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A diminutive young woman lay sprawled at Terrell Hawkins's feet. Her motionless form confessed no sign of life.

"She's dead." Terrell's cousin Brock confirmed his fears, speaking in a choked voice from the tiled bathroom floor.

The girl's shapely chest did not rise and fall in the hallmark of the living. A ring of blood highlighted the hair at the crown of her skull. Her head collapsed to one side when Terrell pressed his middle and index fingers against her neck. Neither her neck nor her wrist revealed a pulse.

"I told you... she's dead," Brock moaned. He sounded as if he were on the verge of tears.

Terrell's first thought was that if he had kept a low profile while Monet was visiting her sick mother in Virginia Beach, this horrible situation couldn't possibly have occurred. Instead, he agreed to let Brock and their friend Shawntae bring some random sluts to his apartment in northeast Baltimore. If he had said no or at least not actively participated in the debauchery that ensued, there wouldn't be a dead girl in his bathroom. But he had participated quite vigorously. His mind returned to earlier that night, recalling the events that led him into a drunken, post-coital slumber as the girl at his feet lost her life.

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2

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Red plastic cups and bottles of alcohol in various states of depletion littered the floor of Terrell's living room. Cigar guts and ashes rested in two paper bowls that served as makeshift ashtrays.

One A.M. approached as a malevolent sky threatened the early June night. Plied with alcohol and marijuana, Tia and Tiffany Jenkins danced suggestively as Brock and Shawntae leered at them from Terrell's couch.

Their friend Heloise sucked her teeth. "They always act so raunchy." She sat next to Terrell on his loveseat, close enough for her skirted thigh to brush against his leg.

He leaned toward her, struggling to hear over the blaring stereo. "What did you say?"

"I said they act so raunchy!" Heloise's throaty voice was like honey in Terrell's ear. She had a pleasant, vaguely fruity smell. Her breasts were full, her legs long and lean.

Terrell had only intended to play the polite host to Heloise, giving Brock and Shawntae time and space to get the two sisters into bed. That was before he'd started drinking. Though he hadn't had one pull of marijuana, Heloise's stunning attractiveness combined with the mind numbing effects of alcohol to push Monet far from his mind.

Terrell smiled. "Yeah," he said. "I like quiet girls- like you."

Heloise giggled. "I like you, too." She was no more sober than Terrell was.

The sisters continued their antics, grinding against each other shamelessly.

Riled up by the lurid dancing, Shawntae placed a tree like arm around Tiffany's tiny waist, pulling her tight against him. "Come on,

girl,” he said, pressing his crotch against her from behind. “I got somethin’ betta for you to grind on.”

Terrell smiled as Shawntae and his soon to be notch on the belt walked toward Malik’s bedroom. Malik had left Baltimore for Brooklyn immediately after Morrison University’s spring semester ended. His uncle had lined up a good summer job for him there. It had been agreed upon that whoever had the good fortune of putting some mileage on Malik’s bed springs would be responsible for straightening his quarters afterward. Terrell had no doubt that Shawntae would clean up with a huge grin plastered on his face.

Moments later, Heloise asked to see Terrell’s bedroom. He knew that he should brush her off, but he was far too drunk and she was far too sexy to refuse. He regarded her statuesque frame as they entered. Two-inch pumps brought her almost even with his 6-1 height.

They hadn’t been on Terrell’s bed for ten minutes before Heloise confessed that the weed and alcohol had made her quite horny. She asked if Terrell felt as horny as she did.

“What’s it look like?” he slurred, whipping Terrell Junior out. Monet was not even a shadow of a thought in his drunken, lustful mind.

Heloise giggled, idly brushing his little friend with her left hand.

“Whatchu’ want me to do wit’ that?”

“You’re a big girl. I don’t think you need instructions.”

After Heloise finished treating his trouser snake like the world's sweetest lollipop, Terrell plowed her in various positions. He paused once when he heard a crashing noise.

He looked down at Heloise. "You hear that?"

"Who gives a fuck?" she said. She leered at him and wrapped her legs tighter around the small of his back. "Finish fuckin' me. You were doing so good."

Terrell managed another dozen pleasurable thrusts or so before spilling his load into the condom he wore. He and Heloise then collapsed into drunken, sexually satisfied slumber.

