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Damage Control

*“Outcasts and girls with ambition/
That’s what I wanna see”*

—PINK

It’s Friday and the homecoming buzz is all around. It’s only been two days since the finalists were announced and there are already posters of the candidates all over campus. I feel for Nellie being one of the Drama Club’s candidates. Not because we’re not organized, but because we aren’t all that visible on campus unless we’re on stage. We’re good at performing and talking shit. But, when it comes to making signs, posters, and all the campaign tools necessary to win, that just ain’t our thang.

And, as if there wasn’t enough tension in my life, Jeremy springs on me this morning that he doesn’t do dances. Some bullshit about him and his brothers making a pact years back. It’s been on my mind since we pulled up to campus and I can’t wait to catch up with him again today so we can finish our discussion. What the hell?

“Hey, Jayd,” Nigel calls down the hall after me. “Wait up.” It’s break and I want to catch up with my girls and Jeremy. But, I’m glad to see Nigel too. I want my letter.

“You must be the busiest Black man at South Bay High,” I say, giving him a hug. The other students in the Main Hall notice us and I feel self-conscious. I don’t want Jeremy or Misty

to get wind of me being too friendly with the new guy. "Where's my letter?" I ask.

"A little anxious, are we?" Nigel teases. It feels just like old times. "I met your girls, secret agent double-o-seven," he says, taking what I assume to be my letter out of his backpack. "What kinda friend you think I am? You knew I wasn't going to tell them girls nothing," he says, waving the letter in my face.

"Well, if you would have simply come back to Mr. Donald's class the same day and given me the letter, I wouldn't have to send my girls on a mission," I say as I reach for the letter. "Would you please give it to me?"

"I knew you wanted me, Jayd, but damn. You don't have to beg," he says, laughing at his own joke.

"You're so stupid, Nigel. Give me the damned letter," I yell, tired of his behavior. Why do boys have to play so much?

"All you have to do is say please," he says, handing me the letter I've waited all week to read. It had better be good.

"I got to meet up with coach before class," Nigel says. He's always been a dedicated athlete and student, as well as a serious rapper. Gotta love a well-rounded brother. And, many sisters do. "I sent a little message for you through your girls. Holla," he says before sprinting down the hall. Now I can read my letter in peace.

I walk outside class since it doesn't look like I'm going to catch up with anyone before the bell rings in the next minute. Leaning up against a tree outside Government class, I open the sealed envelop with the letter *J* on it and unfold the paper inside.

"Jayd, I miss you. Call me. Same number, same Rah.
Peace."

That's it? That's so typical of Rah to leave me hanging. He's always been a man of a few words, unlike KJ and very

much like Jeremy. I want to talk to Nigel more, but I'm trying to keep my association with him on the low for as long as possible. I'll have to see what Mickey came up with at lunch.

As we make ourselves comfortable on a bench outside the library, Nellie, Mickey, and I begin to dish on Nigel. No one is likely to hear us here.

"So, Miss America, how's the campaign going?" Mickey says, making me wait for my news.

"It's a little slow. What I really need is a campaign manager who's known by everybody and respected by most. The Drama Club gets no love among the majority of the other cliques and I don't really like talking to people, which makes it damn near impossible for me to reach my constituents," Nellie says, flipping her hair over her shoulders and then studying her French manicure. She's such a princess, and most of the time, I love her for it.

"Your constituents," Mickey asks incredulously.

"Yes. My constituents. The people need a real campaign. Like that girl Laura. Her face is plastered all over the place. I can't even squat in the girl's restroom without seeing her campaign posters. What makes her so hot?" she asks, dipping her celery sticks into a plastic container full of ranch dressing before taking a bite. We all decided to be good today and have salads from the cafeteria.

"Nellie, Laura's boyfriend is the Associated Student Body president. Of course her campaign's going to be more visible," I offer, not sure I'm really helping. But, it's the truth. It'll take a miracle for Nellie to win this race. "Besides, the Drama Club has it's own campaign strategy, to pull the votes in during our killer performance homecoming week. I'm sure your campaign will be just fine."

"Maybe you should be her campaign manager," Mickey says, only half serious, I hope.

“Oh, hell no,” I say, cutting off Nellie’s response.

