

Cipher

Prologue

I had this feeling I did not understand when I passed him by the stairs and he nodded to say what's up. I replied with a slight hello as I kept it moving. I made it to the parking lot of my building and my legs were no longer moving forward, they only allowed me to go in reverse. I didn't want to think that he was waiting for my disappearance to make his appearance. I found myself turning the key all the while telling myself this can't be, yet I walked in smelling the air, entered the bedroom, our room, their room in that moment. That moment that my eyes witnessed her chocolate legs open with his bare ass striding, with his jeans down around his ankles between them, and each of his hands palming the bottom of what was promised exclusively to me, as naked as my heart's beat, now both being braced against a wall. Her eyes closed, mouth half open exhaling ecstasy as she pressed her dark face against his muscular high yellow shoulder and neck. He panted with a rhythm of a boxer pounding away at his opponent. Her hand gripped his back as her nails dug into his skin and my soul simultaneously. His pant increased along with his moans from the rotation of her grind that I knew vividly.

"How long . . . ?" My voice cracked. "How long have you been fucking him?" I intruded as they begin their climax unable to stop their powerful orgasms without warning. She opened her eyes in shock, looked at me with an expression of regret, deepened the grasp she held onto him to prevent herself from falling as he jerked inside of her and wailed upon his uncontrollable release, and let the tears fall from her eyes the way her cream rolled down her walls betraying me and mixing with his seeds now running wild inside her valley.

Cipher

Tononiya D.

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She sits there thumb scrolling her touch screen phone. Her attire that of the hip hop culture, Ed Hardy's the devilish wink, accented with a princess cut cross and a sparkling spinner rim watch on a thick red band. Her head high . . . her lips stained and darkened by the constant smoking of nature's herb and what she calls her escape. Her shoulders as broad as her chest . . . her locks hanging well below

her shoulders, their color as dark as her skin. Her bloodshot eyes trying to focus on the contents of an e-mail that she received from her cast member's bulletin on her next acting role over the internet. Remy's self-proclaimed enemy at her side. Diamond's blonde strains cover the length of her back. While she positions her thin frame next to her warrior's Nubian essence, to ensure that every single sista in here is fully aware that Remy has been bought and paid for . . . like she is every night by the regulars that frequent the gentleman's club Diamond works at and where they hooked up. Smiling at her small victory over them, she leans in for the kill as she whispers in Remy's ear to get her a drink to quench her thirst and Remy does on command. I feel the steam escape my forehead as I watch Remy hurry back with Diamond's drink in hand. I rehash with Dianah on how Remy just told us a week ago . . . she had come to an epiphany at the age of 28 and although she had never actually dated a black woman before, she was ready to show the women in her own ethnic background their place and pleasure, because they are queens in her eyes and black women should not only be aware of their royalty but be treated as such. She was crying and all that shit . . . She was so believable she had Kioni trying to persuade Dianah and me to go out and get some red, black, and green dashikis with her and pump our fists in the air and yell "Power to the People", like most best friends do when they are hyped about something. Now she has the nerve to bring her ass in my house with the trailer park rendition of Malibu Barbie like the conversation never happened. Don't get me wrong, it's not Diamond's dirty blonde hair . . . blue eyes . . . nor her fifty dollar body spray that gives her normally pale skin the beautifully brown complexion that she has been telling anyone who will listen she's so proud of . . . and it's not even the fact that Remy chooses to date white women, that has me hotter than lava. Hell, I kind of understand the reasoning behind my brothers and sisters dating people from different cultural backgrounds. It's sort of like leaving one's country to be recognized as a citizen of the country you just fled. See other cultures are well aware of the strength and royalty that runs through our bloodline and heritage. So in turn, they treat us as such and value our differences. Whereas, we as a culture, are lost and have no idea who we are, let alone uplift each other as a whole. But I am agitated by the fact that African people most often let the propaganda and depiction of our culture lessen their self-worth while they not only run to, but embrace the people or culture that steals everything good about their culture and disguise their true heritage to the point they feel like black is bad. And teach us to hate the very thing that they pay money to emulate. Yeah . . . we're black

and they're beautifully brown. I shake my head and suck my fucking teeth before I take my eyes off Remy's lying ass.

"You know what they say, all the good ones are married . . . gay, or with white women!" Dianah says, jokingly comparing Remy's potential to the complaints of numerous women that are looking for a man that at the least have a job and treat them with respect. Dianah looks at me with the eyebrow over her right eye cocked up and her lips pressed together like she just took in a smell that her senses didn't agree with. "Fucking hypocrisy!" Kioni chimes in unexpectedly and the three of us crack up laughing causing everyone to pause what they are in the midst of doing, and all the eyes in the room to center in on us with curiosity.