They remained in that state until Brock crept into the room and shook Terrell awake.

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3

Terrell's awakening senses failed to make out what his cousin was saying. "Wh-uuut?" he groaned.

"Shh!" Brock placed a trembling finger over his own trembling lips. "Git up. I gotta show you something."

Drunken grogginess did not stop Terrell from recognizing the shakiness in his cousin's voice. He slowly rose from the bed, taking care not to awaken Heloise.

The previously foreboding sky had given way to a tremendous rainstorm as Terrell slept. Flashes of lightning and crackling thunder announced heaven's fury.

Terrell slipped his boxers back on and closed the bedroom door behind him. He became aware of the eerie silence that permeated his apartment.

Brock's eyes were the size of saucers. His body was slick with sweat.

"What's wrong, Cuz?" Terrell whispered.

"I fucked up, man," Brock moaned, sounding like he was on the verge of tears. "I really fucked up."

"What are you talkin' about?"

Brock motioned for Terrell to follow him. They walked into the bathroom. Tia lay still there, across the naked floor tiles.

Having confirmed the girl's death, Terrell hauled his much smaller cousin to his feet. He stared into Brock's distraught eyes. "Tell me how this happened."

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4

Brock didn't need video footage to know what was happening in the bedrooms. He figured that it was time for him and Tia to get down to the business of slapping bellies as well.

Tia had different ideas about how matters should proceed. Instead of rushing to what Brock felt was the inevitable conclusion; she took great pleasure in teasing him and keeping him waiting.

She played peek-a-boo, exposing her breasts before tucking them away again. She rubbed Brock's crotch through his jean shorts, then backed away, laughing. Just when he'd had enough of her antics, she unzipped his shorts and pulled them to his knees.

She kneeled in front of the couch and stared up at him. Her full lips unfurled into a devil's smile. "Don't nut while I'm doin' this, because I want you to fuck me real good."

A few pleasurable minutes later, someone knocked on the door. Brock ignored it at first, but the knocking persisted.

Tia urged him not to answer.

"I have to," he explained, rising to his feet and fixing his clothes. "It might be somethin' serious."

Seated on the couch once more, Tia folded her arms in a displeased pose. "What could be more serious than what I was jus' doin'?"

Brock ignored Tia and looked through the people to see Terrell's upstairs neighbor. Brock didn't remember the man's name. He thought of him as the chubby dude who worked for Baltimore Gas and Electric.

The man said that his wife had henpecked him into coming downstairs and asking that they turn the music down. Brock apologized for the disturbance and agreed to do as asked.

After carrying out the request, Brock sidled back over to Tia. He was surprised to find her face flushed with anger. He wondered if he should leave well enough alone before thinking of the world class oral skills she had just demonstrated. He decided that he had to see what else she could do.

"Come on, sexy." Brock leaned over her. "Les' pick up where we left off."

“Fuck that!” she hissed. “Didn’t I ask you not to answer the door?”

Brock’s eyes expanded like rising yeast. “How you gon’ be mad about that? I had to git it. Somethin’ serious could have been goin’ on. People don’t jus’ knock on their neighbor’s doors in the middle of the night for no reason.”

“Somethin’ serious was goin’ on.” Tia’s eyes blazed in anger. “I was breakin’ you off. Nigga, this shit is exclusive. Not everybody gits to sample this.”

Brock thought of her reputation and laughed so hard that he rolled into the floor.

“I don’t see nothin’ funny!” Tia bellowed.

Brock knew that he was provoking her, but he just couldn’t stop laughing.

“I don’t know why I bother messin’ wit’ these bullshit dudes,” she grumbled, her sand colored face turning a harsh crimson.

“Bullshit?” Brock bellowed, his laughter changing to hostility in an instant. “Who the fuck you callin’ bullshit? You fuckin’ whore!”

“Who the fuck you callin’ a whore?” Tia hissed. Her head looked as if it were about to fly from her shoulders.

Brock didn’t miss a beat in upping the ante. “I’m callin’ you a whore. Thas’ what the fuck you are!”

Tia launched herself at him. Brock barely managed to ward off a flurry of blows before pushing her down on the couch. He pinned his

weight against her and held her wrists. “Yo... are you fuckin’ crazy or somethin’?”

