classroom, Carmen looked through the mobs of people for her friend. When she did spot her, she couldn't help to notice her attire for the day. Tiara donned a lace white button-up, dark denim boot-cut jeans, and a pair of Steve Madden Spikley red pumps. Always one for flair, Carmen broadened her smile once Tiara had taken notice of her.

"If it isn't Miss Rich Girl," Tiara said, jokingly, shoving a copy of *The Brookstone Times* into Carmen's hands. "Your last name is being spread like wildfire all over this damn town. I know you're proud of your papa, selling one of his high-priced buildings to Mr. Donald Trump."

"Hey, that's my daddy's success, not mine," Carmen said, laughing.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, my teacher couldn't stop talking about your damn daddy. The good thing is; it got us out of listening to another lecture. What are you up to?"

"I just wanted to hang for a minute before my class. Have you eaten?"

“Nah, I woke up late, so I didn’t have time to grab anything. Why don’t we go over to the Westside to that diner?”

Carmen wrinkled her face in disgust at the idea of going into the slums of West Brookstone. The Westside was known for its high crime rate and gang-related activity. While it was Tiara’s stomping grounds, Carmen preferred not to frequent the area. Whereas, Tiara had a hard time stomaching East Brookstone. *The land of the ritzy and boogie*, Tiara would say. Carmen would always debate the issue while reminding Tiara of their latest fiascos. In fact, she was doing it now. “There are drug dealers all up and through that place. Do you remember the crackhead who pissed behind my car at that house party we went to? What about the gunshot we heard?”

“Carm, nobody’s going to hurt you. Now, I’m hungry. We’re either going to head to this diner, or you’re going to have to treat me to lunch. I don’t have any extra cash to be eating at one of them ritzy places you’re always going to.” Tiara placed her hand on her hip, eyeing her friend quizzically.

“Alright, but I only got like forty minutes. We’re going to have to be quick about it. Shoot, I don’t mind treating you, but if I do it once then you’ll be expecting it every time we’re together,” Carmen joked.

“Forty minutes, Carm, it takes twenty minutes just to get over there. We might as well go to the cafeteria.”

“I’ll just skip then. We’re not doing anything important,” Carmen said, making the decision quickly. In less than thirty minutes, she had completely forgotten about how much money her father was paying out of pocket for her education. Since it wasn’t on her mind, the idea of skipping seemed grandeur.

“Girl, they are looking for you to be in class. Everyone is talking about your rich daddy,” Tiara said, thinking Carmen was stupid for skipping. If it was her, she would’ve gone to class just to get the praise. She loved attention and craved every second of it.

“Please, it’s not that serious. They’ve known about my father’s business since he started it. He takes a picture with a rich white man and now everyone wants to go crazy,” Carmen replied, placing the newspaper back onto the top of Tiara’s binder.

“It was Donald Trump!” Tiara yelled.

Carmen rolled her eyes, wanting to forget about the issue. “Let’s just go,” she said, turning to walk out the building.

Carmen heard Tiara sigh behind her, but she ignored it. Carmen had to constantly remind herself that they both cared about two different things. Carmen could care less about fame, while Tiara hung onto every bit of it. She thought that was one of the reasons Tiara had decided to pledge Delta Sigma Theta in the fall. Her friend wanted attention and wanted everyone to know her name.

“Have you checked out that club Sapphire?” Tiara asked as they reached Carmen’s car. “Everyone has been talking about it lately. It’s been open for a while. Why all of a sudden is it popping now?”

Carmen shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know. I was going to go tomorrow if you were up for it. I know you party hard.” Carmen waited for her friend’s response, but Tiara remained quiet. It wasn’t until they were inside the car that she finally spoke.

“You know me,” she said, turning around to face Carmen who was putting her seatbelt on. “I’m always down for a good party. Besides, I want to meet someone new. Tyrell isn’t cutting it for me.”

“What’s wrong with him?”

“He’s on some stuff. I mean, he isn’t doing what he used to. He doesn’t call. Half the time I have to beg him just to have two minutes of his time. I take that back, he does call whenever he wants some,” Tiara said, putting her seatbelt on as well.

“Well, who said that you had to sleep with him?” Carmen’s mouth turned into a frown at the thought of Tyrell. She couldn’t be paid enough to date him. Despite his superstar good looks, he was crazy as hell. Tyrell was always coming on campus, trying to embarrass Tiara about some guy she probably had messed with in the past. He always looked for a fight and was known to constantly throw down.

“I got to have my sex, Carm. I’m not like you, trying to save myself for Boris Kodjoe.”

Carmen laughed at her comment as she pulled out of the parking lot. She wasn’t saving herself for Boris Kodjoe, though she was saving herself.

“You need to get with one of these Brookstone boys. They are all up on you, Carm. You just don’t want to give them a chance.”

“I just haven’t found someone that I really like.”

Carmen thought about the guys that she had been out with in the last few months. None of them had the complete package. In fact, most of them were only checking for the money they heard she had. What they didn’t realize is that she didn’t have any. The only money in her bank account was from the checks she received from working at her mother’s store. While her parents were her providers, she didn’t have access to any of their money. It didn’t take long for a guy to realize that and soon lose interest. For that reason, Carmen remained single and abstinent. She figured it would be the same for today when she pulled up in front of the diner. Rather packed, she was lucky to find a park near the front of the restaurant so that she could keep a lookout on her car.

When she walked inside, she made sure to stay close to Tiara, noticing that one section of the diner was packed with a group of guys. From what she had heard from some of their other friends, the rumor was that the diner was the hot spot for a lot of drug deals. It explained why the restaurant was always crowded and a police officer was on duty in the evenings.

“Let’s sit here,” Tiara said, choosing the booth right across from the guys.

Carmen knew she had chosen the seat on purpose when she saw Tiara’s gaze go right to the guys’ booth. She was maintaining eye contact with them while at the same time shooting them each a smile that clearly expressed her interest. Carmen didn’t look their way simply sitting down in the booth and grabbing a menu. She kept her eyes planted on the various entrees until the waitress came and took their drink orders. Once she was gone again, Carmen put her eyes back on the menu.