"Since we have everyone's attention, I would like to know everyone's views on a question that I'm sure you have all been asked at some point, which is how do you label yourself?" I say holding back laughter that's getting harder to control, so I nod my head towards Ebonee; the youngest of the bunch at age 21 . . . ok that's putting it mildly . . . *Ebonee* is a baby that just put the teething ring down and graduated to whole foods compared to everyone else in our circle . . . sitting a bowl of my homemade chili and a few pieces of wheat bread down in front of Ivory at the table that's soon to be filled with cards, drinks, and ashtrays. Kioni and Dianah's eyes follow my lead just in time to witness Ebonee lean in and kiss her lover Ivory on the lips. Ivory Dinero is a Computer Software Engineer and more to love in size. If you ask her about her cultural background it varies between Italian . . . Puerto Rican . . . Jewish . . . hell if it's hip to be, she's it. She has wide dark brown eyes with a long thin nose that somehow blends in harmony with her round pale cheeks and curved chin. Her hair is brown with burgundy spikes throughout. She has one gold tooth that is removable and only seems to wear on special occasions, like spade night, and/or any other pride function. At times, she feels the need to perform an impersonation of Mr. T, just with sterling silver jewelry that has been super shined and gives off the uncertainty of whether or not it is silver or platinum. Thank GOD tonight isn't one of them. Her choice of attire consists of expensive designer labels. Every piece of her clothing has to be by the latest popular designer, or she can't wear it, let alone own it. Sometimes, I think she feels that money and material possessions validate her worth. However, she is one of the most loyal friends you could ever ask for and will give you the shirt off her back . . . when it's beneficial for her. I truly believe that she loves her friends whole heartedly but doesn't know how to separate the object from the emotion when needed. Her smile makes

her look like a big old teddy bear, and yes, she's one of those type of friends I want to choke the shit out of you one minute, and laugh and love the next. Ivory acts as though Ebonee is not her ideal choice as a lover, but after Cameron's countless reminders that it was her choice to start a relationship with someone as young as Ebonee, Ivory is really working on the way she down plays her affection for her in public, which is only right because we all know that that's not how she treats her when they are alone.

"Ooh I'm Coach all the way!" Diamond says as she holds up her white leather bag covered with rainbow colored C's all over it in one hand and snapping her fingers with attitude with her other hand.

"You know what . . ." Dianah says shaking her head trying to hold back the laugh that's fighting its way out, as we both fall into each other and the "hell naw's" and "no she didnt's" fill the air.

"Hold up ya'll, before ya'll rip her to pieces. She's a newbie. "Let me break it down for you lil' mama," Remy says with her raspy voice, Tononiya D. CIPHER 5

placing her phone on the table in front of her and turning to face Diamond while everyone else finds seats in the living room close around them.

"Labels, as in stud/femme and the dominant breed like myself, my man Cameron, Ivory and Chase, ya feel me?" Remy asks Diamond but really doesn't want her to answer by the way she kept on talking. "Now peep 'dis. Raven, Kioni, Ebonee, and Dianah are what you call femmes, even though Dianah do both."

"What you mean, she's dominant and femme?" Malibu, I mean Diamond naively questions with a stupid expression on her face. Remy just holds her head in her hands realizing that her attempt to save her just failed miserably.

"The proper terminology is Bi-sexual!" Dianah corrects them both and then rips into Remy. "If you have to tell people my business then make sure you tell it correctly. That's how the misunderstandings and stereotypes of lesbians begin. Some ill-informed person passes on botched information and that same false hood takes on a life of its own!" Dianah says with a bit of a sting in her voice, then takes a sip of her drink.

"Oh I get it. You sleeps with both studs and femmes," Malibu says flipping her hair to one side and looking at Dianah with an "I got it" smile.

"Well at least she knows that bi equals two," Kioni says sparking a new wave of laughter.

"Now what did you say you did for a living?" Cameron asks with a

torn expression on her face.

“I dance.” She replays with a soft giggle. “Y’all should come down to the club with Remy and Ivory sometimes. They have ladies night every Friday. And that means y’all don’t need no male escort to get in.” Cameron rubs her right hand slowly across the back of her head, which is a clear sign that my wife is fighting to keep her opinion to herself.

“You sure know how to pick ’em Remy.” Dianah pats Remy on her shoulder bringing the heat of everybody’s eyes that Remy was trying to avoid, directly to her.