“Git the fuck off me!” Tia’s teeth gnashed. She bucked and twisted like a wild mare trying to throw an unwelcome rider.

Brock fell silent as he continued to restrain her. Corded veins bulged in her slender arms and neck as she continued to thrash about. Brock’s own muscles strained as he waited for her to tire.

“Are you calm?” Brock asked in a weary voice when her struggles finally abated.

Tia answered in a near whisper. “Yes. Now git off me.”

“If I git off you are you gon’ come at me again?”

“No.”

“You swear?”

“I swear.”

“I mean it. I don’t want no more of this. We ain’t sposed to be fightin’ in here. That don’t make no kinda sense, baby girl.”

Tia’s voice softened to how it had been before the nasty confrontation developed.

“I know. I swear I won’t try to fight you anymore, Brock.”

Brock backed away. Tia immediately charged him. Malice filled her eyes as she swung her fisted right hand at him. Brock moved instinctively, dodging the blow and circling behind her. As she pivoted to renew her assault, he grabbed her around the waist and hoisted her from the floor.

As the diminutive fury struggled to get free, Brock used one arm to carry her toward the bathroom and the other to ward off more blows. He intended to teach her crazy ass about messing with him.

“Oh, you a hothid,” he teased. “Huh? I’m a hothid, too. I tell you what-we both gon’ cool down in the shower.”

Tia screeched. “Git the fuck offa me!”

As they struggled into the bathroom, Tia grabbed Brock’s free arm and viciously bit his wrist. He dropped her as he howled, “You crazy bitch!”

Tia regained her balance and rushed him again.

Furious, Brock pistoned his arms outward, catching her squarely in the chest with both palms. Her feet lifted from the floor as her small body flew backward. For the split second that she was airborne, she looked like a tailback on the wrong end of a collision with Ray Lewis. A ripping sound was joined by six simultaneous pings as the cheap shower curtain tore free from the bar it hung from and the plastic rings that had held it in place popped like popcorn kernels. Tia’s momentum carried the curtain with her, but it did nothing to stop her head from caroming off the inside lip of the bathtub. There was a sickening thud as her head rebounded upward before settling into a canted position against the lowest of the wall tiles that overlooked the tub. Her splayed feet hung over the edge of the bathtub as her limp arms dangled like those of a rag doll. She looked like a grotesque approximation of someone who had fallen asleep while sitting up on the couch. A dot of blood marred the spot where her head had struck.

Brock composed himself after a long stillness, taking great care in lifting Tia from the tub. The gruesomeness of her dented skull and ruined neck forced him to accept the reality of her death. He gingerly laid her in the bathroom floor, treating her broken form like a precious piece of china.

“So that’s how it happened.” Brock slumped against the towel rack, having finished his horrid account. “I can’t believe this shit is real.”

“Neither can I,” Terrell said, his lips trembling.

They both fell still and silent, remaining that way until Shawntae sauntered into the bathroom. “Shit, shorty got some good pussy,” he chuckled, drawing closer.

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5

The sight of Tia’s limp body immediately wiped the satisfied grin off Shawntae’s face. An expression of sheer shock replaced it.

“Oh, shit. Oh shit, man!” he gasped, his wide frame clad only in boxer shorts. “How the fuck did this happen?”

Tears flowed freely down Brock’s face as he answered. “I killed her, Tae. It was an accident, but I killed her. I fuckin’ killed her.”

“What the fuck are we gonna do?” Terrell asked as he pulled the door close.

Before any of them could answer, they heard footfalls approach from the hall. They cringed at the sound of Tiffany’s voice outside the bathroom door.

“Tae?” She called. “Where you at? You in the bathroom? Can I come in? I need to go!”

Tae stammered his answer. “H-hold on, baby.”

“Hurry up!” she demanded. “Umma check on Tia. I hope she feelin’ right like I am. S’ been a while since I had some good lovin’ like that. I’m gon’ need some more of that, big man.”

Terror gripped Terrell and Shawntae as Brock edged toward catatonia.

Seconds later, Tiffany yelled, “Hey! Where’s my sistah?”

Shawntae stepped into the hall in a vain attempt to keep her from the bathroom, but she barged right past him.

“I don’t like this sh...Omigod!” she gasped, “Tia! Omigod!”