“What’s your name?” she heard one of the guys ask. Since she wasn’t looking in his direction, she knew the question was directed at Tiara.

“It’s Tiara, and yours?”

“Carlos,” the guy replied. “Why don’t y’all come join us?”

Carmen looked up at Tiara, giving her a look that said no. Then, without thinking, she glanced over at the guys in the booth opposite of them. It took only a split second for her to notice a caramel-complexioned guy looking her way. They met eyes for a quick moment, but it was all Carmen needed. For the one second that she stared at him, Carmen was certain that she could draw a picture of his face if she had a pencil and paper in front of her. His dark brown hair was closely shaven and he bore a beautiful set of hazel eyes that reminded her of a summer sunset. She wanted to look again yet her nerves kept her face towards Tiara’s.

“I think we’re fine right here,” Tiara said, pleasing Carmen with her response.

“We aren’t going to bite. We just want to get to know you. If you ask me, I think my boy right here wants to get to know your friend, too. He can’t take his eyes off of her.”

The comment made Carmen turn her head back into the direction of the guy that had captured her attention. Like his friend had stated, he was staring directly at her. That is, until she turned to look at him. His gaze was now on his food as if he hadn’t been looking at her at all.

“You want to go?” Tiara asked, helping her to break her gaze.

Carmen shook her head no and watched as Tiara told Carlos no once again. He looked disappointed and immediately started whispering a few words under his breath. Before she knew it, two of the guys that were with him and his friend stood up out of the booth, allowing Carlos to slide out. She figured that since Tiara wouldn’t come over to his booth then his next move was to join them. Carlos sat down right next to Tiara and immediately stroked her jet black hair with his fingers.

While Tiara smiled at the affection, Carmen became somewhat uncomfortable. To add on to her nervousness, she listened as Carlos invited the rest of his friends to their table.

“Jay, Malik, Rakim,” he called out, waving to the other guys that were in the booth. “There is plenty of room, bring your asses over here.”

Carlos’ antics were unwanted by Carmen and Jay. Matter of fact, Jay turned away from his friend, ignoring the request. Nevertheless, he couldn’t stay turned away for long. The girl in the booth had captivated him for some unknown reason and he was searching his mind as to why. There was something different about her yet he couldn’t quite put his finger on it. She was very pleasing to the eye, bearing a blemish-free brown-skinned complexion that was matched with beautiful flowing hair that stopped at the base of her neck. Her curvy figure was accentuated perfectly in her clothes and he could see that she had expensive taste. Most girls

weren't driving a Lexus in West Brookstone, at least not the model that the girl was in. It raised a red flag in Jay's mind as he tried to figure out who she was. West Brookstone was home to a rival drug dealer, Pierre, who was known to keep only top notch chicks around him. She could've belonged to him or she could've been the daughter of a judge or doctor in East Brookstone who simply wanted to get a taste of the Westside.

"Damn, Jay, you've been staring long enough," Carlos said, slamming his hand down on the table. "Bring your ass over here."

"Y'all go ahead," Jay said to Malik and Rakim, eyeing the girl once more. He was still apprehensive about approaching her. When he didn't get a response from his friends, he turned to look at them.

Malik and Rakim were two fraternal twins originally from Virginia who he had put on his team when they were in high school. They were much younger than him and Carlos and looked to be about the same age as the girls in the booth across from them. Too busy eating to pay the girls any mind, Jay could tell they were uninterested.

"You don't want to go over there?" Malik questioned, sliding a French fry into his mouth.

Jay shook his head no as he went back to listening to Carlos' conversation.

"Are you in school or something?" Carlos asked one of the girls.

"Yeah, we go to Brookstone," Tiara replied. "We're both majoring in Business."

"What y'all doing over here then," Carlos asked, noticing that they were on the wrong part of town.

"I live on the Westside. I'm over on Rochester," Tiara said, seeing the waitress returning with their drinks.

“You’re from the same hood as Malik and Rakim,” Carlos said, turning to look back at his friends. He planted his eyes on Jay in particular because he knew his friend was trying to act hard. He wanted to pretend like he didn’t want to talk to Tiara’s friend when it was obvious that she had caught his eye. If it wasn’t the girl then Carlos knew it was the Lexus. Jay was probably wondering if she was a new girl that Pierre had scooped up. A known enemy of Jay’s, his friend probably wanted to know if she was claimed by his rival before he tried to spit his game.

“Would you like to order now?” the waitress asked.

Her presence interrupted Carlos’ thoughts while it gave Carmen the opportunity to look back over at the booth. The guy, who she assumed was Jay, was busy eating his food, which meant that his eyes weren’t focused on her. It gave her the opportunity to study him even more. From what she could see this time around, he was extremely tall, way over six feet and appeared to be biracial. In addition, he had a set of keys lying next to his plate. The Rolls Royce keychain automatically made her shift her focus from him to the parking lot. A Rolls Royce was parked outside, which told her that he was the one driving it. She looked back at him, giving them both the opportunity to lock eyes again. This time, he didn’t turn away until after a few seconds.

Carmen became lost in her thoughts as she started to wonder what the guy did to be rolling in a Rolls Royce. She hated to judge him, but the only thing that she could think of was that he was a hustler. *Shoot, it doesn’t help that we’re on the Westside. This is where drugs reign supreme*, she thought. Carmen sighed and glanced back at Tiara, who was giggling away at a joke. Unsure of what she and Carlos were discussing, she knew she wouldn’t get a chance to find out when she heard one of the guys in the booth ask, “Is that your car?”

Carmen turned to face the parking lot and uttered a sigh of agitation. A man dressed rather ruggedly was knocking on the front driver's side window of her car. The sight of him made her look back at Tiara as a wave of déjà vu came over her. "I guess I'll handle this one," she told her, recalling the last incident she had with a drug addict. Tiara only shrugged her shoulders as she stood up out of the booth. Carmen told the waitress to give her a second, however, she didn't expect for Jay to block her path.

"I got it," he said, holding his hand up to her, "order your food."

Carmen parted her lips to respond yet Jay was walking quickly out of the diner. If he thought she was going to stay inside and let him handle the situation, he was definitely mistaken. It was her car and she was going to deal with the addict who mistook it for a drug dealer's.