“But, why not? You’re the natural choice, Jayd. You’re in the Drama Club, you’re my friend, and you used to be in ASB, so you know what we’re up against,” Nellie reasons. But I’m not budging.

“I have enough drama of my own, thank you very much, which moves us to the next item on our agenda. What did you get out of Nigel?” I ask, almost whispering in between bites of my oversize salad. It’s like the salad bar at Sizzler’s in our cafeteria.

“Yeah. Is he taken? Because if not, you can slip him my number. It would be so cute if we ended up at the dance together. He, the first Black quarterback and me, the first Black homecoming princess. Our names even sound good together: Nellie and Nigel, or Nigel and Nellie,” she says, almost dreamlike.

“Well, he must be with someone because a brotha didn’t even try and holla at all this,” Mickey says, eyeing her reflection in the library door window.

“Hello? Back to me,” I declare, reaching for my bottled water on the ground next to my backpack. It’s October and still hot as hell out here by lunchtime.

“Oh yeah. He says you’re missed,” Mickey says, almost annoyed. “And to come to the studio tonight, if you’re free, that is.”

“The studio? Oh, no, not another wannabe rapper. Now I’m completely turned off,” Nellie says, looking totally disgusted. “Why can’t brothers just be football players or whatever their real talent is? Why everybody got to try to be a rapper?” she asks, finishing the last of her salad before opening her Snapple.

“Actually, rapping is his talent. Football’s his hustle,” I say, checking Nellie’s snobbish attitude. I remember the first time

Raheem took me to his homemade studio in his mother's garage. When I heard his beats and Nigel's rhymes I knew they would make it big one day soon.

"Oh, yeah? And, what's Raheem's talent?" she retorts, making me a little flustered.

"His talent is producing and mixing sounds. They're actually a really good team," I say as I get up to throw the remainder of my salad in the trash can.

"And, does Raheem also have a hustle?" Mickey asks with a devilish smile.

"Yes, he does. But, that's none of your business," I say, not wanting to give up too much information on my boy. "Raheem's actually a very intelligent brotha. He's planning on studying law and becoming an entertainment lawyer, as well as a producer."

"And you sound like his first groupie," Nellie says.

"Actually, that's a story for another day," I say, remembering my first kiss with Raheem. It tasted like chocolate milk and Doritos. It was my first kiss and his too. We were each other's first everything. Well, almost everything.

"Ooh, sounds like this is going to be good," Mickey says, ready for the scoop. But, I'm holding out on full disclosure for as long as possible.

"I ain't telling y'all nosy heffas nothing," I say.

"Come on, Jayd. We won't tell your dirty little secrets. What did y'all do?" Mickey asks.

"None of your business," I say, a little flushed. She's bringing up memories of me and Rah making out when I had full sensation in my breasts before my reduction.

"So, are you going to the studio? He says the session's tomorrow night and you know the spot and time," Mickey says, not letting it go.

"I don't know. I don't think Jeremy would be too happy

with me going to my ex's for a late-night rhyme session," I say, missing my man.

"That's right, Jayd. You and Jeremy just started life as a couple a few days ago. Don't go ruining it over some wannabe Tupac," Nellie agrees, picking up her and Mickey's trash and taking it to the trash can.

"Don't listen to her, Jayd. Nigel seemed to genuinely miss you and says Raheem does too. I think you should at least reach out," Mickey says, handing me a piece of paper with both Nigel and Raheem's cell numbers on it. "Did you get the letter?" she asks.

"Yeah, but it didn't say much," I say, taking the envelope out of my backpack and handing it to Mickey.

"Jayd, you don't need no more drama, especially if you're going to be my campaign manager," Nellie says as she sits down next to me, reaching for the paper with their numbers on it and ignoring my first rejection.

"Nellie, I'm not heading your campaign for the slaughter house," I say, instantly feeling bad for doubting my friend's chances at winning. But, the dream I had the other night is still haunting me. Should I tell her about it? Will she see it as a warning or me being a typical jealous female? Either way, I'm keeping my mouth shut on all fronts.

"It won't be a slaughter if you manage my public persona," Nellie says, sounding sincere. Shit. Why is she dragging me into this?

