

Chapter 7
Charles-The story of an old player

The sun was making its final descent for the day, and Cameron had just exited the bus. He was making his approach back into lower-middle class Detroit. Working at the Burger Joint was hectic, and he had already worked every shift on the schedule in the few weeks since he had been hired.

With his work uniform stained with splashes of mustard, grease, and ketchup, Cameron dragged his feet down the sidewalk in the 88-degree heat. His body started to feel numb, and he was growing more and more tired from all the overtime he had been putting in.

One night, after he had put in well over ten hours at work, he had a dream that he was trapped in a kitchen, grilling burgers for eternity. He woke up to discover that he was running late on a day he was scheduled to work the grill.

Rick had asked him to stay over a few days to fill in for a co-worker who had called in sick for the entire week. Cameron still had two more shifts left to work before the end of the pay period. He was already at forty-three hours and going into overtime. He wanted to start taking his driver's training class in a few weeks so he could get his license. So far, he had done a good job of saving his money for the class, which cost over two hundred dollars.

His main reason for saving the money was so that, one day, he could let his bus pass expire permanently and buy a car before the new school year started in the fall. Cameron knew that once school resumed, he would have to move to a part-time schedule, which would mean less cash. Each week, he only used about sixty dollars to go to the movies on the weekend with Talana, buy a little food for the house, and purchase the necessary bus passes.

Cameron soon reached the brick apartment complex he called home. Charles was lying under the Cutlass with a box full of tools scattered beside him. Cameron passed by Charles without saying anything and walked onto the porch. The front door was open, and he could hear loud music blaring from inside the apartment. Cameron could hear Darlene in the kitchen, gossiping on the phone with their cousin, Andrea. They were talking about Andrea's on-again/off-again boyfriend/baby daddy. Andrea always claimed she was tired of him not helping her with the bills and free-loading off her, yet she allowed him to live with her rent-free and unemployed.

Sitting on the steps, Cameron leaned back on his elbows and tried to filter out the loud music and gossip coming from inside.

Suddenly, he heard Charles laughing from beneath the car.

"You ain't trying to hear all that noise either, huh, young blood?"

Charles stuck his head out from under the car with a wrench in his hand.

"Man, do she have to play music all the time? Don't she realize that some folks just want it to be quiet sometimes?" Cameron complained with some agitation.

"Well, fo' some folks, life is just an ongoing party," Charles said as he fished through the tools, looking for a socket.

"Oh," he added, "I fed that little puppy of yours and took her for a walk around the corner. She was hungry, and I know you been working a lot and ain't had a lot a time to spend with her."

"Thanks, man."

Cameron sat upright, propped himself up on his elbows, and faced Charles, watching him as he put his head back under

the car. He watched closely as Charles rotated a socket wrench in a counter-clockwise direction.

“Why are you here, man?” Cameron suddenly asked Charles in a sociable manner.

Charles belted out a hearty laugh, as if Cameron had told a joke.

“Why am I here? Now, that’s a damn good question,” he said. “It ain’t cuz I *want* to be here, that’s fo’ damn sure!”

He rolled out from under the car with his elbows laced with grease.

“I grew up in a foster home in L.A. I started hustlin’ on the streets at about yo’ age. I remember every time I would fuck up and do something to get in trouble, my foster parents would tell me to confess my sins to God and start over. They would say ‘every day is a new beginning.’”

Charles laughed again in remembrance, and then continued.

“That’s what they would say, and ma’ young dumb ass would believe that shit. Well, maybe God forgave me, but after I got that felony fo’ stealin’ a car on ma’ record, the DA didn’t forgive a damn thang. Wasn’t nothin’ a new beginnin’ after that. Maybe the beginnin’ of bad luck to follow.”

Cameron listened intently as Charles talked openly about his past.

“Man, just remember you ain’t gonna stay sixteen forever, man. And the stuff you do now, and in the next five years, is pretty much what ya’ future is gonna be based off of. Be smart about your future, man.”

Charles paused and gathered his thoughts.

“I’m here because I’ve got no place else to go.”

Charles kept his eyes on his work under the car as he spoke.

“If ya’ momma put me out right now, I’m on the streets, and she knows that. She knows she got the upper hand in this relationship. Don’t ever let ya’ woman get that much financial control in a relationship ‘cause she won’t respect you, young blood. Believe that!. She might respect you fo’ a few minutes in the bed if you lay down the pipe right, but as soon as them bills roll in, and you don’t have your part of the stake, then you just another broke brotha pullin’ her down.”

Cameron looked down at his grease-stained shoes and thought about Charles’ situation.

“You could go take a trade or something. You seem to be good at working on cars.”

Cameron’s suggestion brought yet another laugh from his mother’s boyfriend. Charles looked up from under the car at Cameron, who was still sitting on the steps. The loud radio continued to blare from inside the house.

“Young cats got a solution for everything,” Charles replied with sarcasm. “Man, you make it sound so easy, young blood. I ain’t no spring chicken like you. How am I gonna hustle, work on cars, and try to make a little money, while I’m in school?”

Charles went back to working under the car.

“Then, just to get out of the trade school and have to pay fo’ all that shit and try to get a job and have them mofos come tell me they can’t give me a job ‘cause of my criminal record. Then I’m back in the same situation I’m in now, but with school loans and all that shit.”