"Get the fuck off that car, man," Jay was saying once she got outside.

She watched him as he pulled the man away from her car, pushing him in the opposite direction of the restaurant. Obviously homeless, his clothes were torn, his salt and pepper hair bushy and he stunk of urine and last month's trash.

"You got something for me man? I know you do."

Jay gave the man another hard shove towards the street, trying his best to direct him away from the restaurant. "I don't have shit for you. You can't be rolling up on people's cars like that. You know what I would do if you rolled up on my car?" Jay lifted his shirt, revealing the nine millimeter that was tucked perfectly in his waistband. It didn't scare the man off only intensifying his need for a quick high.

"I just need a hit, man. You got something for me?"

"Hell no! Get your ass out of here!" Jay yelled at him, trying to hold back his frustration.

“You always got something, man. I know about you. I know what you do. You got something, man.” The crackhead started pacing the parking lot as if he wasn’t going to let up. Before long, he was scratching at his left arm.

“Look, man, don’t ever roll up on this Lexus again. I’ll smoke you for that shit, real talk.” Jay knew he had scared the man because he started walking away from the diner. The addict had probably given up and was aware that there was another dealer down the street that would sell to him. Jay didn’t mind missing the sale when he knew that his biggest customers were on the corporate level. CEOs and stockbrokers were his main customers. That was how he made his real money. Crackhead money was just chump change. The high school boys that Carlos put on dealt with them. He, on the other hand, only set back and collected his paper.

Jay pushed the thought of crackheads and drug dealing out of his mind when he remembered that the girl was still standing there. “You should’ve stayed inside. I had this,” he said, leading the way back into the diner.

“It’s *my* car,” she replied with an attitude. “I had this.”

Jay took a long look at her, stunned almost in a way at how she had responded. She had an innocence about her while at the same time, she was feeding him attitude that surprisingly turned him on. Physically, she was built just right with a full bosom and hips that were accentuated nicely in her Roberto Cavalli jeans. Her beauty alone made him forget about her snide remark. In fact, he followed her to her table and even motioned for Malik and Rakim to join him in the booth. Though he had warned himself of her, his dick was now talking for him.

“I knew you were going to come over,” Carlos admitted as he made room for the twins.

“Nah, you just had a lucky hunch,” Jay said, picking up his fork and digging into the coleslaw that was still on his plate. He put some of it in his mouth and looked back at the girl,

watching her sip on her drink. He swallowed and then proceeded to pursue her. “What’s your name?”

“Carmen,” she answered after taking the straw out her mouth.

“I’m Jay,” he said, looking down at her nails. Nicely manicured, Jay took a closer look at her appearance. Her teeth were blindingly white and straight while her shoes appeared to have been worn for the first time. Her jewelry appeared to be of the upmost quality and not one single strand of her hair was out of place. When he saw her lips start to move again, he gave her his full attention.

“I know,” she muttered. “Your friend introduced you.”

Jay narrowed his eyes as he caught another whiff of her sarcasm. This time, it wasn’t a turn on. If that was how she normally was, Jay knew he would be turned off quick.

“Carmen doesn’t frequent this area much,” Tiara explained, trying to take some of the tension off of the table. “She lives over on the Eastside. You know how those Eastside people are.”

“How are they?” Jay asked, nastily, eyeing Tiara. “I live on the Eastside.”

Tiara straightened her grin as she realized she had backed herself into a corner. Nonetheless, as quickly as she had gotten there, Carlos swooped in and saved the day.

“Y’all party?” Carlos asked, thinking of Jay’s club, Sapphire. He felt Jay’s eyes burning onto his, but he didn’t care. Carlos wanted to see Tiara again and he knew that Jay already had his eye on Carmen. Sapphire was the perfect place for their second meeting to be.

“The party doesn’t start till we get there!” Tiara exclaimed.

“Then y’all need to come by Jay’s spot,” Carlos said, sneaking one of Malik’s fries. “He owns Sapphire; it’s over there on the Eastside. Y’all probably have already been there.”

Jay tensed up, not wanting Carmen to know yet that he owned a club. If he was honest then he would admit that he didn't want her to know anything about him. He only wanted to know about her. Nevertheless, he had already given her a clear indication of his business endeavors a few minutes ago by handling the crackhead. For all he knew, he could've scared her off before he had the chance to pursue her.

"You own the club?" Carmen asked, wondering how old Jay was. He looked to be in his twenties, but now she was guessing that he was probably in his early thirties. He only gave her a look as his response, allowing Carlos to answer for him. When his friend said yes, Carmen inquired some more, "How did you get a club?"

"I just got a club," he responded, dryly. He gave Carlos a mean glare to let him know that he had spilled the beans too soon. Carlos didn't seem to care because he only went back to talking to Tiara. Still, Jay knew that Carmen was going to continue to ask questions.

Eventually, he would have to give her answers, which meant digging up his past.

"The reason I asked is because my mother owns Flame downtown. I work there and she's thinking of opening up another store. I might take over one day. We're not in the same industry, but you never know, maybe, we can network or something." Carmen waited for his response yet she only received another glance. This time, her stomach twisted as their eyes met. Not quite sure why, she saw an image of the nine millimeter that was in his waistband. It instantly made her want to retract her statement. Though she couldn't deny her attraction, the gun was a clear reminder that Jay wasn't what she wanted or needed.

Book Excerpt #2

Diamonds Are Forever

The steel gray bars separated into two as Carmen stepped one foot out of the cell. She had told herself that when this day came that she wasn't going to look back. She was going to put one foot in front of the other and continue walking, leaving behind the stale smell of the quarters, the loud yelling of the inmates around her and the memory of being locked up. She did exactly that. She put one foot in front of the other as the guards led her out of the cell and into a small room. They closed the door behind her allowing her to change out of the orange jumpsuit that she had been wearing for nearly six months.

