

*HE HAD THE POWER. SHE HAD THE VOICE.*



MUTED  
MUTED  
MUTED  
MUTED  
MUTED  
MUTED

*A NOVEL IN VERSE BY TAMI CHARLES*

# MUTED

*TAMI CHARLES*



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Readers should be aware that this book explores issues including abuse, eating disorders, divorce, manipulation, and rape.

**TO EVERY ARTIST, EVERYWHERE:  
MAY YOUR GIFTS ALWAYS BE HEARD,  
LOUD AND CLEAR**

You know you're VIP  
when you roll up to the airport  
with a pilot at your side.

Papi, you sure know  
how to make a girl feel special.

# CONTENTS

[TITLE PAGE](#)

[DEDICATION](#)

[EPIGRAPH](#)

[PART ONE: CHECK-IN](#)

[PART TWO: SECURITY](#)

[PART THREE: TAKEOFF](#)

[PART FOUR: LANDING](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

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## PART ONE: CHECK-IN

Monday, December 23  
Atlanta International Airport  
Time: 8:13 a.m.  
Destination: Home

## AIRPORT LINES

are the worst—  
'specially during holidays.  
But that's not the case for us,  
right, Captain Lafleur?

We hustle past the bustle,  
sight unseen,  
straight to the holding room,  
where we'll wait ... and wait some more,  
before being escorted to the plane ... first.

Pilot perks.  
Also: *boss moves!*

This leaves plenty of time  
—one hour, forty-four minutes—  
for me to explain how it all went down.  
I'm gonna say some stuff  
you ain't gonna like.  
But you've done some stuff  
I didn't like either.  
So maybe you'll get it.

And I'm sorry, Papi.  
For lying. For leaving.  
But not for the music.

Even though it took some time  
to open my eyes,  
I fixed everything, you'll see.  
I muted the monster once and for all.

And now ...  
I get to go home.  
With you.  
Just like you, and Gwen,

and Ma wanted.

But first, I gotta start  
from the beginning.

SATURDAY, MAY 11

Inside the great white tent  
in the community center parking lot,  
an emcee tapped and screeched  
into the microphone ...

“Singing India Arie’s  
‘Beautiful Surprise,’  
give it up for our next  
Corn Festival talent finalists ...  
Angelic Voices!”

Slow claps simmered  
from the small audience  
as three brown girls  
took their place in the spotlight.

Fingers plucked F#m chords  
three voices, three harmonies  
powered through verse and chorus,  
as onlookers looked on,  
and over,  
and *at*  
anything else  
but the magic unfolding on the stage.

It wasn’t the first time  
we sang and dreamed  
and wished upon a star,  
every wish, every prayer unanswered.

But for me,  
I longed for the day  
when hustle  
turned to gold.  
Show it to my family.  
Show them who I really am.

That night, as we celebrated our win

—fifty bucks and a bushel of corn—  
three amigas lay on a blanket  
in the grassy meadow of Shohola Falls.

“We *rich* rich now, y’all!”  
I fanned my sweaty face  
with my cut ... a whole seventeen dollars.

“Even Black Jesus knows  
that ain’t enough to do enough.”  
Shak half laughed, half groaned.

And she and I high-fived  
our measly-ass thirty-four dollars  
beneath a silver moon.

“I’m so done with  
this small-time mierda,”  
Dali cursed at the blue-gray skies.  
“We need a stroke of luck.  
Like ... if y’all could sing for anyone  
in the universe, who would it be?”

“Kirk Franklin.” Shak didn’t hesitate.

“Queen Yeli, J. Lo, but most of all ...”

Dali and I locked eyes and belted  
“Sean ‘Mercury’ Ellis!!!” in perfect harmony.  
We’d been stanning homeboy since third grade.

“The King of R&B?  
Wouldn’t that be something?” Shak smiled.

And on that night,  
three brown girls,  
three heartbeats colliding,  
laughed and laughed  
at that dumbass dream.

But as the sky grew darker,

the stars undressed themselves,  
and the universe whispered ever-so-softly,

*Some wishes are granted  
only to the bold ...*

FRIDAY, JUNE 7

**YOU DON'T WANT TO MISS THIS!**

Sean "Mercury" Ellis at the Prudential Center in Newark, NJ!

Grammy Award winner, hit maker, pop-R&B superstar!

You comin' or nah?

It's going down Friday, June 14 at 7 p.m.!

Top fan comments:

**denverlee01:** Calling @dalisaybabe @ballershak, behold ... A SIGN!

**Samiam24:** #nah Merc is #sketchyAF #ImGood

**Cutierock14:** We bow down to #MercEllis all day, errrday!

**dalisaybabe:** Damn @denverlee01, what kinda brujería did you do? You literally conjured this man up! Right @ballershak?

**ballershak:** Word. Black Jesus came through on the prayer front! Hallelujerrr! This is gonna be fun!

## ANGELIC VOICES . . .

lyrically known as *Whew, those girls can SAAANG*,  
locally known as *But, who really gives a damn?*

Talent dripped through our pores,  
dreams of fame as real  
as starlight,  
but none of it mattered in  
that town,  
                    that school,  
                            those mountains,  
                                    my family.

In Shohola,  
nobody won Grammys  
            or Billboards  
                    or VMAs.

That's why soon as I saw  
that my *favorite artist of all time*  
was gonna be just two hours away,  
it was obvious this was meant to be,  
so my goals were hella clear:  
Be bold. Get seen. Be heard.  
This was our chance.  
How'd I know?  
Because the universe told me so.

FRIDAY, JUNE 14

Last day of junior year  
and Mr. Andrade had the NERVE  
to be at the board ... teaching!

Dead smack in the middle of  
THE most boring discussion  
about ...

“What was he saying again, Shak?”  
Shak started to tell me,  
always the good girl I’d never be.

But I didn’t hear a damn thing,  
cuz right on time  
Dali appeared outside  
the science lab door.

Pretty as an angel,  
a smile like the devil himself,  
no one ever suspects Dali.

Left eye winking,  
lips puckered up,  
Dali mouthed, “*It’s go time, muchachas!*”

But before we could get a word in—  
*RIIIIIIIING!!!*

Fire alarms blazed,  
crowds gathered,  
feet scattered

students  
teachers  
principals  
huddled outside  
in beautiful  
utter chaos ...

a perfect melody  
in the key of  
distRacti0n.

## OPERATION BOUNCE

was in full effect!

Sunroof open,

AC on full blast

school clothes tossed

an in-the-car makeover

of epic proportions

for two, not three:

lip gloss

midriffs

cutoffs

For them ... not me.