She fell to her sibling’s side, trying unsuccessfully to revive her.

“How the fuck did this happen?” she demanded, her eyes and voice frantic. “She ain’t breathin’! Why ain’t she breathin’?”

After receiving no answer, Tiffany fell silent. All traces of emotion deserted her countenance as she walked trance-like from the bathroom.

“I know she’ll be alright,” she murmured. “She’ll be alright. This is just a mistake. S’all a mistake. We have to call the police. We have to call an ambulance.”

Terrell and Shawntae followed the distraught girl. She reached for the phone that was mounted in Terrell’s kitchenette. Shawntae grabbed her from behind, covering her mouth with one meaty hand.

“I’m sorry, Tiffany,” he sighed. “We can’t call nobody.”

Tiffany grabbed his large mitt with her own small, delicate hands and bit down, throwing her neck into the effort. She clamped down, savaging him like a mad pit bull.

“Argh. Argh!” Shawntae wailed in pain.

“Fuck you!” Tiffany screeched as Shawntae wrenched free. Drops of crimson leaked from his hand, landing on the tiled floor of the kitchenette.

“Fuck!” He screamed, holding his offended appendage. Tiffany scrambled to grab one of the discarded alcohol bottles, breaking it against the dining table that sat adjacent to the kitchenette. An entranced Brock emerged from the bathroom as Tiffany pointed the jagged end at Shawntae.

“You muthafuckas killed my little sistah and now I’m gon’ kill all of y’all!”

Shawntae pleaded, holding both hands out in front of himself. Blood continued to escape his wound. “Easy, Tiffany. It ain’t gotta be like that.”

Terrell stepped in front of his friend, not knowing exactly what he should do. He only knew that he didn’t want Shawntae to get hurt again.

Hatred painted Tiffany’s eyes as she fainted at Terrell with her makeshift weapon. Terrell realized just how much danger he was in when she didn’t charge him wildly. She intended to strike with accuracy.

Brock exploded into the scene, flying at Tiffany as if shot from a cannon. He twisted his whole body into a right cross, sending the petite girl crumpling into the living room carpet. Instead of pausing to check out his handiwork, he marched into Terrell's bedroom. Terrell heard the unmistakable sound of a fist striking flesh.

"What'd you do?" Shawntae asked, still nursing his ravaged hand as Brock returned.

"I knocked her out, too," Brock answered. "What the fuck were y'all gon' do?" He rubbed the knuckles of his right hand. "Let that bitch cut you up? Let those chicks keep makin' noise until somebody called the cops?"

He walked over to the couch and sat down.

"Now what?" Shawntae asked, looking down at Tiffany.

"We gotta convince these girls not to talk about this," Terrell answered.

Shawntae looked at him with disdain. "The fuck are you- crazy? That's her sister did in the bathroom 'n' shorty back there's her homegirl. How the fuck we gon' keep these bitches from talkin'?"

Terrell shrugged. "There's gotta be a way. I mean... we could just explain to them what happened. It was an accident. Maybe they'll understand."

"You must have bumped your hid harder than that chick in the bathroom," Shawntae snapped. "They just 'sposed to accept that Brock killed shorty's sistah 'n' we tryna' cover it up - 'n' thas' 'sposed to be

alright wit' them? Naw, Terrell. We gotta find some other way to keep them quiet.”

“There’s only one way to keep this quiet.” Brock’s voice was devoid of emotion. “Y’all know that.”

“Man, don’t talk stupid,” Terrell broke the long silence that followed. “We are not murderers! This shit started out as an accident, but what you’re talkin’ about is takin’ it to another level.”

“It ain’t stupid, Terrell. S’real. What the fuck could we tell the cops? That I accidentally killed Tia while defendin’ myself and then I knocked out the other two to protect y’all? Would they believe that shit?”

“S’the truth, Brock,” Shawntae said. “We didn’t mean to hurt that girl ‘n’ we didn’t mean for any of this to happen.”

“Yeah?” Brock said, standing and gesticulating wildly. “Well s’also true that shorty over there is only 17 years old ‘n’ the other chicks are only 18. Plus none of us are 21 yet so, we ain’t legal to buy alcohol but we’re all drunk as skunks ‘n’ we got weed up in here- and we’re three niggas ‘n’ the mayor’s up for re-election this year-stressin’ bein’ tough on crime. That ain’t a good position to start from wit’ the cops.”