Carmen stared at the window knowing that the guards were watching her change. Through the last six months, she had grown accustomed to the lack of privacy. Carmen stared at the plastic bag that lay on the table. In the bag were the clothes she was wearing when she was arrested. Carmen slid the jumpsuit off, anxious to get back inside of real clothes. The jumpsuit fell at her ankles and she grabbed the dress, pulling it over her head. It stopped just about two inches above her knees. She grabbed the flip-flops, putting her feet inside of them. She felt for the holes in her ears, hoping that the holes hadn't closed up and slid the earrings inside. Carmen waited, knowing that they were watching her. It was only a matter of seconds before they were going to open the door.

Carmen waited until she heard the sound of the door opening before she moved. She grabbed the plastic bag and followed the guard out of the room and down towards the releasing department to collect the money that had been left in her account.

“Going home,” one of the other inmates asked as she walked by.

“Yes ma’am,” Carmen answered. She kept walking, knowing that the inmate had to be new to the facility because she had never seen her before. Carmen stood in line, seeing another woman being released until it was her turn. She filled out the card with her information and handed it to the clerk.

“Are you having a girl or boy?” the guard asked, peering down at her belly.

“A boy,” Carmen replied, starting to drum her fingers on the counter as she waited for the clerk to hand her the leftover money. Carmen touched her head, feeling the tight cornrows that she had gotten the night before. Due to the vitamins and pills she had to take for the baby; her hair had grown almost down her back. Carmen knew that she wouldn’t be able to take care of her hair because she was in prison so she quickly made friends with an inmate who could braid. Carmen got her hair braided regularly, trading braids for food and postage stamps.

“Here you are,” the clerk said, handing Carmen an envelope. Carmen took it from her hands and slid it into the plastic bag.

“Ready?” the guard asked.

“I’ve been ready for six months,” Carmen told the guard. Carmen followed the guard down the long hallway. She could feel tears starting to wail up in her eyes as it hit her. It was over. Her prison days were over.

Book Excerpt #3

The Ace of Diamonds

“Sir, can I help you?”

Jay’s eyes traveled around the main lobby of Davenport Realty as he took in the space. It was tastefully decorated by illustrations of luxury home floor plans and commercial real estate properties. In addition, there were several framed portraits that lined the wooden walls. Jay’s attention was more focused on the single portrait of Lotus Pagua, which hung above the receptionist’s desk, than the receptionist in front of him. He was staring at the portrait when her voice sounded once again in his ears. This time, she had a slight attitude.

“Sir, do you have an appointment? Who are you here to see?” she asked.

Jay raised his brow, hearing the harshness in her tone. He looked down at her desk and saw an enormous amount of paperwork. He figured she had other things to do so he decided to stop stalling. “Lotus,” he told her.

The woman looked at him quizzically, and it was then that Jay realized his mistake. Most people were unaware that the owner of the real estate company was born Lotus Pagua. “Harold Davenport, I need to see Harold Davenport,” he told her, and then held up his briefcase as a sign that he had come on business. The woman didn’t seem to recognize him, a factor that could potentially work in his favor.

“You know, Harold Davenport retired. You chose the right day to come because he is actually in a meeting with the new CEO of the company. You’ll have to wait until the meeting is over, though. Why don’t you take a seat over there,” she suggested, as she stood up from her desk and pointed to a row of chairs in the waiting area. “Would you like some coffee?”

Jay ignored her question, and headed to the row of empty seats. He sat his briefcase in the seat next to him before giving the lobby another once-over. The building that housed Davenport Realty was far more upscale than the premier office in Brookstone. Jay assumed that the Texas location was more profitable.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” a male voice burgeoned. “Don’t make me have to come back up here. I retired for a reason.”

Jay plastered a smile on his face as he saw Lotus walking into the reception area. He appeared to be in a dismal mood from the signs of stress on his face. It made Jay think twice about approaching him; however, he was determined that his visit to Dallas was not going to be in vain. He rose to his feet quickly and stepped into Lotus’ path.

“Uh...” Lotus uttered as he blinked his eyes twice to make sure he was seeing right. Certain that he was, he looked Jay over from head to toe. Lotus hadn’t spoken or seen Jay in years. Jay lived in New York, so Lotus knew that he had intentionally come to Texas and sought him out for a specific reason.

“Do you have a moment for Hector’s son?” Jay asked him with a smile. He followed Lotus’ gaze, which was fixed on his briefcase. He then looked back at him only to see that his facial expression had turned to one of nervousness.

“Sure, I was headed out,” Lotus told him, nodding his head. “Come with me.”

Jay quickly grabbed his briefcase and followed Lotus out of the building. A black limousine awaited them outside directly in front of Davenport Realty. Jay made no hesitation in

getting inside although his own limo was across the street in the parking deck. Before turning to address Lotus, he sat his briefcase in between them and buckled his seatbelt.

“Why are you here?” Lotus asked. “You’re the last person I’d expect to see in Dallas.”

Jay chuckled, because it was obvious that Lotus was suspicious of his presence. He couldn’t blame him, either. It had been a long time since they had held a conversation, besides; Lotus wasn’t exactly his biggest fan. “Our paths are always bound to cross. I’m Hector’s son, remember? He was your best friend. I also have two kids by your daughter, Carmen, and not to mention a little princess on the way. Your grandkids are a good enough reason for us to talk.”

“Are you counting Rakim as your son?”

Jay looked over at Lotus hoping that he could read his facial expression. Instead of answering his question, he opened up his briefcase. He pulled out a white envelope and handed it to him.

“As you can see,” he said as Lotus opened the envelope, “I do believe that Rakim is my son. If you want me to be honest, I always believed that he was. I just didn’t push the issue as much as I should have. Now that Carmen has broken up with me, I am going to push the issue. Rakim is still very young, but he needs to know that I’m his father. By the time I get back to Brookstone, Carmen will have a copy of these court papers.”

Lotus looked at Jay as he took the papers out of the envelope. He read the documents quickly before placing the papers back inside. “Is this how you intend to get her back?” Lotus chuckled in disbelief. “You take her to court for a DNA test, and then sue her for paternity fraud? Rakim is almost a year old. If you really thought he was your son then you would have did this a long time ago. Why bring it up now?”