Wasn't catching my stomach

hanging out like that

I dressed myself

in the usual:

too-big jeans,

too-big tee,

chest

skin

island hips

dipped invisibly

Yeah, my body was big

but my voice was even **bigger**.

All I had to do was get to the concert

to prove my point.

**JUNE 14, 10:09 A.M.**

**Ma:** DENNY, I GOT A FIRE DRILL ALERT FROM YOUR SCHOOL.

**Me:** It's over now. Headed to calculus. Then hanging out at the Falls. Dali's after. I'm sleeping over, k?

**Ma:** HANGING OUT? GWEN WOULD BE DOING SOMETHING MORE PRODUCTIVE. LIKE FINDING A SUMMER JOB!

**Me:** It's the last day of school, Ma.

**Ma:** YOU CALL ME AND CHECK IN, OK? PICKING UP ANOTHER SHIFT IN THE ER. PAPI COMES HOME TOMORROW MORNING. DON'T BE LATE.

**Me:** Turn the caps lock off.

**Ma:** HUH?

**Me:** Never mind. See you in the morning.

**Ma:** BRIGHT AND EARLY FOR PAPI. DON'T TEXT AND DRIVE!!!

**Me:** K, Ma. Got it.

## \*I PUT THAT PHONE ON VIBRATE\*

turned the music up,  
let the sound  
drown the anxiety rising  
bone-to-skin,  
laughed,  
and sang  
in the key of  
IDGAF!  
Because right then,  
right there  
I had zero fucks to give.

Not when ...  
summers were made for music.

*(not annoying parents)*

Mini concerts in the park,  
jam sessions in the basement,  
hitting up the Apple Valley on Route 6,  
to enter the talent contest,  
where we'd sing our hearts out,  
and pray to win that hundred dollars.  
Not each though—  
that was a three-way split.

*Not enough to do enough,*  
Shak would say.  
But every summer,  
we did that (& more) anyway.

Hoping, praying, dreaming  
of seeing a talent scout  
a record exec,  
or get THIS ...  
our *parents* in the crowd.

But I we were never enough, I guess.

That's why I had to  
make it happen,  
nervous as I was.

So we sped off in my Honda Civic,  
three tickets in hand,  
didn't care 'bout those nosebleed seats,  
'cause I had a plan.

And there I was  
driving-driving-driving,  
while Shak and Dali sang the roof off  
as I begged the universe  
to make my wish come true.

Because deep down I knew  
that moment  
that highway  
that summer was made  
just for me.

(us)

**KNOW WHAT ELSE**

summers were made for?

Dreams.

Intergalactic,  
out-of-this-world,

fly            to M  
          me            E  
                          R  
                          C  
                          U  
                          R  
                          Y

and back  
kinda dreams.

## SHIT SHAK SAID

“What if our folks find out we dipped off?”

“What if we get lost?”

“What if ...”

    “What if ...”

        “What if ...”

Songs in the key of doubt,

by Shakira Brown

## SHIT DALI SAID

“Do you think this lip stain makes me look older?”

“Do you think my booty looks good in these shorts?”

“Do you?”

A lullaby in the key of diva,  
by Dalisay Gómez

**ACTUALLY . . .**

Dali's ass looked perfect  
in those jeans,  
and I woulda told her that ...  
had Shak not been around.

But!!!

... that wasn't the point.  
The point was  
brains outweighed beauty,  
which meant  
my plan was  
absolutely,  
positively,  
g-e-n-i-u-s ...  
                    right?  
(of course!)

## REASONS WHY I'M SMART (HEAR THAT, MA?):

Metadata.

All-knowing magic,  
hidden in pictures,  
that showed me where,  
out of all the planets in the universe,  
Mercury was positioned.

First, at home in Atlanta.  
Concert in Richmond.  
Cavs game in Cleveland.  
Video shoot in Philly.  
And then his final destination:  
40.7335° N, -74.1710° W

In other words ...  
25 Lafayette St., Newark, NJ.

His arrival time? 10:17 a.m.  
Ours?  
Noon-thirty.

## REASONS WHY I'M NOT:

Fifty-leven girls  
thought to do the same shit.

## ARRIVING SIX HOURS EARLY MEANT

fireball in blue sky,  
aimed at your body  
like lasers.

Heat-hugging,  
sweat-building  
air,  
we inhaled,  
exhaled  
like fiends searching for our next fix.

Steel double doors ahead,  
too far to touch,  
barricaded by  
girls,  
skintight clothes wearing,  
lollipop sucking,  
video-vixen wannabes.

And me.  
In my basic-ass outfit  
standing beside  
Dali (Miss Universe)  
and Shak (legs for days)  
Waiting ...

Waiting ...

Waiting ...

## ACCORDING TO INSTAGRAM

Sean “Mercury” Ellis was inside the Prudential.  
Mic check done, ready to hit the streets,  
grab a bite, before the concert began.

And so we all stood  
beneath the sun.

Hope filling up,  
fingers crossed that he’d float out,  
like Black Jesus,  
invite someone, anyone  
onto that tour bus parked at the corner.

And I tell you, just like in the movies,  
those doors flew open,  
pupils combusted.

Stares turned to whispers,  
whispers bubbled up  
to loud chants.

“Merc is here!”  
“Merc is here!”

Hella pissed  
'cause I couldn't see nothing.  
Just heard the claps echoing,  
up, down, and all around  
Lafayette like a parade.

Felt the huddle grow tighter.  
A stampede of epic proportions  
swallowed me, Shak, and Dali  
whole.

“Can I get a selfie, Merc?”  
voices cried out.

My eyes found a clearing,  
zoomed in on a giant  
hovering above the crowd.  
Security.

Big head stacked on big shoulders,  
stacked on even bigger arms,  
swatting video thots  
like gnats in summer.

I grabbed hold of Shak and Dali,  
forced our bodies away from the crowd,  
inched closer toward the tour bus.  
“It’s no use,” Dali said.

But I didn’t *hear her* hear her  
because my eyes studied  
the sea of red-bottom shoes  
and Timberland boots,  
and finally,  
I saw the only pair that mattered—  
diamond encrusted Air Force 1s.

“He’s coming this way. Shak, connect the speaker!  
Pull up the track!” I yelled.  
And so began Mrs. Doubtfire with the questions.  
“Right here? Right now? On the street?”  
I snatched my phone from her,  
clicked play,  
and let that C minor 7th chord  
do what it do.

And by do,  
I mean SAAAAAAAAAAAAANG!

Dali came in with that  
soprano note,  
high enough to crack a hole  
in the sky.

Me and Shak  
swerved in beneath her,

the perfect alto-tenor blend.