The screen door opened, and Cameron turned around to see his mother holding the cordless phone to her ear as she flicked her cigarette to the ground.

“Go get me some milk so I can make this cornbread, Cameron.”

Cameron rubbed his eyes, looking back at his mother.

“Mom, I’m tired. I just got off from work, and I got to be there at seven in the mornin’. Can’t you go get it?”

Darlene let out a heavy sigh and put her hand on her hip.

“All I asked you to do is go get some milk. Is that too much, Cameron? You eat here and got that little fast girlfriend of yours callin’ here all hours of the night, and she don’t never ask how I’m doin’. You probably done had sex up in ma’ house. *And* you got that loud-ass barking dog that you found in ma’ back yard. shitting everywhere, and I don’t complain. All I’m askin’ you to do is go to the store and get some milk!”

Cameron looked through the screen door and saw the bottle of beer on the coffee table. He knew the beer was to blame for Darlene’s argumentative state.

Charles rolled out from under the car. “Lay off the boy, Darlene. He been at work all day. I’m almost done with the oil change. I can go run and get the damn milk.”

Cameron’s mother lowered the phone from her ear and stepped out onto the porch. Putting her hand on her hip, she began to address Charles.

“Huh? Did you mention work? That’s something you lackin’, and you need to go get some, OK! And until you get a job, you can’t tell me shit, OK?”

With that said Darlene put the phone back up to her ear and walked into the apartment continuing her conversation with her cousin. “*Girl*, these Negroes ova’ here done lost they minds. They got me out here showing ma ass fo’ real.”

Mumbling inaudible words under his breath, Charles rolled over onto his knees from under the car and then looked under the hood.

“Come here, Cameron,” he called over his shoulder. “Let me show you how to change motor oil.”

Cameron got up from the steps and walked over to the grown man whose woman had put him to shame.

Nathanial Portis

Cameron now understood what Charles meant about a woman not respecting her man when she had too much control over his financial situation.

Chapter 8

Four months later

Charles sat at the over-priced, rented glass table in the kitchen as the radio blared music loud enough for everyone on the street to hear. Darlene's alcoholic and intoxicated mind made her lash out at Charles with a disrespectful tongue.

"What you want me to do? Go out and rob a bank and get thrown back in jail?" Charles shouted, trying to talk over the loud music.

Darlene stormed through the halls of the small apartment, screaming at the top of her lungs in an angry rage.

"I want you to bring some fuckin' money in this house, or get the hell out! I don't need no sorry, broke-ass man!" Darlene yelled.

"You knew my situation when you first got with me! I do what I can," Charles pointed out as he took a sip from the glass of brown liquor sitting in front of him.

"I want a hundred dollars by the end of the week, or you can get ya' shit and get the hell out my house!" Darlene yelled from around the corner as she headed down the hallway into her bedroom.

"You running a hotel now?" Charles asked as he poured another drink and gulped down the liquor.

"She living in low-income housing, paying eighty dollars a month and trying to get a hundred dollars outta a brotha," he mumbled under his breath.

"And give me the keys to my car, if you can't put no gas in it, then you ain't drivin' it no more!" Darlene yelled out.

She was looking through a pile of clothes for a shirt to throw over her thin top when she heard the front screen door slam shut.

“Sorry ass ain’t got shit and think he’s about to leech off me.”

She went into Cameron’s room looking around for a t-shirt. Cameron had thrown out of the old rollaway bed his mother had bought for him and bought a new mattress set and a few blankets and comforters for his room.

Darlene grabbed a white shirt from the dresser and made her way back towards the kitchen, continuing to yell and provoke an argument.

“I’m sick of sorry-ass men. All my life, that’s what I’ve had to deal with. No more, uh-uh. I mean it!. I can do bad by my damn self.”

Stopping at a red light, Charles tilted the bottle of liquor up to his mouth and swallowed. After a few taps on the gas he now felt in control. Control was good; it was a feeling he hadn’t felt in years. With the bottle now firmly between his legs and well within reach, Charles began to reflect on his youthful hustling days as a pimp and drug pusher. Women used to beg him for his respect, and all he had to do was dress, impress, and collect his cash. With one more swig from the bottle, he was now intoxicated enough to not care who saw him in his drunken condition.

The engine roared when he saw the light turned a blurry green, and the V8 engine dragged the old ’74 Cutlass down the road with enough G-force to pull an oil tanker behind it.

Charles wiped the alcohol dripping from his mouth. He held the steering with one hand as his drowning mind filled with memories of the muggings, robberies, and beat-downs that he

had suffered over the past few years while ripening in his old age and still trying to hustle the unfamiliar streets of Detroit.

With the sorrow of his past playing in his head, Charles accelerated and pushed the V8 engine to the max over the four-block course as he focused his thoughts on one clear vision mission.

“You said fifteen hundred for this one, right?”

Wearing a Burger Joint logo shirt, black khakis, and smelling like fries and hamburger grease from nine and a half hours of grilling meat at the Burger Joint, Cameron walked around the silver, 1987 Nissan Maxima, examining, in detail, every centimeter of fiberglass on the body.