The question that Lotus posed was a good one. Jay was unsure of how to answer other than to explain that it took him awhile to make sense if it all. “Carmen told me that her husband

couldn't have kids. I believed her, but I got confused when Kane came with his paternity test. For a while, I thought that maybe a miracle had happened. You know, maybe he was Rakim's father after all. Then, I used my common sense and remembered that Kane had never produced a child naturally. The only child that is biologically his is Kristian and they used in vitro to conceive her. I know that Rakim is my son. Since Carmen doesn't want to admit that, I have to take matters into my own hands."

Lotus gave the envelope back to him. "Okay, so what do you want from me?"

Jay focused the conversation on the real reason that he had come to Dallas. He had recently linked up with one of his old comrades who had helped him put millions into a new investment, one that he wanted Lotus to help him out with. His plan was to use their connection to his advantage.

"I figured that since I'm Hector's son that you would help me."

Lotus was taken aback. "Help you? Help you with what?"

Jay knew that what he said next was going to send Lotus into a fury. "I need a warehouse," he told him, quickly.

"Oh hell no," Lotus said, taking off his seatbelt. "Stop the car, Arnold. Pull over."

Jay unbuckled his seatbelt as well. He grabbed Lotus' shoulder, in an attempt to calm him down. "Lotus, come on, listen to me. I know you helped me with this before, but I need another one. I mean, you sold me the building for Blue Magic. I'm making honest of the restaurant, aren't I? I promise you, I will—" Jay was interrupted as Lotus screamed in his ear.

"Are you out of your damn mind? What kind of shit are you getting into now?"

"I can't go to anybody with this project. I don't need a lot of ears or eyes on this. I trust you, Lotus. I know that you won't publicize this sale like you do the others. I know you will take the warehouse out of your company's listings way before the sale is even complete."

Lotus shook his head, nervously. He knew that if Jay was asking for a warehouse then there was probably some illegal operation about to go down inside of it. The last time he had sold him one, he ended up using the space to house illegal drugs and weapons. Now, he wanted one again. Certain that Jay was still running a drug cartel, Lotus didn't want anything to do with it. His days of working alongside a criminal enterprise were long gone.

"Sir, should I still pull over?" his driver asked.

Jay looked at Lotus, waiting for him to respond. He smiled when he told Arnold no. It was a clear sign that Lotus probably wanted to know more. If he did, Jay could potentially be leaving Dallas with a place to house his newest project.

"Jay," Lotus began, "Do you really think that I'm going to risk my real estate business for your criminal enterprise? You know what, don't answer that. Arnold, head back to the parking deck so we can drop Mr. Santiago off."

Jay became uneasy as the conversation took an unexpected turn. He knew now that he had to pull out all of the stops if he wanted Lotus to comply. "I'm begging you. You were my father's best friend, his right-hand man. I know our relationship hasn't always been good, but I'm asking you to put our differences aside. I'm not trying to get you in any trouble. I want to keep everything that is done between us discrete."

Lotus closed his eyes briefly as he thought of Jay's father. Everything that Jay was saying was true. He had been Hector's best friend. In addition, he was also legally Jay's godfather. It was a secret that he had never made known. Part of the reason was because his main concern had always been in establishing a new identity. He didn't want anything to do with Hector's criminal enterprise, which was why he had broken away in the first place. Even now, he didn't want to take part in Jay's project. Lotus felt that if he gave Jay what he wanted,

he wouldn't be working in his best interest. Instead he could be aiding him in getting another seventeen year stint in prison.

As the limo eased into the median, Lotus knew that he was pressed for time. He still had to break the news to Jay that he wasn't going to help him and reveal his secret. He knew that if he gave Jay a heartfelt explanation of why he wouldn't help him that he would accept it. Besides, it was time for him to let a skeleton out of the closet.

"When you were first born," he revealed, "I signed court documents to be your godfather. Hector wanted me to watch over you in case anything ever happened. I hate to admit that I failed in that department, but I did. Even when we reconnected, I didn't play the part that I was supposed to. But, today is a new day." Lotus turned towards Jay so that he was staring into his eyes. "I don't want to see you back in prison. I don't want to see you following in your father's footsteps either. I know you're still running the cartel. Right now, I'm looking out for your best interest. My daughter is having a baby by you that is due this month. You need to be around to see that child grow. I don't believe that you intend to use this warehouse legally and because of that, I won't help you. That doesn't mean I hate you or I'm trying to be spiteful. It means that I want to look out for your best interest."

Jay looked out the window as the driver parked the limo directly across from his own. The bomb that Lotus had dropped had made him speechless. He never thought in a million years that Lotus Pagua could be his godfather. Lotus was right when he said he hadn't played the part. He had been absent from his life for many years. While his secret helped Jay to better understand Lotus' stance, he still wanted his warehouse. Deep down, Jay knew that Lotus wouldn't let up. Therefore, without bothering to respond, Jay got out of the vehicle.

Lotus took a deep breath as Jay's lofty frame disappeared into a white limo. He wasn't quite sure how to take Jay's reaction. In addition, he was very curious about his godson's

newest venture. *What are you up to now? You're too much like your father, always working on something.* Lotus sighed at the comparison. He got ready to direct Arnold towards his house until he noticed a black velvet bag on the seat opposite of him. He had never seen Jay place it there but he figured his godson had pulled a fast one on him. Lotus picked the bag up, loosened the strings, and glanced down into it. A slight snicker escaped his lips as he saw that the bag was full of diamonds.

Book Excerpt #4

Black Diamonds

Trapped

Copperton City, Georgia

It could have been the swift movements of the car or even the light hum of the radio, which caused Kristian to stir. A thick aroma of vanilla and clove hung in the air; her nose sniffing the scent as she started to come to. Although her eyes were still firmly closed, she heard and felt enough to let her know she was in a moving vehicle. Now, she was listening to see if she and the driver were alone.

No one was talking or even moving. Her position told her there could possibly be three people in the vehicle—her, the driver, and another individual who was keeping watch. She was laid out flat on her stomach, the left side of her head faced downward. Her legs didn't hang off the seat, which meant she was probably in a limousine. She also knew no one was sitting beside her. When she heard a small exhale, she had the evidence she needed. The sound was familiar, which she instantly connected with the scent she smelled. A little more pleasurable than a cigarette, she attributed the smell to that of a cigar. When the person exhaled again, her eyes blinked several times before becoming wide open.

