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## Acknowledgements/Dedication

*In loving memory of Godfrey Peters. You are deeply loved and never, ever forgotten.*

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# Treat Her Like A Lady

*A Short Story*

By G. S. Sinclair

# Chapter 1

**H**IS FIST CONNECTED WITH HER jaw, and she felt fire shoot from her eardrums. She knew, without looking, that the salty taste in her mouth was blood. Topaz Bond braced herself for the afterthought. As he turned around to give her a slap that was the *best of his love*, she felt her bottom lip burst. It hurt too bad to cry. Besides she was just too damn scared. This was the last time Curtis Ellis was gonna use her...the last time. She stumbled to her knees. She couldn't quite straighten up. If she could just catch her breath and stop her heart from thumping.

“Ho, Imma kill you today. Tired uh yo shit, ya here me?”

*Barely.* She managed to say, “Curtis, why you always gotta—”

“Gotta what, bitch? Huh, huh. Say that muthafuckin shit again.” He slurred and the stench of Grey Goose Vodka overwhelmed her.

BAM! The stained Nike sneaker crashed into the metal locker before it ricocheted to her back. She was numb to the blow, but its impact flattened her. Two sharp kicks connected with her side, threatening to lift her off the floor. Before floating off somewhere between yesterday and tomorrow, she heard him say, “You gon pay for makin me fuck up my shoes on you, ugly-ass bitch!”

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## TREAT HER LIKE A LADY

Topaz Bond lay in her tastefully decorated aqua and white bedroom. Her head pounded, her throat was parched and she had no recollection of getting out of Curtis' phantom grey Escalade. Yet, here she lay fully clothed on her bed. She looked in disgust at her bloodstained tee shirt.

She worried if the investment banker and his red-headed trophy wife in the huge six-bedroom home next door saw him bringing her in last night. Their three car garage faced the front of the Bond home. They didn't have kids and no one saw them except when they were unloading their cars or driving away from the gated Olympia Fields community that housed the well off and the trying-to-be well off. Even if they had seen Curtis bring her home, she doubted that they would have mentioned anything to her mother, Brinda.

Turning her head to the nightstand as her cell phone's display lit, she heard the refrain from Miley Cyrus' song, "I Came In Like A Wrecking Ball," the tune that she *tongue in cheek* made Curtis' signature ring. He *had* entered her life just like a wrecking ball.

Curtis Ellis had struck her as a hella handsome man with his small, tight physique. She knew he was much older than her, but somehow the fact that they were both nearly the same height lowered her defenses. Being driven around in his Escalade, going to the best restaurants and clubs had made her feel special. She glanced toward her closet at the large Coach and Michael Kors purses Curtis had given her. Expensive gifts that made her girlfriends envious. He had broken down her walls and the sex had been white hot until he became possessive, controlling who she talked to and where she went. Now, she felt like a wreck, and she just wanted to run away.

She ignored the persistent ring until mercifully it stopped. He should be at Fifth-Third Bank now. At least between now and 5:45 m she was free of him. She gathered her strength to get up. Her face hurt, her lips were swollen and her gums ached.

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She lay in her queen-sized bed with her clothes on. Curtis had, for some strange reason, taken her shoes off. When she sat up, she noticed they were neatly arranged: right foot, then left foot on the right side of her bed. *Shit, what kind of maniac beats the crap outta you and then carefully places your shoes?*

She would piss her bed if she laid down another minute. The battered girl rose slowly, like an accordion unfolding each crease one-by-one so that she could bear unleashing the pain. She heard the alarm clock on her dresser across the room. To avoid continuously pressing the snooze button until she was late for school, she didn't keep it next to her bed. This way she had to get up to cut it off. The noise aggravated her already-pounding head and she staggered over to turn it off. Topaz walked barefoot into the cool, aqua tiled bathroom of her bedroom suite. She squatted unsteadily, allowing the strong stream of urine to wash away the sperm that Curtis had probably deposited in her while she was unconscious. He had done it before, telling her, “No use letting good ass go to waste.” She was happy for the safety that birth control pills provided against ever having a baby with Curtis.

“Topaz, sweetie, you up yet?”