“Yup, it’s a damn good deal for this car!” replied the elderly salesman, who walked beside Cameron grasping a wooden cane for balance.

“Can I start it up?” Cameron asked as he gave the salesman a hopeful glance. There were only fifteen cars sitting on the family-owned used-car lot. Of the small stock, Cameron could only afford two without having to go on a payment plan.

“Tommy, toss me the keys to the Maxima,” the salesman called across the lot to the office where his assistant stood in the doorway watching them. Soon, as requested, he came walking out, brandishing a set of keys with a yellow tag attached.

“Aw, that Maxima is tight, man!” Rayshawn shouted across the lot as he exited the driver seat of a Chevy Blazer that was well out of Cameron’s price range.

“Yeah, that’s you, man!” Rayshawn joined them, took the keys from the sales assistant, and immediately climbed into the driver’s side to start the engine. Cameron continued investigating the underbody and rear end, looking for any signs of excessive rust.

“Now, it does need some new brakes, and I would get a tune up on it, but other than that, it’s in good shape,” the salesman reported as Cameron continued his examination.

“Pop the hood, Rayshawn!” he shouted over the roar of the engine. He and the salesman walked to the front of the car where Cameron lifted the hood and investigated every hose and

visible component. He tapped and tugged to be certain that everything was secured in its proper place. The salesman spoke once more.

“I can give you a deal on the car. As you can see, it has a good engine, and with the right care, it’ll last a long time.”

There was a brief silence as Cameron pulled out the dipstick and checked the appearance of the oil.

“What kind of deal you going to give me on it?” he finally asked, trying not to sound too impressed by an offer.

“I’ll let her go for thirteen hundred, cash.” The elderly man replied after taking a sip from a can of cola that he held in his hand.

Before Cameron could respond, Rayshawn interrupted his train of thought by blaring loud static from the speakers as he tried to tune the radio to 105.9 FM.

“Hey man, chill with that! We’re discussing bidness!” Cameron shouted at Rayshawn over the hood.

“I’m lookin’ out for you, man, because it don’t seem like the radio works.” Rayshawn replied, shutting off the stereo.

“Yeah, the radio will need to be replaced. Som-o-bitch just don’t work,” the salesman admitted, stepping back from the car and allowing Cameron to close the hood.

“I’ll take it!” Cameron announced.

“OK, then,” the sales-man said. “Follow me to my office. All I need is ya driver’s license and the cash. I can get you some temp tags today.”

The two teenage boys faced each other, and Cameron grinned and bumped fists with his friend.

“I’ll be back with the keys to the Nissan, man!” he bragged.

“Oh yeah, that’s what’s up!” Rayshawn was clearly impressed as he got out of the car and pulled a Black and Mild cigar from one of his jean pockets.

“That’s what I’m talkin’ ‘bout, boy!”

Cameron felt a sense of pride inside. He walked into the sales manager’s office with sixteen hundred dollars in cash tucked into his shorts’ pocket under his work uniform. That money was every dime he had saved over the past four months. It made his summer job of grilling burgers and having hot grease pop in his face well worth it. Pride swelled like a balloon in his chest when he signed the papers and drove away in his own vehicle.

“Man, we got to get you some sounds to listen to,” Rayshawn pointed out as Cameron drove the newly purchased Maxima down the interstate. Cameron agreed.

“A man without a working sound system in his vehicle is like a man without money in his pocket. It just doesn’t feel right.”

“Yeah,” Cameron nodded in agreement. “I’m going to get something to listen to. Right now, I have to use the rest of my cash to get these brakes checked, so my ass don’t go rolling off into a pole or something.”

“So what are you going to name ya ride man?” Rayshawn asked removing a dew-rag wave cap from his head and brushing the waves on his low-cut faded hair.

Cameron thought for a moment, and then smiled. “Betsy,” he said with satisfaction as he sat back in the driver’s seat and held the steering wheel with one hand.

“What kinda gay-ass shit is that, man?” Rayshawn asked in a fit of laughter. “You always comin’ up with some crazy, off-the-wall-type stuff!”

“Like that sexy lady in that cartoon comic,” Cameron explained, still holding his smile of contentment.

“Man, you mean *Betty Boop*?” Rayshawn asked.

He glanced at his reflection in the side view mirror still brushing his wave-patterned hair and laughing hysterically.

“Forget you, Rayshawn. I’m still gonna call my car Betsy!” Cameron couldn’t help but laugh at his own mistake as he exited the interstate and came to a red light. He turned right into the parking lot of a convenience store that had a bright yellow sign reading *Convenient Center Market and Liquor Store*.

An old man wearing a grey hat leaned on a pole outside the store smoking a cigarette, scratching off a lottery ticket, and holding a newly purchased can of beer in his hand.

Cameron opened his door to exit the car.

“You want anything in here, man?” he asked.

“Yeah, get me a Black and Mild cigar.”

Rayshawn handed Cameron a quarter.

“I’ll try, but they might trip and ask for ID.”

On his way into the store, Cameron glanced back at Betsy, his new pride and joy. A few minutes later, he was on his way back with a bag of Lay’s potato chips and a Sprite.

The man who had been standing in front of the store had tossed his losing lottery ticket into the trash. He was now walking away, crossing the street with the beer can in his hand. His hopes of winning a little extra cash now just a faded wishful memory.