Darkness completely entrapped her until her eyes focused on her surroundings. The sky was murky, which told her it was nearing or slightly past midnight. In addition, they were passing barely lit streets. If it was indeed midnight then she had been gone from campus for a little over three hours.

That wasn't the mystery, though. The mystery started with her. She had to find out where she was and who she was with. She looked away from the window until she found herself staring at the bottom of a pair of black Mauri shoes. The person was wearing dress socks of the same color, and she quickly learned the other passenger was male. When she gazed upward, she noticed his hands were light in complexion and his wrist bore an Audemars Piguet watch, a clear sign of his wealth.

A slight exhale escaped the man's lips once more, prompting her attention. She turned to face him, meeting eyes with none other than Shawn Blumington or Blu for short. He was a known drug dealer who once claimed to be a part of the Santiago cartel. Months ago, on a previous encounter, Blu had expressed his displeasure of getting the boot. His pink slip had come from the hands of her mother's boyfriend, Jay Santiago, the cartel's boss. Blu had exhibited his revenge by sending a slew of his goons after Jay. Since he failed to kill him, she assumed Blu's new plan was to throw her in the mix. She had a biological connection to Jay's biggest and only love, Carmen Davenport, and Blu knew Jay would do anything to keep her mother in his arms.

"You're not far from home," he said, pulling the cigar from between his lips.

Kristian stared in horror as he spoke. His words flowed out in such a calm manner she wondered if he thought he had rescued her. Certain that wasn't the case, Kristian moved frantically to both sides of the limousine, trying the locks on both doors. Blu stayed put, not

moving an inch because he knew the child safety locks were on. He also didn't speak when she made several pleas for help. A limo partition separated her from the driver who also ignored every word she uttered.

As a result, Kristian looked for anything she could use as a weapon. She came up short, wrapping her arms around herself as her anxiety increased. This isn't happening, this isn't happening, she repeated to herself. She rocked back and forth, pinching her arms, yet she didn't wake from the nightmare. In fact, it became more real. No longer moving, the limo was now parked in front of Soulshock, a soul food restaurant about eight minutes away from Copperfield University where she was currently enrolled. Kristian wasn't quite sure what was about to happen when she noticed the restaurant was pitch black on the inside. Her fear of the unknown forced her to gaze at Blu who now had a pistol resting in his lap.

"No problems, right?" he said right above a whisper. "You're going to cooperate?"

There was no longer an absence of tears as Kristian began to think the worse. With a gun in his hand, Blu now had complete control. Whatever he wanted, he could get. Kristian looked at him through her tears, the pistol now pointed directly at her. His left hand held it while the right one reached for the door handle. At that moment, she heard the child safety locks coming off. While her first thought was to exit out the other side, the image of the pistol reminded her she couldn't. The bullet would catch her before she made it to safety.

Blu waved the pistol in her direction, encouraging her to follow him. She did as he asked, noticing how deserted the area was. Not a single car passed them as they walked inside the dark restaurant.

Nonetheless, Blu seemed to know Soulshock like the back of his hand. He led them to the kitchen without error. “Did you miss me?” he asked, taking a quick look at her. “It’s been awhile, Miss Kane. I guess you thought I had forgotten about you.”

Kristian swallowed, the only reaction she gave. In their previous encounters, Blu had expressed his attraction, or better yet obsession with her. She had always made it known she wasn’t interested yet he was a predator who would never break the pursuit.

“This is all business,” he told her as they approached double doors. “Don’t take it personal.” He pushed open the door with his right hand while the left one pointed the pistol inside the room. Though it wasn’t verbalized, the expression on his face said, After you.

Kristian hesitated for a few seconds only because the room he was leading her into was completely black. Her body stood there frozen until Blu waved the pistol in her face. Unable to see anything, she walked inside, listening carefully to Blu’s movements. So far, the only thing she heard was the sound of the door closing behind him.

It was followed by a burst of light, stemming from a lit match. With light in the room, Kristian could see they were in a short corridor which was filled with boxes. A strong odor was in the area, prompting her to cover her nose. Since his hands were full, Blu couldn’t do the same, proceeding to lead her down the corridor until they were at the far end of the hall. Now standing in front of another door, Kristian watched as he slid the pistol underneath his right armpit before retrieving a key. He unlocked the door in front of them, revealing a long set of steps, which led to the basement.

“Go ahead,” he ordered, holding the match at eye level.

Kristian glared at the steps as she realized Blu's intent. He was holding her for ransom. He wanted her in the basement because he knew if she went down there, no one would find her until he was ready for them to. She would be solely in his possession until he got whatever he wanted from Jay. For all she knew, she could be down there for days, weeks, or even months.

The fear of being trapped made a series of thoughts form in her mind. One idea came into play. She latched her arm onto Blu's as she swung the match down onto his suit jacket. The flame lit quicker than she imagined, garnering an instant reaction. He shoved her into the open doorway and with a final thrust, pushed her down the flight of steps.

"You fuckin' bitch," he yelled as she tumbled down each one.

By the time she was at the bottom, her whole body had fallen numb. She closed her eyes tightly, moaning at the pain, barely hearing the footsteps that were coming towards her. Her eyes opened for only a quick second before closing back. Several seconds later, her eyes fully reopened. With the match and flames out, all she saw was darkness.

Then, she felt a gust of cold air on her skin from where Blu was standing directly over her. Moments later, the room became lit, revealing an empty space. Yet, it was the least of her concerns. A sharp pain was now shooting through her back, forcing her eyes shut. She started to see black again just as Blu grabbed her by her shirt, pulling her towards him. The scent of burning cotton filled her nostrils even more than the smell of cigar on his breath.

It was followed by the cold hard slap of Blu's hand across her face. She thought for sure he would kill her, but he didn't. Instead, he released her from his grasp before pulling on a shoestring, which was attached to the light fixture. He gave it a hard tug until it broke loose, sending her into complete darkness.