“Yes, Mama,” came her startled response, “Uh, I’m in the bathroom.”

“Good. Did you do your homework last night?”

She took a deep breath before lying. Her mother worked two jobs so that they could afford this nice home in Olympia Fields. Brinda Bond was always either getting ready to leave for one job or the other—or just dog-tired. Topaz had no complaints. They had a fly-ass crib in the suburbs; she attended Rich Central, a good school, and her mother gave her a generous clothing allowance. But sometimes she missed having her around. She wished her mother had time to shop or just chill

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with her and giggle the way they used to when she was younger. Before her father died. Now her mother's entire focus was working so that her daughter had a chance for a better life.

"Yes, Ma'am, all done," she said, mustering everything in her to sound cheerful.

"I made you some pancakes. Come on down."

Realizing she wasn't prepared to face her mother, she told a second lie. "Oh, uh, Mama, I just came on my period and I'm a mess. It's gonna take me a few minutes." She looked at the silver filigree-embellished face of her watch and noted it was seven-o'clock.

Brinda Bond needed to leave any moment to drive and park at the Metra Station in time to make the seven-fifteen train, or she would be late for her secretarial job at Kirkland and Ellis, where she worked closely with one of the law firm's partners. In addition to her work at the law firm, Brinda augmented her income with commissions earned working as a real estate agent for RE/MAX. Her life was a hectic race to keep her and Topaz living comfortably in the school district where her daughter could get a good education.

"Okay, sweetie, take a couple of Midols if you're cramping."

Her heart jumped as she heard her bedroom door open.

"Topaz, I'm headed out. Don't be late for school again."

"No way, Mother, I'm getting ready now."

"OOOKay."

She heard a hint of skepticism and warning in her mother's tone.

"Listen, I'll see you tonight. I should be home early. I don't have any properties to show this evening."

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Her mother closed her bedroom door, and Topaz heard her feet descending the steps to the first floor.

Topaz leaned against the bathroom door exhaling in relief. Crisis averted. With a single lie she had assured her mother that she was on her period, avoiding further questions and buying herself time to assess the damage to her face and make repairs.

As her mother hurriedly turned the tumblers on the front door locks, she said, “Have a great day! I love you.”

She had barely formed the words, “Love you, too, Mom” when she heard the front door slam shut.

Aware that she *was* going to be late for school, she was comforted by the fact that she could easily make Trigonometry up; she loved math.

She stood and looked in the full-length bathroom door mirror as she pulled the short green tee shirt over her head. Her entire body ached, but it was the muscles of her mid-section that were raw with pain. She looked on her left side and saw the bruise and remembered the kick that had landed and left its mark.

Her mother would call the police on Curtis if she knew about the maroon bruise on her daughter’s side or caught a glimpse of her puffed-up bottom lip.

At least she didn’t have a black eye, and she just might be able to excuse the lip away by saying that she tripped down the stairs. Topaz stepped into the steam shower and allowed the hot water to pummel her, to cleanse her, to soothe her. The scent of orange blossom body wash lifted her limp spirits. She carefully towed dry, brushed her hair, parting it down the middle so that it framed her cocoa-colored face delicately and barely grazed her slim shoulders. She searched in her overstuffed cosmetic bag and applied a light coat of colorless lip balm to her lips and searched

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for the new tube of MAC lipstick. Lipstick was her passion. She applied her newest shade, Candy Yum Yum, with a soft sable brush, making sure she got full, coverage of her lips. She could barely smile when she saw her reflection in the mirror.

She walked into her closet and quickly chose a pair of slim jeans and a graphic tee. Slipping on a pair of four-inch pumps, she was locked and loaded. She grabbed her book bag and rambled for her incomplete homework assignments. She had intended to complete her school work, but Curtis had picked her up from school and took her to his gym to work out with him—or rather to witness his half-clothed, sweaty workout. He was vain, always patting his six-pack and flexing his biceps.

Her mind flashed back briefly to yesterday afternoon just before the fight started.

“Hey, baby girl, look at what ya man is working with!” He had called out to her as he lay on the bench press, hoisting an increasing stack of weights. She guessed her apathetic look and her lack of response to his workout had been the trigger.