If music were a color,  
ours woulda been blue-red-green  
ocean meets fire meets earth,  
and I'm not just saying that  
'cause those were my lyrics,  
my chords, my literal heartbeat ... in a beat.  
I say it because  
the minute we unleashed our voices,  
noise canceled,  
Air Force 1s emerged,  
each diamond  
bringing more sunshine with it.

Sean "Mercury" Ellis.  
Shades slid  
to the tip of his nose.  
Gray eyes sparkling  
beneath the midday sun.  
Homeboy was snapping,  
swerving,  
grooving to "Shoot Your Shot,"  
our song—  
my song.

Time stood still as  
verse blended into chorus,  
into the final,  
belting, universe-breaking  
note.

Applause, thunderously loud.

Eyes upon eyes  
stared us down.  
But there was only one set I cared about.

"That was dope," Merc said. "Y'all wrote that?"

"Denver did." Dali giggled,

then covered her braces  
with her left hand.

There was no time to be shy,  
not when the chance to fly  
was right in our faces.

“We’re Angelic Voices,  
an R&B group, from PA.  
Looking to score a record deal.”  
I handed Merc the business card I printed at home ...

like a freaking BOSS!

Whispers from the crowd spread like disease.  
*“Ain’t getting no record deal looking like that.  
'Specially McThickums.”*

But I didn’t *hear them* hear them,  
'cause I was too busy  
breathing in the same air as Merc.

He leaned in and I knew what was coming next:  
“Yooooo, what’s up with your eyes?”

Same reaction I get  
whenever someone  
meets me for the first time.

Always starts with  
a stare,  
a lean,  
a question  
(or three).

And for me,  
an answer that I  
spent the past seventeen  
years rehearsing  
down to the last word ...

*Heterochromia*

As in:  
two eyes  
two different colors  
one blue  
one brown  
part ocean  
part earth  
made of both.

As in:  
a genetic mutation  
the crashing of  
two genes  
—a miraculous disaster in the making—

*No, I don't have a white parent!*  
*(Even though that blue eye came*  
*from Ma's German granddaddy.)*  
*I'm Black mixed with Black mixed with magic.*  
*And no, I ain't wearing contacts!*

*So, LAWD HAVE MERCY*  
*can we get back to the discussion at hand, sir?!?*

(I didn't quite say all that tho.)

“Angelic Voices, huh?

That's real cute,” Merc said.

“So are those eyes of yours.

Good luck with the songwriting, baby gurl.”

He. Called. Me. Baby.

Security stepped forward,  
side-swatting us  
like gnats in summer,  
while Sean “Mercury” Ellis,  
wrapped in a trio of video thots  
made his way onto the bus.

And right there,  
on the corner of Lafayette,

I almost emptied myself  
of wishing, hoping, dreaming.

Almost.

## IF YOU LOOK IN THE DICTIONARY,

it'll tell you that *almost* means:

Not quite.

Nearing.

Not done yet.

I wasn't done.

Yet.

"Let's just go home," Shak said.

"Oh, hells no! I spent my last dollar on that ticket," Dali pouted.

"What if those twenty-seven-dollar tickets are fake? What if security kicks us out? What if—"

"We gotta trust in Denver's plan." Dali beamed at me. "I know I do."

I stepped back into the line,  
felt Dali's shadow follow behind me.

And then, finally, Shak's.

We'd waited that long.

We weren't going NOWHERE.

## SCORCHED SKIN,

backs dripping wet,  
phone buzzing,  
calls from Ma on repeat,  
I clicked IGNORE as  
time moved  
four o'clock,  
    five o'clock,  
        six o'clock,  
double doors rolled out like red carpets.  
Lines swerved,  
swayed,  
snaked their way through  
metal detectors,  
steps,  
corridors.

A weight pressed down on me.  
Stacked, meaty arm-head-shoulder of a man.

“Y’all the singers from earlier?” he asked.

“Yo, that’s dude that was with Merc.”  
Dali’s whispered words floated in the air.

“Yes,” I spat out, “Angelic Voices. That’s us.”

“Follow me, young ladies.”

One star,  
one wish,  
one pause of a beating heart  
was all it took for homeboy’s words  
to drink ~~us~~ me in.

Dali and Shak trailing me,  
I floated behind him,

hypnotized by a long-ago memory:

Bon bagay ap vini ... *Good things will come.*

You used to say that  
to me as a little girl.  
Remember, Papi?  
That Haitian Creole,  
like a lullaby,  
always guided me through  
every missed step,  
    every fall,  
        every off-key  
piano or guitar chord.

Do you still say it now?  
Even though you no longer  
have time to sit next to me at the bench,  
hands placed on mine  
like angel wings,  
together,  
flying  
through notes,  
scales,  
symphonies,  
Bliss?

Because that's exactly  
what that moment felt like.  
Bon bagay.  
(And more.)

VIP meant  
no waiting in lines  
no binoculars needed  
black leather seats so close to the stage.

The curtains opened,  
sparks flew, floor-to-ceiling,  
    smoke gathered,  
but only for a second, because

there he was ...  
thin cord attached to his back,  
descending from the heavens  
till he planted his feet, slid to the front,  
the beat kicked in, and then ...  
he winked at me.

I. LOST. my. shit!  
Screamed till every  
vocal cord ripped to bits

For two hours, every lyric, every song,  
I pictured myself up there with Sean “Mercury” Ellis,  
Shak, Dali harmonizing at my side,

I felt Merc’s sweat flicker,  
as he danced,  
tickling my skin  
like an afternoon spring rain,

Heard the tenor in his voice,  
real and true  
—no autotune needed—

Saw the gleam in those smoky eyes  
as he extended his hand,  
pulling her—not me—up to the stage.

Houselights dimmed,  
taking my spirit right with it,  
as the spotlight zoomed in,  
on the silhouette of them both.

Hypnotized her with the serenade,  
intense from the first note to the last.  
Fingers locked together like chains,  
until the fog cleared,  
curtains closed,  
concert ended,  
and Merc and Dali folded

into the **d a r k n e s s**.

## A MAGNIFIED LOOK INTO THE LEFT SIDE OF MY BRAIN:

Why did Merc pick her?  
Why not me?  
Or Shak?  
Or some other random, screaming fan?

He knew I wrote that song.  
He knew I set up that whole  
street performance.

Was I jealous?  
Hella thirsty?  
No, of course I wasn't.  
That's dumb AF.

A magnified look into the right:

Merc picked Dali because ... well, look at her.  
Shak had Merc by a good half a foot ... in flats.  
Ain't no way he coulda lifted my ass with one hand like that.  
Right? (right.)

Also: WHERE? WERE? THEY?