“Here, man.”

Cameron handed Rayshawn a single Black and Mild cigar. It momentarily took his friend’s attention away from his unending battle to adjust the car radio in hopes of finding a station that wasn’t overridden with static.

“Cool!”

Rayshawn was happy that the lack of identification was still overlooked by many of the stores in their area.

“So wassup, man? You want to hit up the basketball court later on today and let me school you in some B-Ball?”

As he spoke, Rayshawn leaned out of the passenger door and began rolling the cigar between his palms, loosening

the tobacco inside. Giving his friend a look of disapproval, Cameron turned off the static radio to watch Rayshawn's method of taming the cigar.

"Man, why you fuck up the cigars like that? Let out half the tobacco, then smoke the little bit that's left? That's the stupidest thing I ever seen."

Rayshawn laughed and finished his ritual before closing the car door.

"I wouldn't expect you to understand—you, coming from the suburbs of country-ass Alabama and all. I wouldn't expect you to know how to *freak* a cigar," he said.

After pausing to light the cigar, Rayshawn turned to face Cameron.

"So, what's up man? You coming to the basketball court with me or what?"

"Maybe later on, man. It's too hot now, but if I do ball then I can only stay for a little while at the court. I have go get Talana so we can hit up the movies tonight."

Cameron gulped down several mouthfuls of Sprite and then started up the Nissan and backed out of the parking lot.

"Man, I don't even know why you hooked up with that money-hungry ho. Everybody knows she only cares about the dollars."

Rayshawn and Talana had a mutual dislike for each other that Cameron just accepted as jealousy. Rayshawn's remark, however, struck a nerve with him.

"Man, lay off ma girl for real, dog!" Cameron said in anger.

"Just drop me off at my house, man!" Rayshawn shot back. "We can chill another day. Shit, I can go smoke or somethin'."

“Man, when you gonna get enough of gettin’ high and smokin’ all the time? You need a hobby, man!” Cameron said leaning back in the seat.

“Nevvvvvvaaaa,” Rayshawn responded with a high pitch chuckle. He put out the cigar in the ashtray after letting a puff of smoke out the window. Cameron stuffed some chips into his mouth and gulped down more Sprite.

With one left turn, he was on the dead-end street where his best friend lived.

Rayshawn’s mother was outside on the porch pouring a bag of charcoal into a BBQ grill. Cameron pulled in front of the house and called to her from his window. Initially, Rayshawn’s mother didn’t recognize him in the car. She stared for a while from a distance before finally returning Cameron’s greeting.

“Alright, man. I’ll holla’ at you tomorrow then, playa!”

Rayshawn bumped fists with Cameron, then exited the car and made his way to the house. Before Cameron could back Betsy out of the driveway, he could hear Rayshawn’s mother yelling at him about his extended absence. His mother was already finding jobs for him to do around the house to keep him home for the remainder of the day.

Cameron drove down the street and around the corner to his apartment. He parked Betsy behind his cousin’s car in the vacant parking space where his mother’s Cutlass would normally be parked. Cameron took a look back, as he walked away from his newly purchased car before making the walk into his apartment.

The door was wide open, and Cameron could hear his cousin’s voice talking with his mother. Surprisingly, the conversation wasn’t the usual gossip about Andrea’s lazy boyfriend, and more surprisingly, there was no music playing in the background. Cameron sensed something was wrong. He

walked into the house and saw Darlene near tears with a drink in her hand, sitting on the rented sofa with her cousin.

“Hey, wassup, my people!” Cameron said in a jovial tone, still excited about his new car.

“Hey, Cameron,” Andrea replied. She was only six years older than he, but she already had two kids and was living in her own government housing unit with her baby’s father and the children.

Andrea’s serious expression worried him. Cameron looked at Andrea’s long fingernails and noticed how every one of her fingers held a ring. He also noticed that his cousin’s hand was rubbing Darlene’s back as if to console her.

“What’s going on in here?” he asked.

“I just brought your mom from the hospital. She’s been there all day.”

“Charles got into a wreck this morning. He crashed into a pole,” Darlene interrupted. “They say that he may be paralyzed from the waist down.”

She lowered her head, sniffled a little, then reached for the bottle filled with brown liquor that was on the coffee table. The guilt of her last argument with Charles was almost too much for her to bear.

Cameron quietly walked over to the couch and sat down on a loveseat across from them.

“Is he going to be alright?” he finally asked.

Andrea stood up. Her jeans were so tight that they seemed to flatten the fat rolls on her belly somewhat.

“He was unconscious,” she told him as she picked up her purse from the table.

“But he woke up while we were there, and he was responding.”

As she spoke, she untangled the gold chains that dangled around her white shirt.

The telephone rang in the kitchen, and Cameron left the women alone to go and answer it. He returned a few seconds later and handed the cordless phone to his cousin.

“Hello?” she answered.

Cameron and his mother could only hear one end of the conversation, but it quickly turned sour.

“Look,” Andrea said into the receiver, “I had a family emergency. Don’t be questioning me about where I’m at, OK.”

She stole a look at Darlene and rolled her eyes. It was a silent language only they understood. Andrea resumed yelling into the receiver as Darlene took another sip of whiskey. It was a good time to change the subject.