The sound of a car’s horn being tapped lightly interrupted a stream of unpleasant thoughts, providing Topaz a temporary reprieve from reopening yesterday’s trauma. She needn’t look out the window to know that Nikki’s black, Honda CRV was in the circular driveway.

“*D-a-y-m-n,*” she said aloud. She grabbed her heavy, black rawhide-trimmed canvas book bag and leather Coach cross body bag and headed out. Seconds later, she stopped in her tracks. Rushing back to the bathroom, she rescued her blood-stained green tee shirt from the floor and buried it in the hamper.

*No use Mom interrogating me about the stained top.*

Nikki tended toward the impatient, and Topaz hustled downstairs and out the front door to meet her awaiting ride. Both girls were seniors at Rich Central High School.

## Chapter 2

**N**IKKI FRANKLIN POPPED THE DOOR latch and Topaz climbed into the front passenger side of the shiny, black truck. The rims sparkled and the tires shined. “Hey, morning,” Topaz said, barely managing to close the heavy door. “Hey yourself, Boo,” mumbled her friend, in the slow, croon that had become her regular tone.

“This ride is what’s up,” said Topaz, inhaling lemon air freshener and enjoying the truck’s ambience. “You get it washed yesterday?”

“Twice a week—always. You know how I am about my ride.”

“You just *like* a dude. Shit,” she said, removing a stick of gum from the empty cup container and breaking it into pieces before chewing. She stroked her friend’s ego.

“Don’t hate, bitch,” replied Nikki with a pleased grin that caused the gap between her two front teeth to show.

“I’m gonna need some coffee.”

“You know we damn missin first period if I stop, right?”

“Yeah, I know.” Topaz sighed. “I had a rough night, and I can’t face *anything* without Starbucks this morning.”

Nikki’s eyes widened. She looked over at Topaz with a knowing gaze. “Cool, baby, I got you.”

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They rode silently several minutes down Torrance Avenue before Nikki asked, “Hey, Taupe, what happened to your mouth?”

“Like what?”

“Seriously. Don’t bullshit me, girl. I *see* your lip swollen under all that pink lipstick. I know how your lips look. Did that fucker hit you again?”

Topaz was silent.

“Why do you let him beat on you, girl? You ain’t gotta take that shit. He supposed to treat you better. Treat you like a young lady supposed to be treated.”

Topaz spat out a quick lie. “It was my fault, Nikki. I said something I shouldn’t have said. *You know I have a big mouth.* Curtis is under a lot of stress from his baby mama. He just snapped.”

“So *talking a lot* means you need to be beat on? Like I said, you ain’t gotta take that shit offa him.” Nikki reached over and covered her friend’s hand with her own, giving it a quick squeeze. Topaz received its warmth. It felt good. She was glad to have a friend. The car pulled into Starbucks lot, and Nikki got out, leaving the keys dangling in the truck’s ignition.

She returned a few minutes later with two coffees and walked over to the passenger side. Topaz lowered the window and accepted the hot containers.

“Tall medium roast with soy milk, right?”

“Yep. You remembered.”

“I *always* do.” Nikki grinned, staring directly into Topaz’s heavily-lashed brown eyes.

## Chapter 3

**N**IKKI PULLED INTO THE STUDENT parking lot after dropping Topaz at the entrance. She was late again. *Damn that Topaz.* She grabbed her book bag and slung it over her left shoulder. Her Rocawear jeans sagged four inches below her natural waist, and the grey and black Roca tee fell past her ample hips. She walked with a subtle, but confident, swagger. She ran her fingers through her short-cropped black hair, adjusted her Ray-Bans and prepared herself for the hassle she was going to get in the attendance office.

*Hell, she rationalized, better late than missing the damn day altogether.* She didn't want to miss her second period Chemistry.

Nikki fought to erase the image of the abused Topaz from her mind. The milk in her coffee churned in her stomach. She felt like kicking Curtis' stupid ass, but that wouldn't solve the problem, because Topaz was an addict, and Curtis Ellis was her drug of choice.