Kristian knew the task was complete. He had her right where he wanted her and now he was making his retreat. “Wa-wa-wait,” she mumbled, trying to crawl towards him. She grabbed for his legs, but he only kicked her off him. “Plea-plea-please,” she whimpered. She tried to follow his footsteps, but for some reason she never reached the stairwell. Seconds later, she heard the sound of the door as it locked. She didn’t give up, continuing to weep bitterly as she looked for a way out.

Book Excerpt #5

Diamonds N' Roses

Chapter One: All Things Go

Carmen sat straight up, sweat dripping steadily from her brow. The sound of gunshots was repetitive in her ear until she realized it was her alarm clock. Now wide awake, she quickly turned it off, silencing the noise. What she thought was a typical wet dream ended up being nothing short of a night terror. She had gone from reliving her rendezvous with Jay to having Kane shoot them dead. It was her first time having sex in public, a result of hitting the bottle too hard, and the nightmare made her want to stick to the bedroom.

Coming to grips that the vision wasn't completely reality, she laid down in bed. Jay hadn't stirred so she used the time to talk to God. By the time she was finished with her prayer, Jay's alarm was going off, which meant it was seven o'clock. He moved beside her yet he didn't bother to turn it off. Somewhat annoyed by it, Carmen got up and pressed the snooze button. She was unsure of his schedule for the day, so she took advantage of the time and headed to the shower. Jay didn't wake until she was completely dressed and even then, he remained in bed.

"You should work a half day."

Carmen chuckled at the comment. She had already taken an extended leave and the last thing she needed was more time off. Her absence had strongly impacted her business and she was just now able to start preparing for the launch of her new clothing line, Fresh Prince. "It would be nice, but it's not possible. I have two big meetings today. One of 'em is with our wedding planners. Remember?"

"I didn't forget, I plan on—" Jay was interrupted by the sound of his phone. He automatically assumed his cousin, Gully, was calling him, since he was his driver for the day. However, the number showing on the screen wasn't programmed in his phone. It had a 212 area

code, which meant the number was local. Despite his conversation with Carmen, he answered the call. Very little noise was on the line, which he took notice of. “Hello.”

“Howard Grendel for Jay Santiago,” the person greeted.

Jay sat up straight, realizing who was on the other end. Howard Grendel was the man responsible for bringing the surveillance footage of the shooting at Blue Magic to the attention of several prominent New York judges. The footage got him a bail variation, which resulted in his immediate release from jail. Currently awaiting trial, he remembered his lawyer, Gomez, telling him Grendel was a part of Amnesty International. “Speaking,” Jay replied. “Let me first tell you thank you.”

“No thanks needed, Mr. Santiago. I’m sorry to bother you so early, but I need to meet with you. I got your number through your lawyer, Gomez. Let’s say I need a favor for a favor. Can we meet for breakfast?”

“That’s fine. Blue Magic is usually my first stop. We can meet there. Is nine okay? There’s a conference room available on the third floor if privacy is an issue.”

“That sounds good, Mr. Santiago. I will see you then.”

Jay parted his lips to say goodbye, but Grendel had already hung up. Unsure of what favor he needed, he pulled the phone from his ear, immediately going to his Google app. He knew very little about Amnesty International, but he could always learn. Quickly typing in the words, he stopped when Carmen’s shadow came over him.

“I meet with the planners at nine,” she announced, continuing their conversation. “Did you suddenly forget? What was said on that call that made you forget about our wedding?”

Jay set his phone in his lap now aware of his error. He assumed the meeting with Grendel wouldn’t take long; however, he didn’t know what he wanted. It could be something minor or something which acquired more attention than a planning session for a wedding that was more than a year away. “It’s something quick. I’ll only be a few minutes late,” he responded. “If I can’t make it, I know you can handle it. I trust you. I’ll make the next one.”

Carmen narrowed her eyes. She was certain Jay was going to say yes prior to his phone call. Something else was obviously more important than their upcoming nuptials. She would admit there was plenty of time to prepare, but it was an occasion that required work on both their parts. She wanted him to be as hands-on as she was. Unfortunately, her wants weren’t a factor that morning. Somewhat accepting of his potential absence, she told him okay before leaving the room to check on Rakim and Nyla.

Their youngest two, both toddlers, were in their rooms fast asleep. She spent a few minutes with each one, watching as they slumbered, until it was time to head to Flame. Her company was an inheritance from her mother which she turned into a multi-million dollar fashion empire. She walked in her building promptly at eight-thirty and on to the executive floor. The elevator doors hadn't even closed behind her before her receptionist, Cathy, was in her face, completely out of breath.

"Coco Masterson is here," Cathy announced. "She's anxious to talk to you."

Carmen peered around the corner to see Coco standing in front of Cathy's desk. Not quite sure why she was there, she gave Cathy a look of inquisition. Her receptionist shrugged her shoulders, obviously clueless about the visit. While it wasn't awkward, it was unexpected. Thankfully, she had a window of time to kill before her wedding planners showed up.

"Good morning," she greeted, now approaching Coco. "You threw me for a loop. Did your mother send you here to try and get exclusive rights to my wedding?" Coco was the daughter of the editor-in-chief of XXL magazine so Carmen expected the joke to garner a response. Coco, however, didn't smile or flinch. She simply stood there clutching her purse as if it contained a million dollars. "I guess not. So, what's going on?"

"Can we?" Coco asked, pointing at Carmen's office.

"Of course," Carmen replied. She led the way inside and once Coco came in, she closed the door behind them. Coco didn't bother to sit so she remained standing as well. "What is it? You're scaring me." She tried to force a smile, which turned upside down when she saw Coco digging in her purse. When she pulled out a Ziploc bag, Carmen sat down. She covered her mouth to keep from screaming because her son's 18-year-old girlfriend was holding a pregnancy test. To make matters worse, she was handing it to her.

"I was in denial, but I'm not anymore."

Carmen didn't take the pregnancy test from her. She was no longer covering her mouth, this time covering her eyes. There she was, still in her early forties, wanting to have more kids while her eldest son, King, was making her a grandmother. Too much for her to handle, Carmen stood up and paced the floor. This can't be happening. King can't be having sex. I mean, Coco can't be having sex. When did they do it? Was his little brother home? What if they had sex and Malachi heard? Shit, forget about Malachi, what about Jay? He is going to blow the roof.