“A college degree is not required for that position,” Remy snaps.

“But you would think some level of education would be needed to hold a position beside you. But obviously not.” Dianah adds another wound to Remy’s bruised ego.

“It’s not that complicated. Sometimes she feels like having a nut and sometimes she don’t!” Ebonee blurts out without reserve as she leaned in close and touched Diamond’s hand, like they are sharing an intimate girl moment at a slumber party hosted by Betty Boo.

“Like you said Dianah, some ill-informed person tries to fucking inform somebody and has no factual data to back up the shit they are saying!” Ivory shoots a piercing glance at Ebonee to make sure she knows she’s the ill-informed person she is referring to.

“No you didn’t go there, Ivory!” Chase calls Ivory on her insult, then the both of them start cracking up without regard for Ebonee’s feelings what-so-ever.

“Ok, pay up . . . I want my money right now! I knew she wouldn’t get through the hour without a sarcastic condescending comment towards her.” Kioni says holding out her hand to collect the money owed to her.

“Oh you guys bet on me and shit?” Ivory questions.

“Damn right!” We all say in unison as I hand over the \$50 pot.

“Thanks babes,” Kioni says as she kisses Ivory on the cheek to show her appreciation for the early jabbing and put the cash in her bra and patted it for safe keeping.

“Any way.” I say laughing and bring the conversation back to the topic. “Let me make this clear for you Diamond. In the gay community there are several classifications of lesbians . . . Some in which are the ones that go by no classification, Femmes, Aggressive femmes, Studs, Butches, and just plain Dominant women. All who know that they are women, but prefer certain things in and out of the bedroom. I would be labeled a “femme” . . . short for feminine of course,” I glance over at Diamond. “The label of femme is supposed

represent the “role” I play in a relationship . . . my style of dress . . . and even the capacity to which I show my emotions . . . Even though the capacity at which I show great emotion has nothing to do with a label, and everything to do with who I am as a woman. So if the “role” of femme is to be submissive at all times like some would imply . . . then that label really doesn’t fit me . . . In my opinion people should keep the labels where they were meant to be . . . on clothes!” I try to explain as simplified as I possibly can so she can understand.

“I agree, labels of any kind should be eradicated! I, for one, no longer use classifications to define myself or the attraction that I have for women . . . even though society and our own community labels us based off of their own perceptions of what they think we should be as lesbians and most of us at some point in time went along with the labels because we were not only trying to find out who we were, but someone, anyone that we could identify with. I guess to a certain degree people are still searching because they have still placed a label on me, I am a NO CLASSIFICATION!” Chase glances at her long term lover Kioni before she shakes her head and throws her hands in the air.

“That is so true. When I came out the labels helped me understand who I am. I love being a femme. I think that it fits me because I’m super girly. I would die without my makeup, nails, and shopping!” Ebonee says with animated enthusiasm.

“Wow, placing me under a label for any reason is hard for me to do because this is real life for me and being a lesbian is just a small part of what makes me who I am. The same as being the head nurse of a trauma unit, or being a mother, or a lover. I am a woman with a real family that deals with real problems. But with that being said if I absolutely have to define myself with a label, I will say an aggressive femme because although I am very feminine, when it comes down to the things that I do with my lover, I have and can become very aggressive.” Kioni says with a mischievous laugh because she knows that she has shared all of those aggressive deeds in detail with Dianah and me, her besties.

“I’m a dominant woman with a bald head. I don’t change the tone in my voice . . . I don’t alter my appearance in any way to emulate a man, nor do I desire to be one. But because I don’t wear makeup and I prefer to wear a t-shirt that happens to come off of the male rack as opposed to the form fitting ones on the female rack, I have somehow forfeited my womanhood and been thrown into the box of transgender by society, addressed as “bro” or “my man” by men and other aggressive females as a sign of respect on their part,

automatically called daddy by women that find me attractive as though that is supposed to excite me in some way, and branded a “NO TOUCHER”, just because I enjoy using a strap by the woman in our community without anyone ever asking me who I am or what it is that I like!” Cameron says with a look of intensity on her face. “I’m a hard stud, all the way! Ya’ll knows I’m dat female with a nigga swag, so I love it when they call me big papa,” Ivory’s voice deepens on the word papa and we all burst out laughing for different reasons, mine being I doubt if she has ever been hard a day in her life. “As for me, I’m Raven, a 34 year old psychiatrist and the host of tonight’s event. A few friends of mine and I throw a get together once a month where we play spades . . . cook or cater . . . have a few drinks and release the stresses of our month with some mentally stimulating debatable conversations . . . some laughter . . . hell even at times shedding some tears. We don’t always agree with each other’s ideals or opinions, but I know that there is a form of strength that comes by just being open to different points of views. The openness that we share causes a gradual demise of ignorance and shines a light of knowledge, which allows positive change, healing, and soul elevation in each of our lives when it’s all said and done, whether we know it at the time or not.