*That girl is so blind she can't see nothing to the left or right of his trifling behind.*

She wanted to demand that Topaz stop seeing Curtis and tell her he was probably married. Even though he wore the same sharp gear as guys their age, dude had to be at least forty years old. But until Topaz got tired of lying to explain her "accidents," telling people she was clumsy and unlucky, there was nothing to be done but to pick her dumb ass up for school and wait.

*I've got to be patient with Topaz. When you have a jewel, you treasure it.* Topaz was that to Nikki and more.

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## Chapter 4

**N**IKKI GOT HER TARDY SLIP and inched her way through the crowded hallway just before the bell sounded for her second period class. She got in class just as Mr. Procter, the chemistry teacher, rose to close the door. She sat down and pulled out her textbook, pretending to be following along with the lesson, but her thoughts were anchored to Topaz.

They had known one another since the fourth grade. Both girls' mothers had moved to the south suburbs seeking a safer environment and better education for their daughters. Nikki and Topaz had quickly become friends and were largely inseparable. An unexpected shift had occurred in the eighth grade. Topaz had started batting her lovely long-lashed eyes at boys, and all Nikki could think about was Topaz.

A warm, tingling sensation flowed through Nikki's entire body whenever she thought of Topaz. Feelings initially interpreted as friendship, over the last couple of years had become much deeper. She longed desperately for Topaz.

When she thought of Topaz's hair, permed soft and parted down the middle and her lips that were a natural rose blush, she couldn't concentrate. Every time Topaz looked at her with those sweeping lashes that she curled to keep out of her eyes, she was intoxicated. It was so damn hard to keep cool about it. Especially now.

Nikki remembered the feeling of wrapping Topaz tightly in her arms and twirling her around after her successful audition for the drama club. That had been their personal victory. They were a team. Topaz was painfully shy, and she shared with Nikki how badly she wanted to join the group. The drama coach held the auditions in the auditorium where anyone could watch. Topaz

had been terrified. She had elected to perform “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou. Nikki remembered telling her, “Taupe, everybody likes that poem, but you gotta do it different to grab attention.”

Topaz stared blankly, but Nikki had a plan. She critiqued Topaz’s every move and gesture until she performed the poem as a sassy, gut-bucket-blues poem. They had spent three weeks together with Nikki as her devoted drama coach practicing for two and three hour stretches.

Nikki used her iPhone to video and play back every gesture, movement and hip-wiggle that Topaz made in the delivery of the iconic poet’s work. She listened to the rise and fall of her voice and rehearsed every possible nuance until, at last, they were satisfied.

Finally, after three weeks of grueling rehearsals, Topaz auditioned brilliantly and was selected! They had celebrated by smoking a blunt on the drive to see *Ride Along*, at the Mall. Weed made the Kevin Hart comedy even funnier and they had laughed to the point of being shushed by a senior couple a few rows behind them. That warm early October night felt supernatural as they had walked arm and arm up the driveway to Topaz’s home. Nikki felt a growing pride in who she was and who she wanted to be more than ever. When Topaz opened the front door, turned and spun around to say goodnight, Nikki had leaned in for a kiss. In a split second Topaz had looked at her, acknowledging who she really was. Then, she kissed Nikki lightly on the lips and, without speaking, quickly went inside.

Nikki started towards her car, intuitively turning to look backwards at the second floor window: Topaz’s bedroom. She could faintly see her standing behind the gauzy curtains. She waved. Topaz waved back. But it was the kiss that lingered on Nikki’s lips and warmed her on the drive home. She had been kissed on the lips by her Topaz. That was last year. This year Topaz was with that little idiot Curtis.

## Chapter 5

**O**NE OR TWO EVENINGS A WEEK after school, Nikki hung out at Bruce's Body and Fender Shop. Bruce was her father's oldest friend, but she was closer to Bruce than to her father. Maurice Franklin was serving a twenty-five-year sentence, and after two years of her mother traveling back and forth to make prison visits, he had told her mother, his childhood sweetheart, to move on. He had refused all her subsequent visits and no longer wrote. Nikki knew that he still communicated with Bruce.