“I got a car, Mom!” Cameron blurted to his mother who looked up to him in surprise.

“Oh, really? Where is it?”

“Outside,” he answered.

“I got a good deal on it, too.”

Darlene got up from her seat and walked to the front door to look at the vehicle parked in the spot where her car used to be.

“Oh, that’s nice, Cameron! I ain’t know you was gettin’ a car today.”

Darlene turned to Andrea, who was still yelling at her boyfriend, and motioned for her to see Cameron’s new vehicle.

“I’m proud of you, baby,” Darlene said. “But don’t be driving around, acting stupid with Rayshawn,” she warned.

“I ain’t. Do you want me to drive you to the hospital to see Charles?” Cameron asked in a sympathetic tone.

Darlene sighed deeply and turned away from the door.

“No, baby.” she said. “Not right now. I got too much stuff to deal with, and I don’t need to be up in no depressing-ass hospital right now.”

Cameron followed her as she made her way back to the living room.

“Mom, he probably ain’t even got nobody there with him.”

Darlene’s demeanor quickly changed. She swung her head back in rage. Her previous, solemn, quiet tone rose to a screaming pitch.

“I said, not right now. Don’t start fucking with me, Cameron! I’m going through some heavy shit right now. So you need to back off my nerves!”

Put off by her ungrateful response, Cameron became infuriated.

“A’ight then. I’m out!” Cameron shouted back.

Without another word, he grabbed his keys and walked out of the apartment to his parked car. It was moments like this that made him especially glad that he now had his own escape to the world outside of the low-income projects.

Chapter 9
Plans of Action

Almost two years had passed since the accident that left Charles partially paralyzed and forced to live in a nursing home. Surprisingly, Darlene hadn't gotten a new boyfriend since Charles' near-death experience. Sometimes, when the guilt would start eating at her soul, she would stop by the nursing home and talk with him, and sometimes, she would even sneak in the liquor that he would always ask for.

Cameron, now a senior in high school, had already filled out his loan applications and had sent admission forms to colleges in Atlanta and Ohio. The school year was going by quickly. For over two years, Cameron had balanced school and his part-time job at the Burger Joint. Betsy, his car, had proved to be a good investment and held up well over the years.

Betsy's muffler rattled over the potholes as Cameron broke the law, driving the Nissan well over the legal speed limit on the Detroit interstate.

Cameron was just leaving work. He only had two hours before the mall closed, and he still had to go pick up Rayshawn at his house. Cameron was determined to get there before it closed. He wanted to get the Nike Air Max sneakers he had seen on display in a shoe store during his visit to the mall the week before.

Senior Skip Day was coming up at his high school, and Cameron imagined how good he would look in the new Nike Airs that had just come out. He didn't care if he had to get a speeding ticket on the highway to get them before the mall closed. The tradeoff would have been worth it.

Cameron exited the interstate and made a left onto the familiar, bumpy street covered with potholes and broken beer bottle glass where Rayshawn lived.

A man was standing near Rayshawn's unit. His eyes locked onto Betsy as if the vehicle was a motorcade carrying the President of the United States. The man was walking down the street cradling a brown paper bag in one arm as if it were a newborn baby. The top half of the paper bag was folded down exposing the malt liquor bottle. Cameron brought the car to a stop at the dead-end street. The man held his arms up in the air, continuing to look Betsy over from the side of the road.

Cameron tapped his horn. The blare of the car's horn seemed to radiate off the walls of the home that Rayshawn shared with his mother. When his friend didn't immediately come out, Cameron leaned on the horn once more.

"Hold up, man! Damn, I'm on my way out!" Rayshawn's voice yelled through the window of the three-story duplex.

"Who are you yelling at? You ridin' with me, dude!" Cameron yelled back.

Moments later, Rayshawn pulled the screen door behind his slim body as he ran, shirtless, out the front of the duplex wearing creased jeans that were three sizes too big for him and a yellow pager that hung off one side of his belt. He was carrying a wife-beater tank-top in his left hand.

"Man, save all that yelling and open the door!" he said, tugging at the door handle.

Cameron reached over and unlocked the passenger door. Betsy's muffler continued to rattle from the idling motor and the potholes she encountered during her trip on the interstate.

"What's been up, playa?" Rayshawn asked once inside the vehicle.

"Man, you need to be ready when I pull up, that's what's up!"

Rayshawn shrugged his shoulders as if his tardiness was no big deal. "Man, calm yo' nerves. We gonna get to the mall!"

Looking over his shoulder, Cameron backed the car out onto the street. The man cradling the liquor bottle had disappeared after he realized that Cameron's car wasn't carrying one of the local drug dealers looking for a customer.

Rayshawn pulled the lever to the seat and let it down so that he could finish getting dressed.

"Dang," Rayshawn said, putting on his tank top. "You 'bout to graduate, man. That's cool."

"Yeah, it's cool, man. I got to start getting ready for college. I got accepted to Ohio State in Columbus, Ohio. I tried to go to Clark in Atlanta, but my ACT scores weren't high enough, and I would have had to take a lot of extra, credit courses."

Cameron turned off the dead-end street to make his way back to the interstate.

"Yeah, it's some freaks in the ATL, boy," Rayshawn replied.