"Come on, Jayd. You're good at this kind of stuff, and you know damn near everybody of influence up here," Mickey says, getting up from her spot at the other end of the bench to stretch her long, thin legs. She could easily be America's Next Top Model.

"Please? I'll be extra nice to your boyfriend, whoever he turns out to be," Nellie says, giving me a hug with her silly ass

to seal the deal. Even though I really don't want to manage her homecoming campaign, I'd feel bad if I didn't. I've got to help my girl out or she'll be butchered by the competition.

"You know you owe me for this," I say.

"Aah, thank you, Jayd. I'll never forget this," Nellie says, hugging me so hard we almost fall off the bench.

"OK, now that we've got that out the way, what are you going to do about Nigel?" Mickey asks.

"Well, I'm going to my mom's house tonight anyway. Maybe I'll go just for a little while."

"Don't worry, girl. We got your back," Mickey says. "If Jeremy asks what you're doing tonight, just tell him you're hanging out with us," she says, immediately looking at Nellie for her anticipated disapproval of lying.

"What? Why y'all looking at me?" she asks.

"You don't have a problem with providing Jayd with a false alibi?" Mickey challenges Nellie.

"Not at all. I told you, Jayd: I owe you for this. Now, let's talk about our platform," Nellie says, reaching into my backpack to retrieve a pen and writing paper.

"You better use these couple of weeks to your advantage, Jayd. You may not ever get her to be this flexible again," Mickey says just as the bell signaling the end of lunch rings. I missed spending it with Jeremy. But, since he's taking me to my mom's tonight, I wanted to spend this time with my girls instead.

"If I win," Nellie says, putting the pen and paper back into my backpack and leading the way toward the Main Hall, "you'll never have to hear a word of disapproval about any of the poor decisions you make in the men you date ever again."

"Was that supposed to be a kind remark?" I ask, not quite sure if I should be insulted or not.

"Yes, of course it was. And, what's so special about Nigel

and Raheem anyway?” she asks, obviously not knowing about the brothas at Westingle High.

“Well, you tell me, Mrs. N & N, or did you forget the monograms you already have engraved in your pretty little head?” I say, reminding her a few minutes ago she was sprung on Nigel her damned self.

“Yes, but I was just joking and judging him from his public persona here. But, to lie to your man? Now, I don’t know if he’s that special.”

“He’s not, but Raheem is, huh, Jayd?” Mickey asks, barely missing running into the people rushing past us as we slowly make our way to class.

“Mickey, it’s not like that. I’m going to tell Jeremy exactly where I’m going if he asks.”

“OK, but back to my original question. What’s so special about them?” Nellie says.

“Where do I begin,” I say, reminiscing about my days as Raheem’s woman. “Being with cats from Westingle is a whole other experience,” I say as we continue our walk toward the Main Hall. Granted, I wasn’t with Raheem when he started his new school. But, he and Nigel fit right in with those brothers, I’m sure. I know plenty of them from working at Simply Wholesome. They are all fine and intelligent, just like Rah and Nigel. “The brothas at Westingle are all cocky, but not like KJ: They actually have all the right shit to be cocky about.”

“Shit like what?” Nellie asks, leading the way down the long corridor toward our lockers. The hall is full of students rushing past us. I was supposed to meet up with Jeremy before going to fifth period, but I guess I’ll have to wait to see him after school. This conversation’s too important to leave hanging.

“Everything, y’all. The brothers are fine, clean cut, athletic, smart, wealthy, and they got street hustle, unlike KJ and

his boys who just front. They also have no need to play games because they're wanted by every girl in sight," I say, feeling a twinge of pain as I remember the reason Raheem and I could never get it together.

"So, if they're so damn hot, then why aren't you still with your man?" Nellie asks, turning the twinge into a pang.

"Because they're too hot for my own good. Raheem wanted to have his fun and me too," I say as we approach Nellie's locker. Luckily, I don't need to bring books to my last two classes of the day, drama and dance. "Besides, we're much better off as friends, even though we haven't spoken in over a year."

"Hey, baby. I missed you at lunch today," Jeremy says, sneaking up behind me and giving me a great big bear hug. I love the way he feels.