Bruce stood in the gap, taking care of his friend's daughter as best he could. He taught her everything she knew about cars and let her do small spot-welding jobs. She felt at home with the odd collection of guys that hung out in the shop. Her cell phone rang. She lifted the welder's mask and pulled the phone from the back pocket of the lightly-soiled grey coveralls. She recognized the number as Topaz's.

"Hey na—"She was interrupted by Topaz's screams,

"He's gonna kill me, Nikki. I swear if I come up dead, it was Curtis!" Topaz's voice was garbled and incoherent.

"Hold up. Where the hell are you?" She moved the phone away from her ear to better hear the call. "Seriously? On 43<sup>rd</sup>. What are you doin on the low end?"

Bruce was on the ground under a blue Mustang. He slid from under it just in time to hear her holler, "Bruce, I'm out!"

## Chapter 6

**N**IKKI DROVE STRAIGHT DOWN HALSTED to 95<sup>th</sup> before picking up the Ryan. Fifteen minutes later she was exiting at 43<sup>rd</sup> and headed for the Bronzeville Coffee House on 43<sup>rd</sup> and St Lawrence. She found Topaz shivering like a wet puppy at a table near the back of the small brightly-furnished business with flavored coffee, light snacks and Wi-Fi.

“What the hell happened to you, Boo?” Nikki took a breath, trying to stabilize her racing emotions.

Topaz’s hair was in disarray. The front of her blouse was ripped, and she was wearing a leather jacket that she clutched at to cover her bra. Nikki caught a whiff of urine and wondered who the hell would drink coffee anywhere that smelled of piss. Then she realized that the smell of urine was coming from Topaz.

“He beat you!”

“A little.” Topaz grimaced.

She sat down and placed her hands across the table to steady the trembling girl’s arms. Leaning forward, Nikki looked straight into her friend’s frightened eyes. “What do you mean a little?”

“Nikki, I was trying to leave him. I told him I was done. I was walking away and he grabbed me from behind and flung me around. Then he said,” she took a short breath, exhaling, *‘Bitches don’t leave me, I leave Bitches!’*”

## TREAT HER LIKE A LADY

She wiped away tears that streamed down her face and closed her eyes. “Th-that’s when he pulled out a pistol. I started screaming. And, Nikki, before I knew it the gun was right here.” She lifted tendrils of hair to expose a red bruise near her left temple.

“What the Hell! The muthafucka is a dead man!!!” Nikki pushed against the table, standing up, looking at Topaz.

“He *really* pulled the trigger. I *heard* the click, Nikki, and I pissed all over myself.” The retelling of the story made the fear and humiliation raw again.

“Taupe, where the fuck was y’all that nobody helped you?” She slammed her fist on the table, causing the salt shaker to topple to the floor and break.

Nikki grabbed some napkins from the next table and handed them to Topaz, who proceeded to blow her nose and wipe her reddened eye sockets while she picked up the broken glass shards that had been the salt shaker.

The server, a slight-built woman with short kinky twists, rushed over with a towel.

“Sorry, miss, I didn’t mean to do that, it’s just that—”

The server said, “I overheard some of this. No harm done. We got some mo’ salt shakers.”

Nikki nodded and returned her attention to Topaz.

“I just *knew* I was dead. Then he said, ‘Bitch, don’t make me kill *your* ass.’ He said it like he had killed before. I thought Curtis was just mean, but he-is-crazy!” she said between heaving breaths. Topaz continued to ramble, “Nikki, is he gone kill me?”

Nikki looked at her friend and gathered her up into her arms. “Listen to me, Topaz,” she said, lifting Topaz’s face by its angular chin. “Curtis is NOT going-to-hurt-you-ever-again. Trust me.”

G.S. SINCLAIR

The server returned as they were leaving. “Damn shame. You need to call the police on that sucka.”

“Nah, miss, I got this.”

The woman gave Nikki a sheepish smile and turned to attend to an incoming customer.

Nikki grabbed Topaz’s purse and helped her into her truck. Topaz’s frantic sobs of, “He’s gonna kill me,” fueled a long-suppressed anger.