Cameron rolled his window down to allow the spring breeze flow through his car.

"Oh yeah, baby," he agreed, "Lots of honeys."

Rayshawn couldn't believe that his friend was talking about going to college. He always knew Cameron would go to college, but never thought he would go away or that the day would come so soon.

"Damn, man! You 'bout to go off to college!" he repeated again.

"I guess I never thought that far ahead for myself, but that's good for you. College ain't fo' me, though. If I did go to college, I probably wouldn't even go to class because I'd be too busy trying to get some ass from all them freaky females away from home. I heard that the girls in college are freaks, man!"

"Yeah, that's what I hear too," Cameron said. He couldn't stop the smile that crept across his face at the thought of it all.

“And it’s the good girls, too,” he continued. “You know, the one whose parents are all strict on ‘em when they’re at home. Then they get to college and away from mommy and daddy. That’s when they get buck wild, boy! Oh yeah!”

Cameron looked at Rayshawn, and his eager smile broadened. He held up his hand and bumped fist with Rayshawn in celebration of what was to come.

“Kind of makes me want to go ahead and go back to school and finish my high school diploma,” Rayshawn said.

“But I ain’t trying to do no college, man. It just isn’t for me. Man, what I need to do is find me a nice college broad with a little cheese, and sex her up right. If I play my cards right, my sex alone could be my bread and butter.”

Rayshawn looked up and smiled with confidence, giving serious thought to the plan he’d just created in his mind.

“Man, what makes you think a college girl will want a broke-ass dude who ain’t been to no one’s college and don’t even have a good job? And even if you do land you a college girl, she might tolerate you for a little while, but after she graduate and start makin’ some real money, she’s not gonna want yo’ broke ass if you not doing anything or making money!”

Cameron kept his eyes on the road and one hand on the steering wheel. He reached in the backseat to turn on the boom box that he had bought to replace Betsy’s broken radio. For several minutes, they rode in silence, listening to *Ginuwine*, a new artist whose hit single, *Pony*, was playing. Rayshawn broke the music moment to respond to Cameron’s earlier speech.

“See, man, I’m cool with livin’ in the hood. I’ve lived here all my life, so what do I need to leave for? But if, or should I say, *when* I do get with my fine college girl, all that’s gonna change. See, all I’ll have to do is sex her right and pop a baby up in her. Then, she’ll be dyin’ to marry me.”

He paused to check the time on his pager.

“Plus, I figure that I won’t go after the finest female that I see up in college, because the fine ones got too much self-esteem,” he reasoned.

“I’m gonna holla’ at one of those full-figured chicks that already have a baby or two by some dude who left her ass straggling, but I’ll be the man of her dreams.”

Rayshawn paused as he snapped his pager back on. “Hell, yeah! Those big fat girls always have low self-esteem, man!”

Rayshawn laughed at his own humor.

“I’ll make sure she got her own crib too, so I can move right on in. See, her self-esteem is gonna to be low because she done had babies by some dude that’s not around. She’ll be happy she got a man who pokin’ it to her on the regular. All I will have to do is play Daddy and Good Man for a little while, sex her real good, and pop a baby off in her. Man, I’m telling you, she won’t want to raise a bunch of kids on her own, and as far as she concerned, a sorry man is better than no man at all.”

Rayshawn reached into his pocket and pulled out a box with only one cigarette remaining in the pack. Cameron glanced at his friend and shook his head in disbelief.

“So let me get this straight. You’re telling me that you gonna get you a fat chick with kids who’s in college or has graduated college, who’s makin’ money. Then you gonna sex her up and get her pregnant so you can play daddy to her kids? All this just so she can take care of your sorry ass?”

Cameron began to laugh at Rayshawn’s elaborate plan

“And you thinkin’ this woman will go with your plan because she’s gonna have low self-esteem, and she won’t want to be alone without a man in her life *and* because your sex is so good?”

By the time Cameron finished recanting the story, he was laughing hysterically and steering the car off the highway exit.

“Damn, man! That’s some wild imagination you have, Rayshawn.”

Cameron laughed then continued.

“So, in the future, when I see you out with your low self-esteemed, fat girl and six step-kids, then I know your life plan was a success.”

Cameron continued to laugh until his vision blurred with tears.

“OK, yo’ ass can laugh all the fuck you want, but women use us men for our dough all the time. But tha’ shit is so wrong when we do it back to them?”

Cameron caught his breath from laughing.

“That sounds like a plan and all, but I just got one question. What’s gonna happen if she gets sick or somethin’ while in college and can’t finish school, and you have to flip the bills *after* you got her pregnant? What if she wants you to marry her then?” Cameron challenged as he pulled Betsy into the mall entrance.

Rayshawn shrugged his shoulders in a matter-of-fact manner.

“Oh, well, first of all, no marriage or babies ‘til *after* I see she’s makin’ the Benjamins, and she graduated from college. After I see she graduated and makin’ money, I’ll get engaged to her and tell her I love her nine times a day. I’ll cook, clean, take her little kids to their football games and all that good stuff, but no marriage until she makin’ the cheese. And if she can’t finish college for whatever reason, then I’m gone. No need for two strugglin’ people in the house, scared to get the bills out of the mailbox.”

Rayshawn cracked another satisfied smile.

