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It's Bigger Than an Oval

Chapter 11: “Late Nights”

Ms. Waters was 34 years old and worked as a waitress at the local Waffle House. She worked 10 hours a day to put food on the table and keep the lights on in the 2 bedroom 1 bathroom apartment in Detroit, Michigan. Although it wasn't much, it was home for the 2 person Waters family, but it was also very dangerous. They lived in a rough neighborhood of Detroit known as “Hell.” The real neighborhood was called Hallsbury, but nobody ever called it that.

Virginia gave birth to Malik Ace Waters while she was 17 years old, and as a result, she was kicked out of her parent's home and forced to be an adult and a mother all on her own. Virginia found a job at the Waffle House, passed her GED certification, and found her apartment that she still lives in today.

When she had first moved to the neighborhood 17 years earlier, the violence wasn't nearly as bad as it is today. This was something new for her to navigate as well as the growing financial tensions she endured. Ace knew his mom was struggling, so he always tried to help out as much as possible. Whether it was donating his check from working at Walgreens after school and practice or even racing people for money after class. He always tried to repay the one woman who ever loved him unconditionally.

It was around 11 at night, and Ace was still making his way home. The moonlight helped guide his path through the dark Detroit streets representing the beauty in the struggle. The high crime rates and poverty made it difficult to see any good in the place Ace called home. Many didn't make it out of the city, or even survive for that matter, as violence and drug

dealing was the main job opportunity after high school. Ace wanted to go to college, but day by day it became harder to visualize.

How was he going to go to college selling drugs just like everybody else? He began to think of the resentment he held towards his father. His absence led to financial hardships for his mother and him. Although he loved his city and his life, he was stuck at the bottom and he blamed his dad for it.

“Dear Lord,” he softly spoke to himself. “I ask that you provide me with guidance in times of uncertainty, in this time of uncertainty. I know-”

Ace immediately stopped when he saw a man on the track of his high school. A man he hadn't seen before, but knew all too well. Without thinking twice, he hopped the fence separating the track from the sidewalk and yelled.

“WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING HERE?”

The man stayed seated on the metal bench on the football field adjacent to Lane 1 of the track.

“ANSWER ME!”

Ace continued to cover ground towards the man as his anger rose with every step.

“HOW DARE YOU COME TO MY SAFE PLACE? WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE, YO? YOU WANNA BE A FUCKING FATHER NOW?”

The man jerked his head towards Ace at his last statement and stood as Ace neared the bench he was sitting on. As the two locked eyes, there was a moment of realization for the both of them.

“How'd you know?” the man asked.

Ace was stunned. “Know wha-”

“How'd you know I'm your damn father?”

“The care you showed when you caught me selling dope, the protection you illustrated when they tried to rob me, plus you knew I only lived with my mom and I tell very few people that my dad abandoned us like a coward.”

The last word made the man flinch. He had dreaded this day, but he knew it was coming and there was no running from it.

“Your mother and I were both young,” Ace’s eyes widened as the man began but he didn’t interrupt him. “She was always stronger than I was and it showed. My father was never there for me when I was young and as much as I wanted to be the opposite of him, I wasn’t. I failed you and your mother. I had no job, no money, and I definitely wasn’t going to college so what the hell could I offer my son? What could I offer you?” the man paused as tears began to fill his eyes.

“I didn’t expect her folks to kick her out,” he continue, “and when I found out I searched for her, I swear I did, but she had already moved. I’m sorry Malik-”

“You don’t get to call me that,” Ace said in between deep breaths full of tears. “Only my mother and the people who love me can call me that. YOU LEFT! You don’t love me...”

“I do love you boy! I love you with my whole damn heart. Once you started making a buzz on the track when you ran your first race freshman year, I came running. I saw your mom doing a great job, so why did I need to intervene and get in the way?”

“TO TEACH ME! I had to learn to shave on my own, talk to girls on my own, fight on my own, and now I’m out here selling drugs and you’re telling me you’re proud? Look at what you fucking caused.”

“Son, I know things haven’t been easy for you but hard times break the boy and hard times make the man. I’m sorry for the things you had to do on your own, but I’m proud of who you’ve become. You’re a true man, a good man, more than I ever was or will be.”