*What makes a muthafucka think he can do some shit like that and not pay.*

## Chapter 7

**T**HE TWO GIRLS DROVE AROUND for several hours. It was nine-thirty that evening when Nikki drove Topaz back to the subdivision near 199<sup>th</sup> and Torrance where Nikki and her school teacher mother lived with Jasper, their fifteen-year-old cat. Curtis was bound to lay low for a few days, but he knew where Topaz lived, and there was no guarantee her mother would be home to protect her if he came there. She took Topaz straight upstairs to her bedroom.

Next, she needed to square things with her mother. Everything needed to be lined up just right.

She found her mother lying across her queen-sized bed, with Jasper. The fat calico cat stretched out beside her like it was girl's night out.

“Hey, Ma, how you doin?”

“You finally got in? Do you know it is a school night?”

“Yeah, sorry I know. I went to pick up Topaz. We have a project, and I wanted her to stay over tonight so we could get started. Is it okay? She has her stuff for school, and she already told Mrs. Bond.

Her mother sat up, leaned on one elbow and looked at her daughter. “Honey, I’m tired tonight, but I’ll call Brinda in the morning. If she’s fine with her staying, I don’t mind. You girls are like sisters anyway.”

“Cool.”

G.S. SINCLAIR

“Cool?” said her mother with raised eyebrows.

“I mean thanks, Ma.”

“That’s better,” she said, lying back onto her pillows.

Nikki smiled, closed her mother’s bedroom door and walked away shaking her head. She hardly thought of Topaz as her sister.

## Chapter 8

**N**IKKI KEPT TOPAZ UP ALL night, downloading whatever personal information she had on Curtis.

“Taupe, I need to know where dude works, where he works out, where he eats! Everything you know about his habits I need to know.”

“Look, Nikki, I’m exhausted. I just want to forget—”

“Oh HELL no! Ain’t no forgetting today!!!” Nikki was like a cobra, raising its head and preparing to strike.

The next morning, Topaz wrote a note to her homeroom teacher explaining that she had a doctor’s appointment. She signed Brinda Bond’s name on it for Nikki to drop off at school. Once Nikki’s mother left for work, Topaz and Jasper had the house to themselves. Nikki made a cameo appearance at school, but her main agenda required her to track Curtis Ellis.

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**T**OPAZ TOLD NIKKI where Curtis worked out. Last week he had been bouncing her off the lockers at the Mettle Fitness gym on 50<sup>th</sup> and Indiana. The gym rat made up for his lack of height in rock-hard abs, thick biceps and terrorizing women. Exactly as anticipated, he pulled into a parking space near the front door and went inside. Two hours later he emerged wearing a tight wife-beater and some silver sweats.

Nikki shorted her cigarette out and followed. She was proud of her innate surveillance skills. Giving herself a mental *high five*, she trailed her *suspect* like a seasoned detective.

Careful to keep two car lengths between them, she was able to stick with him when he pulled off the expressway onto 79<sup>th</sup> for Ribs from Barbecue, a family owned business known for tasty, tender ribs and soulful sides. She waited patiently until he walked back to his freshly-waxed Escalade, snacking on fried potatoes from the soggy bag. Before entering, he whipped a handkerchief from his back pocket and grabbed the door knob before climbing in. As she watched the twenty-two-inch rims spinning on the freshly Armor-Alled tires, she admired how careful he was with that damn car. Too bad for him that he was reckless with his woman.

He hit the Dan Ryan again, and stayed on it until it merged into 1-57. He exited at 119<sup>th</sup> and pulled into the Citgo station on Marshfield. Nikki waited on the feeder road until he gassed up and pulled back onto 119<sup>th</sup>. She tailed him to a yellow, brick split-level house on 117<sup>th</sup> and Loomis. He pulled into the driveway, adjusted his red and black flat bibbed cap and jumped out with his gym bag. She spied an orange and yellow big wheel tricycle on the large brick porch. For an instant she wondered whether this was where Curtis lived or was it a visit to another one of his jump-offs, but when he pulled out a set of keys and let himself in, she knew *big daddy* was home.