"You're the first one I've told. I called Kristian, but she didn't pick up." Coco looked at the test in her hands and then at Carmen. "My mother is going to kill me," she cried, changing the subject. "How did this happen? I'm supposed to be transferring to Brookstone University in the

spring. If I'm four months pregnant, I'll be having this baby in either May or June. I'll be further behind."

Carmen took a deep breath as she tried to think on her toes. "Have you told your parents? Have you said anything to King? Shit, wait, you just said I'm the first one you told." Carmen paused so she could gather her thoughts. She took a few moments to calm herself before she spoke. "I know you're scared. Believe me, I do. I've been there. I wasn't as young as you, but I was there. You're not alone, though. King is well equipped to make sure you and the baby have everything you need. You might have to take a break from school, but you can always go back." Carmen exhaled because she knew school and money wasn't the issue. It was her son's maturity. She didn't know if he was ready to be a father especially when he was still dealing with his own daddy issues.

Coco shook her head repeatedly. "My mother will kill me before I even give birth. I came here because I need money for an abortion. I can borrow it from you. Once I'm better, I can book a modeling gig and pay you back."

Carmen grabbed her desk for support at Coco's plans. Not once did the idea of abortion cross her mind. While it wasn't her place to convince her to do otherwise or push her religious beliefs, she definitely couldn't give her the money. "Coco, I know telling your mother is a scary thing. But, do you really think she would want you to have an abortion? How would it make her feel to know you made this decision without consulting her? You haven't even talked to King."

"You know my mother, Ms. Davenport. She hates King. If she knew I lost my virginity to him, she would kill us both. Once she finds out I'm pregnant, she's gonna bury us alive."

Carmen's feet shifted at how overly dramatic Coco was being. Maya wasn't King's biggest fan, but she had learned to accept him over the years. "What we can do, Coco, is this. Tonight, I'll have a dinner at my house, let's say seven o'clock. Invite your parents, bring King. We'll discuss this like adults."

"Ms. Davenport, can I just have the money? I can make the appointment. I don't want to be a mother. I don't want to be pregnant. Please, I'll pay you back."

Carmen mouthed the word no before saying it out loud. "I can't give you the money. What I can give you is love, support, and prayer. Now, I can meet with King on my lunch break. Do you want to come? I'll hold your hand while you tell him the news."

Coco's tears were flowing more heavily because she'd hit a brick wall. King's mother was her only resort. "Please," she begged, gripping the Ziploc bag. "I'm not ready for this. I need to finish school."

“You can finish school. Look at what I built, fresh out of prison with a baby.” Carmen extended her arms to illustrate. “I had felonies, no degree, and a child.” Carmen dropped her arms at her side as Coco wept. She looked pitiful, which made her latch onto her. “I know you’re scared. I was scared, too, but you have so many people around you who love you. We’ll be there through all of this. You can still finish school and model. I promise you.”

Coco heard her clearly yet she wasn’t completely set on keeping the baby. She would admit she was being slightly selfish, making the decision before even talking to King. She didn’t even know how she was going to break the news to him. Perhaps it wasn’t a question of how, but rather of when. As if it was to be that moment, she listened as Carmen’s cell phone rung.

“Stay right here,” Carmen ordered as she broke the embrace. “Don’t go anywhere.” She reached for her phone to see Kane flashing on the screen. Automatically, her mind went to the nightmare she had. She shivered at the thought before answering the call. “Mr. Kane,” she greeted. “How can I help you?”

“Kristian is gone.”

“Don’t say that to me. What do you mean she’s gone?”

“Well, some of her things are missing. I think she did it. I think she went to Georgia to see Victor. You know he made bail this weekend.”

Carmen closed her eyes and swallowed at the same time. So much was going on; she was trying her best to keep it straight in her head. And to think, Carmen thought, I thought my only concern for today would be my freakin’ wedding. Now I’m dealing with a pregnancy and a missing child—again.

It was only four months ago when her eldest daughter was kidnapped by Blu, a disgruntled drug kingpin. The kidnapping was a part of his retaliation for being kicked out of Jay’s cartel. Kristian claimed Blu’s business partner, Victor, was her knight in shining armor throughout the whole ordeal. She repeatedly begged to go to Georgia to check on him after Blu put him flat on his back in an Atlanta hospital. After he was well enough to be discharged, he was taken to jail after being charged with Kristian’s kidnapping. Now free, Carmen assumed her daughter had made her way down South. Majorly annoyed by the news, Carmen’s true feelings came out in her tone.

“Get on a plane and find her. Don’t call me until you have your hands around her neck.”

“I can’t,” Kane replied. “My money is low. I can’t afford a plane ticket. That’s what I need to talk to you about. I need to borrow some money. I can’t get it from Monifah because we’re not

together anymore. I broke up with her right after we left Sapphire Saturday night. You know I don't have a job. My savings is down to nothing.”

Well, well, well, Carmen thought. I knew the day was going to come. If he thinks I'm going to be his ATM, he's got another thing coming. He's going to have to work for every penny I give him. “Go ahead and pay for the ticket. If you can squeeze in fifteen minutes, submit an application on our Career portal. I'll give you a job working security. It runs about seventy grand a year. I'll even formally approve it so you can skip the interview. Just make sure you get up here to complete your paperwork before you leave. There's money in petty cash so make sure you call Cathy to get it. Just don't be foolish with it.”

“Thank you. I know that—”

Carmen hung up the phone before he could finish. She didn't have time to listen to Kane rattle. At this point, Kristian could be hemmed up in Timbuktu.

“What's wrong?” Coco asked.

“Nothing we can't handle,” Carmen replied. She flashed a smile to ease her worries. “Look, I have a meeting in a few minutes. I'm going to text King about lunch. Make sure you tell your parents about dinner, okay?”

Coco nodded her head despite her uneasiness. She wanted to live past the age of eighteen, but the chances would be slim once her mother learned of her pregnancy. She wasn't even sure how King was going to react and planned on dodging all his calls. If she was lucky, she would spend the majority of the day vomiting so she wouldn't have to talk to anyone. She was certain all hell was about to break loose and went home to prepare for it.

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