It was no longer a laughing matter to Cameron because he could see in Rayshawn’s eyes that he wasn’t joking.

“Man, you’re not right,” he told him. “And the sad thing about this is that it could happen, because good girls do fall for men like you, Rayshawn.”

“Hell, yeah, it could happen. And it’s *gonna* happen. So you go off to college and study for exams. Meanwhile, I’ll keep my job ova’ at the Burger Joint, smoke my weed. In the end, we might end up neighbors, livin’ in the same upscale neighborhood with our kids playin’ on the same Pee Wee football team.”

Rayshawn smiled

“Don’t get mad, man. It’s the same stuff females have been pullin’ on men from Day One. And what’s to say a female won’t one day run the same game on you? Or, hell, might be runnin’ on you right now?”

Rayshawn stopped and took a puff off his cigarette, then turned to look directly at Cameron with a serious expression on his face, awaiting his response.

“Because by the time I graduate college, I’ll have requirements for the women I date,” Cameron replied seriously.

“I mean, right now, I can talk at a female who doesn’t have much. If she sticks with me all the way through college, and she still standin’ by my side when it’s all said and done, then yeah, I could marry her, and we could share the success together.

“But if I go to college and struggle on my own, and I make it through on my own, then for sure I’ll have requirements. If I don’t have kids, then I don’t want a female who got kids, and if I have a college degree, then she better have a college degree. I’m not tryin’ to talk to no female that has gone out and made babies by a bunch of sorry thugs that don’t want to handle their responsibility. Some female who’s lookin’ for a well-paid dude to take care of her and the six kids she have with ‘Tyrone,’ who won’t pay his back child support. So yeah, I will

have requirements, just like you. Only I will have somethin' to offer other than just a hard dick at night."

Cameron scorned his friend. There was no sign of the earlier laughter in his voice. Cameron's words were stern, and his look was serious.

Still, Rayshawn wasn't giving in.

"I'll have something else to offer than just a hard dick at night. I'll have a hard dick in the morning, a hard dick in the evening, *and* at night."

Rayshawn went into one of his joking laughs while Cameron found a parking spot on the far end of the lot.

"No, but on the real, man," Rayshawn continued in a more serious tone.

After one last puff off his cigarette, he put the butt out in Cameron's ashtray.

"The only reason my plan will work *is* because the good educated dudes like you have your *requirements*. Females know that the brothas like you—dudes with college degrees, no kids, and baby-momma free—not trying to holla' at women who already got kids by two and three different dudes. It's because of ya'll's requirements that they're self-esteem goes low. But nevertheless, they still need a man and some sex in they life. So they come to dudes like me for that," Rayshawn looked up with a smirk on his face, as if he thought his comeback deserved an award.

Cameron sighed.

"I hear you, man, I just don't feel what you doin'. I'm sayin' why can't you go to college or take a trade and add to the table, and be a real man rather than just sexin' up a single mom? You're actin' like a high price ho,' if you think about it."

Cameron reached over to the backseat and turned off the radio.

“Yeah, I could do that, but then my requirements would go up, too,” Rayshawn replied, while getting out of the car and brushing fallen ashes off his shirt.

Cameron knew that continuing the debate would be a waste of his time. Rayshawn just wasn’t willing to change.

“Come on, man, let’s go in here so I can get these shoes before the mall closes.”

The Twelve Oaks Mall was still packed with people doing last minute shopping. Cameron knew right where he needed to go. Rayshawn was busy scoping out the girls and trying to look cool with his laid-back pimp-walk. Cameron was on a mission to get the shoes he wanted, so he could look good for Senior Skip Day.

Cameron thought about their relationship. Although, for the time being, both Cameron and Rayshawn were on the same economic level and making the same amount of money at the Burger Joint, Cameron had so much more than Rayshawn did. They both worked about the same number of hours per week, at the same place, and they were both still in high school. But Rayshawn had failed two grades and hardly ever went to class. Somehow, he managed to make it to all the high school dances and sports games. They both lived in the same neighborhood and trusted each other, and they could both relate to the streets where they had grown up.

Despite their differences, the friendship between the boys was solid. If one of them got into trouble, the other had his back. Unlike Rayshawn, though, Cameron spoiled himself with the money he made from working. They had both been working at the eatery for the past two and half years, and Cameron had managed to buy a car, clothes, furniture for his room, and still had some savings.

Rayshawn would go to work regularly and would buy things for his mother, but most of his money he would spend on

weed and going out to the teen clubs that Cameron never really cared for. Rayshawn would pay a few bills, but then spend the rest of his money as soon as he got it. He had never even opened a savings account.

In the letters she wrote, Momma D was always telling Cameron to pay himself before he paid anyone else and to never spend all his money. She always told him to keep something in the reserve, no matter how badly he wanted to spend it. Cameron just assumed that Rayshawn didn't have anyone to teach him that valuable lesson. And he had run out of breath and patience trying to explain it to him.

"So, I know you givin' me one of those tickets to your graduation, Cameron. Oh, and my momma wants come too, man."

Rayshawn had ended his cool walk and was now pulling up his sagging, creased jeans. They walked by the water fountain, just past the main entrance in the mall, and made their way to the escalators through the crowds of shoppers.