"Hey, you," I say giving my girls the evil eye and turning around to kiss him. Why didn't they tell me he was coming?

"We'll call you later, Jayd. Bye, Jeremy," Mickey says as she leads Nellie down the hall toward their fifth period class.

"Bye, y'all," I say with hella attitude. "So, how was lunch with your boys?" I ask Jeremy as he takes my backpack in one hand and puts his other arm around my shoulders. I love when he walks me to class.

"It was cool. We just played hacky sack by the parking lot and shot the shit. Nothing special. How about you and your girls? Are they still giving you shit for being with me?" he says, smiling down at me with those pretty eyes.

"Not really. Nellie wants me to be her campaign manger and for you to take me to the dance," I say, hoping a little pressure from my girls will help change his mind. They actually don't know yet. But, I already know what they'll say.

"Well, you can get involved in the whole homecoming thing by being Nellie's campaign manager and going to the

dance, but I'm sure they understand a man has his principles," he says, not bending at all.

"No, they don't, and frankly, neither do I."

"Can we talk about this later? I'm still taking you to Inglewood this afternoon, right?" he asks, reaching down to kiss me before beating the bell to his class.

"Yes, but this doesn't mean you're forgiven," I say, allowing him to kiss my pouty lips. His kisses are so tempting, but this dance is important to me and Nellie. He should come to offer his support if nothing else. "What's the big deal if you really don't care? Can't you just do it because it means a lot to me?" I ask, knowing he can't answer me right now.

"After school, Jayd. And, it's personal to me, baby. Real personal. I'll explain later." As I watch my man run down the hall, I wonder what I've really gotten myself into with this cat.

I'm glad the week is over. It's been hectic, trying to deal with Nellie's growing head and keeping my own cat from jumping out of the bag. I wonder how long I can keep my friendship with Nigel a secret from Jeremy. Not for long, if Misty has anything to say about it, I'm sure. I just hope my friendships with Nigel and Raheem don't ruin my relationship with Jeremy. Guys are so territorial when it comes to male friends. But, what's up with Jeremy not taking me to the first dance of the year? He better have a damn good excuse for this one.

As I walk up the hill from dance class and toward the Main Hall, I notice Misty and KJ walking toward the main parking lot. Where the hell are they going together? I know KJ ain't stupid enough to actually get with this girl.

"Hey, Jayd," KJ says as I walk past, trying not to look directly at them.

"Hey, KJ," I say, ignoring Misty. I should have known better

than to trust her around KJ in the first place. Like Mama says, keep your friends close and your enemies closer. I momentarily let Misty out of my sight and she single-handedly ruins my relationship with KJ, gets me into some bullshit with his side trick Trecee, and now she's kicking it with him. Damn, she's good.

"Is KJ the only person you see?" Misty says. "I know you got better manners than that, Jayd." I stop dead in my tracks and look her straight in the eye. If I could blow her up I would.

"I don't speak to broads," I say, resuming my pace. I hope I can catch up with my girls before they head out. I knew Jeremy was going to take me to my Mom's house today, so I brought my weekend stuff to school and stuffed it into my locker.

When I reach my locker, Jeremy and my girls are already there waiting for me.

"Hey, Jayd. What took you so long? You almost missed us," Nellie says.

"Hey, baby," I say, stretching up to kiss my man and ignoring Nellie's impatience.

"Oh, OK. It's like that," Nellie says, playfully pushing me, knocking Jeremy and me off balance.

"Leave them alone," Mickey says, folding her cell shut. "You're just hating cause you ain't gotta man."

"That's not true," Nellie says, looking slightly embarrassed. "Don't you think I could have a man if I wanted one?"

"With your finicky, high-maintenance ass? Not really," Mickey says, further aggravating Nellie.

"I know someone who's interested," Jeremy says, of course referring to Chance. If the two of them got together, it would be a first for them both. Chance usually dates skanky White girls. And Nellie only dates Black dudes with hella Benjamins, which is why she's perpetually single.

“If you’re talking about Chance, I’m cool. But, I am grateful to him for nominating me, which reminds me . . . Jayd, when are you going to get started on my campaign? I need posters, fliers, and buttons. I want the works. I want to give Laura what’s-her-face a run for her money,” she says, getting all riled up.