Ace was speechless. The two stood there as their tears ran down their faces in river-like fashion. The air was full of tension as emotions ran wild. Ace had been right all along. No need for DNA tests or top secret investigations... he just knew.

“What’s your name?” Ace asked.

“Your mom never told you?” The man emitted a nervous chuckle, “Leroy Hunter, but

most people call me-”

“Malik,” Ace interrupted. “That’s why y’all named me Malik.”

“Exactly. How is your mom doing?”

“We’re broke. I’m not out here selling drugs for my health,” Ace responded sharply. “So you talk to the coach of your dream school and instead of being patient you decide to risk it all?”

How the hell did he know tha-

“I know what you’re thinking. Yes, I was at the meet. Matter of fact, I’ve been at every meet you’ve had. I’m surprised you didn’t notice sooner, but I guess when you’re a superstar all the faces look the same.”

“Nah, I just remember the people that’ve been there since the beginning.” The man said nothing. He knew there would be hatred geared towards him and was well aware that he deserved it. He didn’t have an excuse for why he left his only son, he only had his story. Which, in reality, wasn’t ever going to be good enough.

“Hey man, I’m sorry. I’m sorry for abandoning you and your mother. It was wrong and I never considered how much you would have to go through on your own, but one thing I can say confidently is I’m proud of the man you’ve become. If you ever take one piece of advice from me, please let it be this…” the man paused as he turned to walk away. “Stay out the streets, they’re unforgiving.”

Ace watched his dad walk away and, surprisingly, held onto his final words tightly. Although he had no reason to trust this man or his advice, he felt as though his father wasn’t lying to him. Ace had a decision to make, but for right now he had to get home and pray his mother wasn’t awake.

His luck ran out. Ms. Waters waited patiently for her son to return in the recliner near the box television.

“Must’ve been a great dinner baby.” She said softly as Ace locked the door. “Yes ma’am,

we had tacos but they were nowhere near as good as yours mama,” Ace responded.

As much as she wanted to be upset at her son for coming home so late, it was hard to stay mad at him. He had the same charm as his father.

“Malik, you know you could’ve asked to use the vehicle baby. Why’d you go walking to that girl’s house? It’s dangerous,” she said to her only son.

“I didn’t want to waste your gas, mama. It was okay, I was safe.”

“Safe? Baby, the only thing protecting you is God.”

Ace had contemplated for a while telling his mother what he did to earn the money he gave her for the rent, but telling her also meant revealing the firearm he kept handy to make sure his mother didn’t lose her only son. However, before Ace could decide, his mother decided for him.

“Since we’re up and talking, this money you’ve been bringing to me has me worried Malik. I know you work hard, but all of this is not from cashiering. Baby, please tell me you’re not o-”

KLINK!

Ms. Water’s eyes laid onto the jet black pistol Ace placed on the dining table in front of her. She was expressionless as her worst fears had been confirmed.

“Mama the lights have to stay on. We have to eat and we definitely will not get evicted. Not while I’m the man of the house.” Ace paused as tears began to fill his eyes. “You’ve worked so hard and the world has been so unfair to you mom. I refuse to keep letting us get pushed down.”

“Baby, God will always provide.”

“God? God was about to let us get evicted and live on the streets. God has your son standing on the corner moving weight. God has your son 2 seconds away from taking someone’s life.” The weight of all Ace has done came down upon him like a tidal wave. He broke down to both knees on the living room floor as he wept.

“WHERE IS GOD NOW MOM?” Ace said through tears.

Ms. Waters had never experienced her son so vulnerable before. She was aware his strong persona and habit of withholding his emotions would catch up to him. It didn't make it any easier for her to witness. She began to weep uncontrollably as her greatest gift was slowly breaking.

“Malik... God has blessed us. Look at what you're doing on that track. We may not be rich, but God gives his toughest battles to his toughest soldiers. I'm so sorry...” she began to get choked up and was no longer able to emit words.

She ran and dropped to the floor to hug her son tight. Her mind ran wildly, contemplating the things she wished she'd done differently. She was sorry for not picking a better father for her son. She was sorry for not providing a better life. She was sorry for not protecting him from what was to come. She had seen Leroy at every meet since Ace's freshman year, and she knew it was only a matter of time before Ace met him. However, that was a problem for another day. The two fell asleep on the floor, embracing each other.

Written By:
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