"That's cool, man," Cameron replied. "I should have enough tickets to give a few away. I stopped by my dad's house last week to see if he wanted a ticket to the graduation, but Tameka and Tammy had already given him one, so that was good for me." Cameron paused then continued.

"I almost didn't want to go over to my father's house to see if he wanted a ticket. I had asked my dad to help me pay for my senior pictures because mom can't help me out right now, since she lost her job. So I had to pay three hundred dollars for my senior pictures, and I have to pay for the pictures and tuxedo for the prom. On top of all that, I still have to pay the eighty dollars for senior dues to graduate. Plus, I have to have some spending cash for Senior Skip Day. So, I had to ask my pops if he could help me out with something on my senior pictures."

Rayshawn listened quietly as Cameron gave the details of his failing father.

“My father told me he couldn’t help me out with any funds. He gave me this long rundown on why he couldn’t help me out, but when I went to make a payment on my pictures, I see my dad at the register paying in full for Tameka and Tammy’s senior pictures. He had the nerve to give me twenty dollars, talkin’ about that was all he had and started tellin’ me that Tameka and Tammy gave him the money to get their pictures out.”

Cameron ended his venting with a look of irritation on his face.

Rayshawn shook his head after hearing Cameron’s story.

“Your pops is foul, man,” Rayshawn said. “And that was some bullshit he told you.”

“I know it was, but I ain’t even gonna sweat it. I guess he’ll be at the graduation, since Tameka and Tammy are both graduating with me. And, of course, I know his wife is going to be there. I can’t stand that bitch, man. She the reason he is the way he is. But I’m going to get mine. I paid for my senior pictures without his help, and then I went over to his house and gave him a few and left some for Tameka and Tammy and his wife, just to let them know that I can handle mine!”

Rayshawn turned to Cameron and held his arm out to smack hands, showing his support to his friend, who he could tell was getting sensitive talking about his deadbeat father.

“No doubt,” Cameron said. “I’m always going to handle mine, always. And I’m going to make sure he knows about every accomplishment I make in life, just so I can prove to his ass that I’m not about to break just because he can’t be a father. My gain is his loss.”

Cameron smiled and looked at Rayshawn with a mixture of sadness and pride in his eyes as they continued to walk through the mall.

The shoe store was finally within sight. Cameron slowed his pace as they approached the store.

“Damn, I have to give you props, man, ‘cuz you’re my boy, and I’m proud of you, Cam. You know, I always got ya’ back, man...always,” Rayshawn said with a solid tone.

“Word is bond on that, ma dude!”

Cameron made eye contact with Rayshawn, acknowledging his loyalty. He knew that even though Rayshawn was a dog to women and ran through his money like Ice-T on a hot day, he was the most loyal friend that walked the planet, and he knew the words coming out of Rayshawn’s mouth were as real as a hundred-dollar bill leaving the U.S. Mint.

Knowing that the conversation was a tender topic for his friend, Rayshawn decided to change the subject.

“How is ya’ mom doing, man?” He asked.

“Man, she’s good, but she still hasn’t found a job yet. I been helping with the rent, since it’s only seventy-eight dollars a month with the low-income housing certificate we have. But she know I’m about to be eighteen soon, and she’ll have to get off of that subsidized housing, since there won’t be anymore minors in the house after I’m gone.”

Rayshawn nodded.

“Yeah, man, the housing authority don’t play. Those muthafuckas are quick to put up a ‘get-the-fuck-out’ letter on the front door. You better handle that with ya’ mom, man. Make sure she’s alright before you go off to college, man,” Rayshawn said, taking another tug at his waist, attempting to pull up his neatly creased, oversized jeans.

He understood where his friend was coming from, but Cameron also knew that Darlean couldn't expect to lean on him forever.

"Man, I have to look out for myself now. I love my mom, but I can't carry her no more. She know what she has to do, and she know I'm going off to college. She has to handle herself and stop all that drinkin' and smokin' weed. I can't stay behind and lose out on my future tryin' to help her out, and I don't think she expect me to do that. So I'm doin' my thing, man," Cameron replied in a nonchalant tone.

"I hear you, man. We have to stop by the store on our way back. I need some squares," Rayshawn said, taking the empty cigarette pack out of his pocket.

The boys arrived at the shoe store where Cameron had seen the Nike Air Max shoes. Two girls in the store were trying on sandals. Rayshawn cringed at the price tag.

"Damn, them Nikes are nice, man, but eighty dollars? Dayum, that's a few sacks of weed for me and a night of clubbin'. Yo ass always did spoil ya' self, Cameron. You went out and bought you a car as soon as you got ya' license. Even though you ain't throw no rims on it or put a stereo in it, *and* you did give ya' car a whack-ass name like Betsy."

Cameron and Rayshawn shared a lighthearted laugh.

"Forget you, man. You can walk home if you don't like ma' car's name, fool."

Still laughing, Cameron started looking for a sales staff member so he could buy the Nikes.

He waited for the salesperson to finish with the two girls who were trying on the sandals. As he waited, he started thinking about what Rayshawn had said about his accomplishments. All of a sudden, Cameron felt a sense of sadness. He realized that he would be going to college and,

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after he left, he wouldn't have his friend by his side to poke fun at and hang out with.

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