Seemed like Shak  
deflated, too, when Merc pulled  
Dali up on that stage,  
but a nudge from her  
faded that magnifier into oblivion:

“Yo, Denver, your phone is vibrating.”

JUNE 14, 11:17 P.M.

**No Caller ID:** If you need me, I'm backstage, ya know, just DYING!

**Me:** Dali? That's you?

**No Caller ID:** Yeah, Merc's security guard made me use his phone. Merc said for you and Shak to come back here. He put us up front on purpose! Wants to know what other songs we got.

**Me:** STOP

**Me:** LYING

**No Caller ID:** Nope.

**Me:** !!!!!

**No Caller ID:** The security guard's name is Meat. He said go to the right of the stage, follow the path marked with neon arrows and meet him there.

**No Caller ID:** Also, what the hell kinda name is MEAT?

**No Caller ID:** Also, I'm deleting these texts now.

**Me:** LMAO! We'll be right there.

**No Caller ID:** It's happening, Denver. Just like you said it would.

**Me:** Olive juice.

**No Caller ID:** same, olive juice 

## IF YOU LOOKED IN THE MIRROR

and said *olive juice*,  
no sound escaping your lips,  
you'd see it almost looked like:  
*I love you.*

Olive juice.  
Those words  
belonged to me and Dali,  
and no one else.

A reminder,  
a code,  
cloaked in  
two words  
that to others  
would mean  
absolutely nothing  
at all.

## "YO, WHAT'D DALI SAY?"

Where we gotta go?  
Over there?  
In the dark?  
I don't see nobody waiting.  
Why can't security just bring her to us?  
Denver?  
Denver!  
Why you walking so fast?  
WAIT FOR ME!"

A ballad in the key of scaredy-cat,  
by Shakira Brown

## WE FOLLOWED ILLUMINATED ARROWS,

like a yellow brick road  
squeezing,  
pinching,  
holding in  
excitement **building**,  
until we came to the end,  
to meet Meat  
and a young woman,  
hair of fire,  
face of stone,  
propped beside him.

“We need to pat you down,” he said.  
“It’s protocol.” But he didn’t touch us—  
homegirl did that.

Used her hands to explore  
arms, legs, the curves of our backs,  
while Shak and I stared at each other like ...  
*WTF?*

“Open your backpack.” Meat flashed a light  
into my pink fifteen-dollar AliExpress pride ’n’ joy.

Then homegirl started digging:  
fifty-leven gum wrappers, three flash drives,  
two maxi pads, one song journal, till she  
found what she was searching for.

“We’ll return your phone later.”  
Sorry, but it’s—”

Protocol. Yeah, got it.

“You wouldn’t believe  
how many people try  
and take videos of Merc ...

he ain't a fan of digital footprints.”

All good.

Those were the cards you're dealt,  
when you're a star, I guessed.

They led us through  
winding, dark passages  
until we reached an open space, full of light,  
food, liquor, music.  
And people. Their eyes?  
On us.

## WHISPERED WORDS

simmered beneath the beat  
as I scanned the crowd  
of Groupies'r'Us  
spread far and wide,  
twerking, dancing, prancing  
around the room.

“Where’s Dali?” I asked.  
Meat’s expression?  
Blank as hell.

“Ya know. Our friend?” I reminded him.

“And where’s Merc? Think I can get a selfie?”  
Shak added, cheesy as hell.

Meat towered above us,  
arms pretzeled tight.

“Give ’em some time.  
Prolly showing her around.”

But I didn’t *hear him* hear him  
because Shak and I stood there,  
bombarded by waiters  
offering up  
vodka,  
ganja,  
you name it.

And Shak did that goody-two-shoe,  
church-girl act that she’s good for.  
“Ain’t we ’bout to sing?” she said,  
slapping my hand (and my mind)  
back to reality.

Man, listen.

If we were back home,  
if I didn't have that long-ass drive,  
I woulda hopped on ALL of that  
with a quickness.

Dali, too.

Who turns down free vodka?

But ... Shak was right.

The King of R&B

wanted to hear

*my*

music.

So I needed my head in the game.

Meanwhile

the tick-tick-tick of that internal clock

reminded me of two things.

It was time to blow.

Then we had ta go. Fast.

Felt like

fifty-leven minutes passed before

Merc did that

appear-outta-nowhere-like-Black-Jesus

thing again,

gray camcorder in one hand,

Dali, wrapped in a Gucci zip-up,

in the other.

Merc rolled up on

Shak & me

like we were old friends

separated by time and space,

reunited,

picking up right where we left off.

“What up, Merc? Dope show!”

Shak tried to play it cool,

but those goose bumps on her arms

said otherwise.

Dali,  
eyes propped open,  
a tad too glossy and wide,  
that typical sun-kissed skin,  
flushed two shades down.

A look I'd seen before,  
in the quiet moments of us.  
And suddenly,  
a dull ache  
simmered ...

“You good, girl? Whose jacket is that?”

Dali slipped it off,  
handed it to Merc.

“I was shivering.”

She giggled. “Ya know, long flight.”

Code for: high AF.

“Being onstage prolly got to her.” Merc winked.

“Right, Say Say?”

“Who the heck is—”

“Apparently my new nickname,”

Dali cut me off.

“Merc can't pronounce Dalisay  
to save his life.”

She circled her finger  
in the small of my back,  
a resurrection of sorts,  
as I tried to pretend  
like that nickname and  
that jacket and  
the fact she smoked out  
with the biggest star  
in the universe  
didn't bother me one bit.  
(Spoiler alert: *It did.*)

“Anyway. Thanks for the hookup,” my voice quivered.

“It’s cool. Had my dude Meat scope y’all out,  
'cause I like what I heard earlier.  
Would love to hear more ...  
That’s if you have it?”

“Oh, we got it all right.”

I was all business then.  
No time to worry about  
the nerves cooking up in my gut.  
Fixed my eyes on the acoustic guitar,  
propped against the leather couch in the corner.

“May I?” I asked.

“Do your thing, baby gurl.”  
Merc clicked the record button  
on his camcorder.  
Which didn’t help my nerves.  
At. All.

I begged my trembling fingers  
to find peace,  
but once I strummed the opening G chord  
of my original song “Once in Your Life,”  
the vibrations took control,  
I saw Dali’s whole spirit change,  
felt the unity in the breath  
the three of us inhaled,  
exhaled as one  
before we lost ourselves  
in the melody of it all.

For Shak, music was  
a choice.  
Basketball, honor roll, hella scholarships  
tapping at her door.

For Dali, music was

security,  
a way to help her family back in Santo Domingo.