Students and faculty alike are clearing the halls, ready to leave South Bay High behind for the weekend. And frankly, so am I, even though I am kind of excited about helping my girl win. We need to break some new boundaries around this camp, regardless of what my dream predicts.

“Calm down, Nellie. I’ll get started next week,” I say retrieving my books and bag from my locker before slamming it shut. It’s still a little sticky from the new paint. But, at least now I can get open it without any help. Jeremy instinctively grabs my backpack, leaving me to carry only my Gap Hobo bag full of my weekend stuff.

“Jayd, I want to win. So, don’t sleep on it, OK? Come on, Mickey. I need to get to the mall to pick out my dress.”

“Who the hell you do you think you are?” Mickey says. “I ain’t your damn chauffeur.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Nellie says, trying to clean up her mess. She knows better than to come at Mickey wrong. “I just meant I know you have to get home and I don’t want to keep you.”

“Yeah, whatever. I hope your ass don’t win. You’re already too much of a damn princess. See y’all later,” Mickey says, giving me a hug. “And, have nice weekend, Jayd,” she says, slyly referring to the session tonight with Raheem and Nigel.

“OK, Jayd. But, please get to work on my campaign strategies this weekend. Remember, it’s for a good cause,” Nellie says as she gives me a hug and Jeremy a pat on the shoulder. “Get my girl home safely. And, tell Chance if he gets a new car, I’ll think about allowing him to take me to dinner.”

"I'll give him the message," Jeremy says, laughing at my silly friend. As they head out of the Main Hall, Jeremy and I walk slowly in the same direction.

"That Nellie is something else," Jeremy says.

"Something else and much, much more." As we walk down the hill toward the back parking lot where Jeremy's parked, I notice the dark blue ocean water in the distance. I see boats dotting the horizon and surfers lost in the waves.

"Do you miss going to the beach with your friends after school?"

"Not when I'm hangin with you," he says, letting go of my hand and pulling me close to him.

"Well, if you like me so much, then why won't you take me to the dance?" I ask, ready to start the conversation he put on hold earlier.

"Like I said, it's personal, baby. And, it has nothing to do with my feelings for you."

"Well, then what is it? Cause, I don't understand. You see how excited Nellie is to be nominated. It means so much to her and to Chance. Can't you come to support our friends?" I ask, looking up at him poutily as we approach the car. Breaking our embrace, he opens the car door and tosses my backpack into the backseat before letting me in. When he takes his seat and starts the engine, he looks at me very seriously.

"Jayd, there's a lot of history between Reid's family and mine. And, because of my loyalty to my brothers, I don't support any function Reid has anything to do with. Dances and all." Being that part of ASB's duties is to put together all school dances, I guess he won't be taking me to a single one.

"But Jeremy, what about your loyalty to me? And, don't you want to see me in a sexy evening gown?" I ask, touching his thigh as we head out of the near empty parking lot toward Inglewood.

“Baby, like I said. It’s personal. I hope you can understand I don’t mean to hurt you. And, of course I want to see you all dressed up, as fine as you are. I tell you what. I’ll come over and help you get dressed and I’ll even take you and pick you up,” he says, attempting a compromise. I know he’s trying to be sweet, but all I can see is his stubbornness.

“Baby, please don’t make me go alone,” I say, almost pleading. I can just hear Misty, KJ, Shae, and the rest of South Central talking shit all night long if I come without my man. I’ll never live it down.

“I’m not making you do anything. And, you won’t be alone. There’ll be plenty of people there, just not me. Besides, Jayd, dances are so boring to me. I’m just not into school functions like that.” Well, I guess that’s the end of that. Whatever happened between his and Reid’s families must be pretty bad and I’m just dying to know what it is. But, I know better than to push him right now. I’ll wait for a more suitable time, like when I’m nibbling his ear.

As we speed down Pacific Coast Highway, our conversation is quickly replaced by the radio. Listening to Gwen Stefani, I realize I ain’t no hollaback girl, either. I’m going to the session tonight. I’ll call Nigel as soon as I get to my Mom’s house and let him know I’m coming. Besides, it’ll be nice to see Raheem.