“So your idea is better than that?” Terrell argued. “You done killed one girl by accident- now you wanna go ahead and murder the other two? Man, one manslaughter charge is a lot better than three murder charges.”

“You say that shit like manslaughter is a misdemeanor,” Brock countered. “I could git ten years for that shit alone. You know I already got assault charges on my record. ‘N’ you know they gon’ stick us wit’ them otha lil’ bullshit charges ‘cuz we black.”

Brock paused for a moment. “Well, fuck that shit!” he bellowed. “I don’t wanna go to jail, period. ‘N’ if you think y’all wouldn’t git no time behind it, you fuckin’ crazy.”

“Man, I don’t give a fuck what you talkin’ about,” Terrell said, a sneer on his face. “That shit ain’t happenin’.”

“It has to happen,” Shawntae spoke with grave resignation. He placed his right hand on Terrell’s shoulder.

Terrell pushed it away, scowling in disgust. “I can’t believe you agree with this shit, Tae!”

“Yo, T- if we don’t do this shit, our lives are ruined. You wanna have to git your college degree in jail? You think it’ll matter how smart you are when you gotta cop to some shit like this on job applications? Even if you don’t go to jail - you think Monet will still be down witchu’ after she finds out about this shit? You fucked that chick back there-didn’t you? You think any of our families will look at us the same if this comes out? They’ll be ashamed of us, man.”

“Fuck shame!” Terrell hissed. “That ain’t a consideration for me. I’m not tryna’ be involved in murder because I know it’s wrong! I know its’ wrong and we could never atone for something like that.”

“What do you say, Brock?” Shawntae acted as if he hadn’t heard a word Terrell said.

“You already know what I say.”

Shawntae nodded, turning back to Terrell. “I’m sorry, man. But we’re doin’ it wit’ or witout you.”

As Shawntae spoke, Brock started toward Terrell’s bedroom. Heloise started to stir as he watched. She fell still when he punched her on the side of her head.

“What the fuck, man?” Terrell cried, having followed his cousin in. He moved in front of Heloise’s unconscious form. Brock shrugged, holding his palms out as if to say he had no other choice.

“I’m not gonna let y’all do this,” Terrell’s voice quavered.

Brock returned to where Tiffany lay. He pointed down at her. “Did she move any?”

“Nope,” Tae answered, running water from the kitchenette sink over his wound.

“You got any band-aids or bandages?” he asked Terrell.

Terrell retrieved some gauze from the first aid kit under the bathroom sink. He never imagined making such use of the housewarming gift from his mother. Shawntae used a good portion of the gauze to cover his bleeding hand.

“I’m not gon’ let y’all do this,” Terrell repeated.

Shawntae removed the cordless telephone from its base and handed it to Terrell. As he did that, Brock returned to Terrell’s bedroom. Brock emerged with a pillow. He stood solemnly, awaiting the outcome of the contest of wills between his dearest cousin and his closest friend.

“Then go hid ‘n’ call the police,” Shawntae said. “Go on. Call the police and send your own cous- fuck that, your brutha to jail for a long time. We’re all like bruthas- or have you forgotten? Grew up within two blocks of each other. Ran around in the same East Baltimore streets- went to the same elementary and middle schools. Always been there for each other- through all kinds of shit. We always been there for each other. You tellin’ me we not gon’ be there for each other now? Then go hid. Go hid ‘n’ call the police - if you kin live wit’ that.”

Shawntae continued when Terrell offered no response. “Kin you live with that? Sendin’ us all to jail?” ‘N’ for what? Some triflin’ ass bitches? Them trashy bitches didn’t even give a fuck about themselves. You really wanna throw our lives away on them?”

Terrell slumped into a chair at his humble dining table. He noticed Tiffany starting to stir. The telephone slipped from his hand, coming to rest on the tabletop.

“No, I don’t,” he sighed, thinking of the girls with sadness and disdain. “I don’t wanna throw our lives away on them.”

Salty tears slid down Terrell’s face as Brock first smothered Tiffany, then Heloise with the pillow. The entire world faded away, leaving only Brock’s ragged breathing and the lifeless eyes of the slain girls.