But for me, music was  
the only option.  
Bad grades, no other skills or goals.  
I wasn't an athlete like Shak  
or a beauty queen like Dali.  
After senior year,  
there'd be nothing else waiting for me.

Soon as we hit  
the final note,  
questions  
spilled out,  
rapid fire.

And it was everything  
I ~~wanted~~ needed to hear:

“Where y'all from?  
Shohola? Never heard of it.  
How soon can y'all meet me in the studio?  
Next week?  
How old are y'all again? Y'all look fifteen.  
Oh, seventeen? Eighteen in August, Denver?  
“—Bet. Legal enough.  
Let me get your digits.  
Y'all drive, right?  
Let me drop y'all some coins for the ride back.  
“No sense in bringing your parents to the studio.  
Don't need nobody killing our vibe!  
Here's the address.  
Come ready to work.  
And, Denver, bring your song book.  
The whole damn thing.  
Y'all about to be the second coming of Destiny's Child.  
Y'all ready to become stars?”

OH, HELL YEAH WE WERE!!!

ON ANY GIVEN NIGHT,

a drive up the Pocono Mountains,  
that bend  
and wind  
and end

in Shohola typically means  
a sky full of stars,  
white-bright moon to lead the way.

But our ride home was nothing but  
a dark, rainy cloud  
hovering beneath a moonless sky,

And us,  
full of questions (what do we tell our parents?),  
worry (what if he changes his mind?),  
excitement (@!#!&!),  
and \$500 (each) in our pockets,  
thanks to Merc.

Now *that* was enough to do enough.

I texted Ma back  
(eventually),  
but first we had to get the story straight,  
practiced it on repeat  
all the way home:

*Sorry, we were making music all night.*

Slipped into Dali's trailer,  
just before her mom arrived  
from work at 2:00 a.m.,  
scattered popcorn kernels  
on the floor,  
"forgot" to turn the TV off,



“Anything.”

And I swear right there  
her hand  
could've stayed forever.

“Promise we'll do whatever Merc tells us to.  
Because I ain't college material,  
not with all them Cs and Ds on my report card.  
Only other choice I got  
is to help Mami run her business,  
and that ain't the life I want.  
I need this, Denver. As bad as you.”

My mouth held  
the weight of two worlds.  
One that wished  
we could exist in the sun.  
And the other that just ...  
*knew.*

But all I could muster up was  
“I will never let you down.”

**JUNE 15, 11:01 A.M.**

**Me:** Yo, big sis!!! What up?

**Gwen:** Good morning my little Shasou, Denny-wenny! Sup?

**Me:** Something amazing happened last night!

**Gwen:** OMG! You got your first college acceptance letter? 

**Me:** Too early. But me, Shak & Dali went to a concert.

**Gwen:** A concert? That's it? Girl, Ma is looking for you! Better hurry dat ass home. Gotta run. Interning at the hospital today. Check ya lata.

**Me:** Yeah. Lata.

## SATURDAYS

were made for family  
in the Lafleur household.  
Least that's how Ma wanted it.

Even though  
once we moved to Shohola,  
you stopped  
touchinglovingbreathing  
the same air that she we  
shared, Papi.

Nine years ago, when I was eight,  
we left Brooklyn,  
like some great Black migration,  
new jobs, new life, new school,  
same problems.  
(Spoiler alert: *me.*)

Back in Brooklyn,  
the Lafleurs were inseparable.  
Me, Ma, Gwen, and you, Papi.  
We had a big family,  
tons of friends,  
music in every bodega,  
every corner,  
ya know,  
actual civilization.

But then y'all got scared ...  
of them city streets,  
of the cost of living.

But the cost of living  
was much higher here.  
For me.

In those mountains,  
with the three of you always gone,  
Ma piling on shifts,  
you flying round the world,  
and Gwen, swallowed up by college,  
all I had in Shohola were Shak and Dali.  
And music. Always the music.

Saturdays meant  
breaking out the bottles  
of Fabuloso—lavender-scented,  
of course,  
because if you didn't use that,  
were you even cleaning?

Ma and I would wipe down  
every square inch of that  
big-for-no-reason house,  
propped on two acres of land.

A home that no one  
from Brooklyn ever visited,  
because gas was too expensive  
and *who picks up and  
moves to the sticks anyway?*

Still, we cooked and cleaned  
so when you walked through that door,  
familiarity greeted you like an old friend:

te jenjanm,  
the warmth of ginger tea spicing the air,

A sweet, hot bowl of labouyi,  
made just the way Gran taught Ma,  
and kompa music,  
stirring through the walls,  
out the windows,

and into the forest  
surrounding that faraway place

that *never*  
**ever**  
felt like

H  
O  
M  
E.

EXCEPT ON JUNE 15,

it didn't go down like that  
because I was late  
because I lied  
and covered it up.

Soon as I walked through the door,  
there y'all were,  
marinating in the smells,  
three bowls of sweet porridge  
set at the table,  
untouched,  
cooled down.

Faces all scrunched up,  
my final report card in your hand,  
mouths ready to fire off with ...

Questions!!!

## JESUS

be  
some  
earplugs!

Haitian papis be like ...

“What kind of grades are these?  
One C, five Ds, and an F?  
A little less music, and a lot more studying ... like your big sister!!!  
How can you be a doctor, lawyer, or engineer like this?”

Black mamas be like ...

“You sure that’s all y’all did was make music?  
And why would you wanna sleep  
in a trailer when you got all the space in the world here?  
Girl, you betta look at me when I’m talkin’ to you!”

On the outside I ...

promised I’d enroll  
in online summer school,  
and raise that negative one-point-nothing GPA.  
I’d put on the mask that said I cared,  
covered up the fact I was crumbling  
something bad.

But on the inside I was like ...

*IDGAF about going to Dartmouth with Gwen.  
Better yet, I ain’t going to college. PeriodT.  
So just back up off me, okurrr?*

I figured y’all would change your minds,  
soon as y’all saw what I had cooking.

STILL,

Papi, you had some nerve.  
All those years,  
teaching me,  
molding me,  
filling my veins with music,  
like a hurricane brewing.

As if the memory  
of such an act  
was one to be locked away,  
golden key thrown to the fire.

I mean, seriously.  
Why did you bless me with this gift,  
something that truly made me *me*,  
imperfectly perfect outside of Gwen,  
only to make it feel like a curse in the end?

But, I didn't say none of that though.  
I kinda liked having teeth in my mouth.

## SUNDAYS

were for goodbyes.  
The kind where Ma and I  
stood at the edge of the driveway,  
after holding you two seconds too long.

Sundays were for watching  
the driver slowly roll  
down Winding Brook Road,  
to take you to the airport.