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Raven Winters-Carver

I am a product of a woman’s love and a man’s miss definition of the same. I grew up in a house with revolving doors that my father used often and my mother never changed, no matter how painful his infidelities. And it wasn’t because she was uneducated, jobless, or unattractive that she allowed him to take from her soul at will. In fact, she was the exact opposite of all three. It was because she was his wife, for better or for worse. She was his wife.

That’s what she told me the day I came home with my shirt drenched with tears and my eyes swollen from wiping them away because my best friend and I walked in on her mother and my father having sex on their kitchen counter one summer day. I didn’t know which hurt worse, my father’s actions or my mother’s devotion to him, even after telling her what I had been witness to. I was certain that marriage was never going to be in my future if marriage meant I had to accept my husband’s constant and blatant disrespect. In fact what I saw confirmed the feelings that I had been having about girls even more. I didn’t know how to go about acting on my feelings at the time but I did know I never wanted to have a man touch me the way I saw my

father touching my best friend's mother.

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As the years went by I did everything in my power to make sure love was not in the cards for me by ending all of my relationships before the demands of love had a chance to begin. So I went through my fair share of emotionless relationships with women. All of which were sexually gratifying to me and only engaged in when they were convenient for me. Then I met her, Cameron's slanted light brown eyes reep with seduction. Her lips are the type that you find yourself wanting to feel all over your body. Cameron Carver taught me how to escape the grasp and the stickiness that emotions sometimes get trapped in. With each glance she extended her hand and offered me the chance of new possibilities with her by my side. Then a few months after dating, I was listening to Cameron perform a piece called Shattered Reflection on the stage at Voodoo lounge. The words to the poem were like tiny mirrors aimed at my soul. And the words I was studying hard to obtain my degree in psychology with, hit me. I realized that I had not become my mother; a woman tied to a man by nothing more than a state stamped document. I had become the acts of my father; involved with an entourage of women that were meaningless to me and that I was not proud of. I decided that I was going to break the cycle that I have inherited. I was going to invest in myself the commitment that my father never had for my mother and me. I'm going to replace the respect that each one of his publicized relationships stripped from me. I will deal with the understanding that my parents are humans with flaws. I will build the strength needed to mend my own wounded soul. So I'll do what I swore off years ago and that leaves not only me but every human being the most vulnerable, I'll love. I'll love in a new way from what I've seen growing up. I'll love in a way that's always true to me. I'll love the way love is supposed to be and that's freely. I'll love through all my imperfections as tattered as I may be.

Cameron lays her head on my right shoulder, draping her hand across my left breast causing my heart beat to magnify inside my own head.

The space in our California king size bed covered in deep brown earth tone sheets, was enough for at least two more naked bodies to rest comfortably next to us. But here we are just the two of us after ten years of playful banter with each other about who occupies the majority of the bed with their sprawled limbs . . . right smack dab in the center of the bed looking each other in the eyes smiling and greeting each other with soft good morning kisses, the same as every morning even when one of us remains in the bed longer than the

other. When it comes to my wife, I suffer from a syndrome that I like to call 'brains on the pillow' (that's when you are in the state of euphoria usually after an orgasmic release and it leaves you without the ability to think rationally) and oh how my senses leak . . . Her unconditional love makes my heart stronger than it's ever been . . . and my body all so weak. I hear her voice and I'm off track and completely focused at the same time. She is my addiction and no matter how high I get when I consume her, her essence always seems to take me higher. I'm torn from my insecurities that once had me running from commitments of the heart now protected in her embrace. Cameron makes me wild, bold, and uninhibited as she tames, claims, and renames me in her love. She redefines what love and the actions of being in love are to me every day. And even though I met Cameron ten years ago and became the number one lady in her life and she in mine, at times my assurance in her love and cool demeanor betray me, and so do my degrees. And I am left a woman, a woman that wants to be everything for her lover. And in those moments my mind, body, and soul battles in a silent war between the ugly question that is embedded deep within my subconscious, along with love's emotions that I fall into without warning. And I hear the voice inside my head saying the words, am I enough?

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