Nikki sat in her car down the street for over an hour looking at the area. She drove behind the house and saw that the block was populated mainly by senior citizens. It was, however, also the quiet refuge of a hell raiser. Armed with intel, she pulled on her shades and pulled down the street of well-manicured lawns and headed south. She turned on the radio to distract her from her anger. Nikki's brain was racing one-hundred-miles-an-hour when she headed west on 119<sup>th</sup> to Bruce's shop. Her plan would take some doing, but it was not going to be that hard.

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## Chapter 9

**B**RUCE RAN A LEGITIMATE BODY and fender shop, but he had a reputation and mad street credibility for having operated the premier chop shop on the far south side for many years. Saturday nights, Bruce's old crew would often drop in and the forty-something dudes would sit around drinking Hennessey, smoking weed and reminiscing. Bruce often bragged that back-in-the-day his crew could steal a car in four minutes, strip it and have parts ready for pick-up and delivery in an hour. She wondered if this weekend Bruce could gather them up for one last hurrah.

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Nikki paced the floor in Bruce's tiny office. She shared her sketchy plan with her mentor.

“So that's why you come driving in here like a crazy man,” he said, looking at her the way a father looks at his kid. “Nik, is it that you love the girl or you hate the dude?”

Without hesitation Nikki said, “Both, why?”

“When you do shit like this, baby, you need to be clear. Everything's got consequences. You Maurice's kid. You outta know that better than most.”

“I can handle whatever comes.” Nikki continued, “Bruce, I need you to back me on this. But I'm gonna do something to this dude one way or another.”

G.S. SINCLAIR

The middle-aged, clean-shaven man was still in decent physical shape. He took a step back, cocked his head to the side, giving his protégé an admiring glance. “Damn, you got Maurice’s heart in you for sho. That ain’t a bad thing.”

Bruce rarely mentioned her father. Nikki felt her eyes tearing and blinked twice, struggling to resist the chord of emotion he had unknowingly plucked.

# Chapter 10

**C**URTIS ELLIS EMERGED FROM HIS home at six-forty-five am Monday morning, ready to drive to the Metra station on 111<sup>th</sup> and Cottage. He typically took the 6:59 to Millennium Park, and from there it was a brisk walk to 57 East Randolph, where he worked as a security guard.

He opened the door and prepared to walk the twenty-two steps from his porch to the waiting Cadillac truck.

“What the fuck! Natalie, come here and look at this shit.” Curtis Ellis literally hyperventilated and leaned against the brick porch to constrain a witchlike scream that threatened to break free.

Startled by the alarm in his voice, his wife, toddler in tow, hurried to the front door. Her scream could be heard two blocks in either direction when she saw the remnants of what had last night been a phantom grey 2014 Cadillac Escalade.

Curtis Ellis walked over to two five-foot piles of assorted grey and black car parts that lay on the driveway where his \$71,000 car had been parked. His white leather seats were strewn on the grass as though ready to be used as front lawn chairs, the steering wheel resting upon one. The four tires with twenty-two-inch spinners were stacked in twos.

“Curtis, where is our car?”

The toddler began crying and Curtis’ wife rocked her frantically, trying to stop the noise and make sense of the wreckage in their driveway.

“God Dammit, Natalie. Apparently this IS our car, or what’s fuckin left of it!”

G.S. SINCLAIR

He snatched loose a note left on bright yellow paper taped atop the massive greyish rubble.

*“Dude, we know where you live. We know where you work. Stay the fuck away from Topaz Bond. The damage the wrecking crew did to your ride is just a taste of what we will do to you if you ever go near her again. Next time you meet a woman treat her like a lady. We have eyes on you.”*

“Curtis, baby, what does that paper say? Did it say where the car is?” asked the terror-filled woman.

Curtis Ellis’ brow was furrowed, his bloodshot eyes fought to conceal his fear. He turned toward his stricken wife and crying child. Crushing the note with his powerful fists, he said nothing.

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The sun’s influence was muted beneath several large clouds, but Nikki Franklin was confident of sunrise. As she pulled into Topaz’s driveway, she thought, *this is gonna be a good day.*

She didn’t know if Topaz could love her. She hoped so. But with Bruce’s help, she had gotten Topaz out of harm’s way. The rest could be sorted out.