Sundays were for pilot's hats,  
fitted tight, as you took to cobalt skies,  
carrying people and their dreams  
across oceans, mountains, borders,

until you returned to us  
one forever-long ~~week~~ weeks later  
when we played that same, sad-ass song  
on repeat-repeat-repeat.

## BUT MA'S SCHEDULE

was no better.

Long hours at the hospital,  
because the letters D and R  
before her name  
meant the old,  
the sick,  
the new to this world,  
almost always  
took precedence over  
us. Me.

She prolly couldn't stand  
the silence of home either.

Which left me alone.  
Music to fill the empty spaces.  
Ever-revolving trips  
to Dali's.

For years it was like this.

Our parents on the grind,  
working far from home  
because Shohola equaled  
population negative zero,  
which equaled no good jobs nearby.

Exhibit B of why moving made  
no goddamned sense.

Dali's mom,  
running her own cleaning business,  
retail stores by day,  
office buildings till dawn.

Shak's grandparents,  
leading the megachurch  
up in West New York,

her own parents deployed  
in two separate lands,  
fighting for freedom  
right here on our own.  
And speaking of freedom ...

My, oh my,  
what was I supposed to do  
with all that FREE time  
on my hands that summer?

So maybe some of this  
was y'all's fault, too.  
Maybe?  
(k, maybe not)

**JUNE 17, 10:04 A.M.**

**01905557486:** Good morning, my favorite singer-songwriter. Up for a studio sesh on Wednesday? Talk to your girls and hit a brotha up.

**Me:** Merc? That's a weird number. Is that you?

**01905557486:** Sure is, baby gurl. Private phone. Aka paparazzi blocker.

**Me:** Ha! I get it. We'll be there. <sup>100</sup>

**10:09 a.m.**

**Me:** SHUT THE FRONT DOOR!!! Sean "Mercury" Ellis just texted me. He wants to see us Wednesday. Somebody call me an ambulance!

**Dali:** YASSS! I knew he'd reach out! We in there, y'all!

**Shak:** Guys, I got basketball camp in Milford that day, Bible study at 5.

**Me:** And?

**Dali:** Yo Shak, STOPPPPPPP!

**Shak:** What if we reschedule?

**Me:** Pick you up from camp, girl.

**Shak:** Did you even read what I wrote?

**Me:** I said what I said.

**Dali:** PeriodT!

**Shak:** Grrrrr ... y'all so aggy! 'Specially you, SAY SAY! lol

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 19

Alicia Keys

wasn't lying  
when she crooned  
out those lyrics  
about New York:

concrete city where dreams were made,  
and stars were born.

I felt it all driving.  
Me in my songwriter chic—  
boho dress, leggings, Converse.

Dali: crop top, cutoffs.  
And Shak,  
in her sweaty basketball finest.

The three of us,  
a visual definition of opposite  
brought to life,  
harmonizing as  
Shohola country roads  
transformed into New Jersey highways,  
filtered into New York City streets.

We parked in the Hudson lot,  
pushed through crowds,  
hustled down West 42nd,  
skyscrapers kissing summer clouds,  
the music of the streets  
reminding me of the Brooklyn  
that was near, yet still  
so far away.

As we landed at the door  
of Hitmaker Studios,

I pushed the buzzer for suite 3,  
felt Alicia's lyrics  
all up and through my bones.  
Right then, right there,  
there was literally  
*nothing*  
I couldn't do.

"Thank you for visiting Merc World Productions.  
This is Marissa Avent,  
personal assistant for Mr. Ellis.  
Please state your name  
and purpose."

I cleared my throat.  
"Denver Lee Lafleur.  
Dalisay Gómez.  
Shakira Brown.  
Here for a recording session  
with Merc."

The door buzzed,  
soon as we pushed through the corridor,  
I saw her:  
pixie cut of fire,  
eyes like lasers.

"IDs and phones, please."

Homegirl from the Prudential  
stepped from behind thick glass,  
collected our stuff,  
did that whole-body  
search thing again,  
under our arms,  
down the space between our chests,  
over the curves of our backs.

Then finished off with:  
"Elevator's on the right, tenth floor,  
get your stuff back when the session's over."

## REMEMBER

that yogurt commercial  
where the girl  
with the sun in her hair  
and ocean in her eyes,  
ate a spoonful of yogurt?

And as soon as she did,  
she was suddenly flying up to heaven?  
Surrounded by fluffy white clouds,  
angelic music,  
and the pearly gates opened  
and there stood the Man himself,  
all grinning and stuff, saying:

*Welcome to heaven?*

Well,

that elevator ride to the tenth floor  
was just like that.

With a side of nails  
—two sets—  
damn near breaking  
skin in each of my wrists.  
Compliments of Shak and Dali.

First

thing we saw were walls.  
Long, winding,  
covered with  
gold albums,  
    platinum albums,  
    Grammy Awards,  
lined on shelves like soldiers,  
pictures of Merc with the best in the industry:  
Whitney, Gaga, Celine, Mary J—

I stopped counting after Beyoncé.

“I can’t believe homegirl took our phones!”  
Shak threw her braids in a messy bun.

I’d have given anything to capture it all  
in more than just a memory.  
A permanent reminder that one day,  
if we really pushed,  
if we really soaked in what Merc had to offer,  
we, too, could have all of that.

Maybe more.

Meat stuck his head  
out of the final door.  
“Right this way, ladies.”

Seemed a mile away,  
the hall lined with closed doors,  
three on each side,  
a patch of light trapped beneath.

A beat came on,  
vibrating through the space,  
sinking down to the concrete floor.  
A blend of R&B and hip-hop  
and everything that was right in this world.

When we got to The Door,  
Merc danced around the room,  
camcorder in hand.  
Shouted out an *A-YOOOOOOOOO!*  
clicked record,  
soon as he saw us.

“There’s my stars!  
Come bust a move with me.”

Dali wasted no time,  
twerking all four foot eleven of herself,

hips dropping through each thump of the bass.

I couldn't leave my girl hanging  
not when that beat sizzled my skin, too.

But Shak just stood there,  
hands locked, half smiling.  
Church girls didn't twerk.

“Check this out, Denver!”

Next words outta Merc's mouth.

“I modified the key for the bridge,  
took some of the lyrics of your song,

“Flipped it ...

Slipped it ...

Dipped it ...

in D

O

P

E!!!

Tell me what you think ...”

The second Merc  
opened his mouth,  
that syrupy-thick voice of his  
took us on a journey  
to church,  
to hell,  
to Earth  
and back again ...

# ONCE IN YOUR LIFE

By ~~Denver Lee Lafleur~~  
By Sean "Mercury" Ellis

Verse:

~~Have you ever had a dream  
so big, so unreal it didn't seem  
possible for you?  
And you didn't know what to do?  
Today's the day, it's now or never  
You can do whatever  
(ya put your mind to)~~

Verse:

Boy, don't take this wrong  
but I been staring all night long  
I'm feeling you, do you feel me, too?  
'Cause I got something to show you.  
It's now or never,  
we can do whatever.  
(ya body wants to)

Chorus:

~~Pull yourself up off the floor  
Don't cha know you deserve more  
Take a chance  
Life's short, take a stand  
Sometimes you'll lose,  
Sometimes you'll win,  
But in the end  
You'll know you tried for  
Once in your life.~~

Chorus:

Let's bounce up off this dance floor.  
Meet me at the back door.  
For once in my life, I'll take my chance  
Life's short, forget the romance.  
Let me take you for a ride.  
Give it up,  
Live it up,  
On the wild side  
For once in your life.

**K, I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE THINKING, PAPI!!!**

I. Ki caca sa ye??? (It wasn't garbage, I swear!)

II. How could I let Merc take *my* song and turn it into a ho anthem?

but ... **BUT** ...

I promise

the way *he* sang it,  
finding that je ne sais quoi  
it was missing,  
felt like flowers  
sprouting through  
unruly soil.

## MEANWHILE SHAK WAS ALL:

“Why can’t we keep the original lyrics?  
Denver wrote about dreams and goals ...”

“And rainbows and frickin’ fairy dust?”  
Merc cut her off so quick it stung,  
and everyone could feel it.

I took in a sip of breath,  
slicing the silence of the room.

“No disrespect, Denver.  
The theme? Dope.  
The melody? Hot.  
I kept all that.  
But you guys need an image.”

His eyes shifted to Shak.  
“Time to drop the church girl act.  
‘Angelic Voices’ ain’t gonna crack  
the Billboard Hot 100.  
But ‘Untouched’ will ...  
Now, y’all ready to cut this track, or what?”

Shak’s jaw completely unhinged,  
lips temporarily frozen in the key of WTF.

Mine, too.  
My mouth rejected air,  
thoughts, words.

One piece of me  
wanted to scream,  
*That’s not how I wrote it!*  
But the other?  
Well, that part knew *who* knew  
better.

“Denver,” Merc softened his tone,

“being a leader means  
making tough decisions. You in?”

And right then, Dali touched me.  
Three fingertips pressed into  
the deepest curve of my back.  
The ice to my fire.

Pupils, wide and black,  
aimed straight at my own.  
Code for *Remember what you promised*.  
And so I did it. For her.

ACCORDING TO WEBSTER'S DICTIONARY,

*Untouched* meant  
Un harmed  
Un spoiled  
Un bothered

But according to Merc,

it meant  
no one else could  
compete with,  
match up to  
what was given to us  
by birthright.

And just like that

we had a new sound,  
new attitude,  
new name.

## HEADPHONES

gripped against our ears,  
like skin on bone.

One mic,  
suspended from the ceiling,  
walls padded in black foam,  
thick glass separated us from Merc.

Three girls, excitement building,  
huddled in a sound booth  
so drastically different  
from the fake-ass studio  
set up in my basement back home.

“I’m so going to hell for this song,” Shak whispered.  
“Take a number, chica,” Dali giggled.

And I wanted to tell them both  
to quit it  
so I could shake off the nerves,  
savor the flavor of the moment.  
We made it.  
*I* made it.

“Let’s go from the top, Denver,”  
Merc’s honey-dipped voice  
filtered through our headphones.

The opening tick-tick-tick  
of the high hats  
swirled through the booth,  
so loud, so piercing,  
scaring the living daylights  
outta me.

Merc hunched over the sound board,

his back pulsing with the beat.

I cleared my throat,  
readied my voice for  
the opening lyrics:

*Boy, don't take this wrong ...*

Ever seen a hound dog  
cock his head to the moon  
and howl?

Well, that's exactly what I looked like,  
*sounded* like.

Three cuts. Each time.

*WTF was wrong with me?*

Merc paused the track  
hella quick,  
and I knew right there  
we were finished  
before we even began.

I held back the tears  
as he rushed into the booth,  
feet like wings.

“Let her try it again!” Dali’s voice,  
covered in *pleaseMercplease*.

“She’s just nervous.”

“We all are,” Shak added,  
wrapping her arms around me tight.

But Merc smiled, soft as dawn,  
reached his hand out for mine.

“Denver, baby gurl,  
let’s take a walk.”

## GRAVITY

disappeared  
beneath  
my  
feet

as we slow-strolled  
down the hall.

“I remember my first time recording.  
I was a little younger than you.”

“... Bet you didn’t mess up as bad as I did just now!”

“Worse.” Merc laughed. “A whole hot mess!”

But I couldn’t imagine,  
not even for a second,  
the King of R&B  
sounding anything other than  
blessed by the gods.

We stopped short  
in front of a picture  
of the King and Queen herself.

“I miss Whitney terribly.”  
Merc touched the frame  
as if he hoped the image would come to life.

“I never thought there’d be another like her.”  
But then I met you, Denver.”

His words set my lungs ablaze.

“But I’m not like—”

“Denver, you are.  
Everything and more.  
All you have to do is believe.

And if you do, your girls will, too.”

The sweet taste of  
hope  
lingered on my tongue.

He wrapped his hands  
around my bare arms.  
I looked down,  
saw my flesh swell  
between his fingers.

“You see that?  
You’re strong, Denver.”

He called me *strong*.  
Not big.  
Or thick.  
But strong.  
I liked that *way* better than pretty.

And something inside me just ...  
*bloomed*.

Merc led me back to the booth,  
where Shak and Dali waited,  
eyes swimming with wonder.

“You okay, muchacha?”  
Dali patted my shoulders,  
elbows,  
hands,  
Mama Bear style.

“She’s ready now, right, Denver?” Merc said.

“Let’s do this, bro.” I puffed my chest  
sky-high, smiled wide as a crescent moon.

Shak squealed and clapped  
in that *praise the Lordt* way.

Lightning flared in Merc’s feet

as he returned to the control board,  
beats ready to launch.

“Now, let’s take it from the top.”

From the very first note,  
*Untouched* transformed,  
artists lulled  
beneath a master’s spell.

Up-up-up  
my voice climbed  
past the roof,  
beyond summer clouds,  
soared to distant planets,  
rhythm flowed through my veins—  
Shak’s and Dali’s, too.

I could tell  
as verse gave way to chorus  
the way our harmonies unfolded,  
an audible feast of sorts.

Eyes closed tight,  
my mind drifted back  
to the place  
where this music thing all began ...

## FRESHMAN YEAR

Eighth-period bell on blast  
lying low,  
back of the class.

Chorus,  
better known as,  
boring-ass,  
bubblegum  
wannabe opera  
taught by Delaware Valley High's  
finest,  
Mrs. Billick.

In walked the new kid, two months too late.  
Tall,  
lanky,  
bronze colored,  
cornrowed,  
four-eyed girl, straight outta Alabama.

“You must be Shakira,” Mrs. Billick said.  
“Perhaps you’d be comfortable ...  
in the back?”

Code for:  
*with the only other two brown folks.*

Shakira did that southern “Yes, ma’am” thing,  
sandwiched herself in the empty seat  
between me and Dali.

Mrs. Billick plucked the notes from  
*My Fair Lady*,  
asked each student to sing.

“How lovely,” she said to everyone,  
till she got to us,

and heard the soul in our voices  
set fire to the room.

“Your sound is quite ... urban.”

Code for: *too big, too Black, too MUCH.*  
And from that moment  
we gave chorus—and Mrs. Billick—  
the middle finger and started our own thing.

## STUDIO TIME WITH MERC ENDED WITH

### 1. A promise

*We'll hook up again after my next show, k?*

### 2. A question

*Y'all ever thought about moving to Atlanta?  
That's the music capital of the world!*

### 3. A request

*Let's keep our arrangement on the low.  
I'll hit y'all up in a couple weeks.*

And finally, the strangest of them all ...

### 4. A tape.

Panasonic  
VHS-C  
tiny holder  
of  
a night  
filled with  
magic,  
music,  
Merc,  
us ... but ...

“What in the Flintstone  
hunk-a-junk is this?”

Shak laughed, soon as Merc placed it in her hand.

“I was wondering what the deal was  
with that old-school camcorder.”  
I laughed, too, tapping Dali,  
but she didn't crack a smile.

“Girls, I don't live my life on the cloud.  
I keep video archives of all my special moments.

Ain't nobody trying to hack a VCR, nah mean?  
I'm guessing y'all don't have one."

That made me and Shak  
laugh even harder.

Dali snatched that tape outta Shak's hand  
and handed it back to Merc.  
"Can we get a download at least?"  
She did that bat-her-lashes,  
smile-like-the-devil thing.

Always worked on me, but ...

"Ah, Say Say, I can't have  
my music leaking out.  
Not that y'all would play a brotha, but still.  
How 'bout this? Since you don't  
want the tape, I'll send y'all a sample  
of what we recorded to your phones."

I ain't gonna lie,  
I wanted my song,  
the whole damn thing.  
Not some grainy video.

I wanted to roll down the windows  
of my Honda Civic,  
connect the Bluetooth,  
volume hella loud,  
and sing "Once in Your Life"  
all the way home.

But those were Merc's rules,  
so we had to be happy  
with the gift we got ...  
all forty-five seconds of it.

## A SUCCESSFUL FIRST STUDIO SESSION

called for a celebration  
with the finest food  
Milford, PA,  
had to offer at midnight:

*Taco Bell.*

We sat in the farthest booth  
in the back,  
killing a twelve-pack  
of greasy-ass  
untacos

filling that empty restaurant  
with the sounds  
of three girls giggling,  
reminiscing,  
dreaming ...

“Y’all! We gonna be MAD famous!”

“First thing I’m buying is a house for Mami.”

“First thing I’m buying is some  
holy water—cuz we ALL gonna  
need it after that booty-call  
anthem hits the radio!”

Laughter erupted  
all up and through  
Taco Bell,  
followed us  
all the way down Route 209,  
past Shak’s spot in Dingman,  
Dali’s crib in Trails End,  
and around the bend  
to my empty, empty  
driveway  
on Winding Brook Road.

No family within  
those walls to share my night with,  
even though I wouldn'ta  
told y'all jack.

Well, 'cept maybe  
one of y'all was worth a shot ...

THURSDAY, JUNE 20

**1:12 a.m.**

The dying art of voice mail ...

One ring

Two rings

Three rings

“You have reached Gwen Lafleur,  
resident assistant for the East Wheelock House  
at Dartmouth College. I am not available at this time  
to take your call. Please leave a detailed message  
and I will respond at my earliest convenience.

Have a great day and remember  
to always reach for the stars!”

*Beep!*

“Hey, sis. It’s me.

I know it’s late.

But I did something tonight,  
something real special.

I reached for the stars

and landed somewhere you’d never imagine.

But I wanna tell you about it,  
over the phone.

So call me back.

Okay?”

Spoiler alert:  
She never did does.

I went to sleep  
that night, alone,  
windows wide open,  
high AF on the music,  
on my girls,

on long-ago memories ...

## ODE TO BROOKLYN

### *Summer, Ten Years Ago*

Children skipped up and down  
the tree-lined street.  
Singing, laughing,  
lips stained,  
with cherry ices, fresh from the truck,  
in hand.

Ma sat on the stoop with Gwen,  
hands intertwined  
in the thickness of my sister's perfect hair,  
scalp glistening with coconut oil,  
braids patterned in intricate mazes.

Inside,  
summer breeze poured  
through open windows

Me and you, Papi,  
seated at the piano bench,  
lost in musical bliss.

Prelude in E Minor by Chopin.

Your ebony fingers  
struck keys, black and white,  
each chord filling you,  
me,  
with something that felt,  
I don't know ...

*Incurable?*

You held the next-to-last chord  
long enough to tell  
the story behind the song ...

Trapped in Valldemossa,  
island of silent nothingness,  
secluded from the capital,  
where life was vibrant, poppin'.

Hella lonely,  
ink bleeding through  
staff on sheet music,

Chopin legit banged out  
*the* saddest song anyone had ever heard.

Remember that dramatic pause,  
the one right at the end,  
where the silence was  
long enough  
to fill you with the unshakable fear  
that it was over?

Yeah, I didn't get that then—  
seven-year-old me.

But after one magical night  
in the concrete jungle  
with the biggest star in the universe,  
I understood it.  
All.

## BACK HOME,

days passed with no word  
from Merc.

Suddenly life in Shohola  
morphed into my own  
Prelude in E Minor,

a bottomless pit  
of nothingness,  
as I tried to do right,  
keep the parental units  
happy.

But all I could do  
was wonder ... *worry*.

Were Merc's promises real,  
and if not ...  
what waited for me then?

Days and nights  
melted into one another  
as we waited to hear from him again.

I spent the mornings,  
eyes glued to the screen:

Delaware Valley High's  
online summer school.

Tried my best to soak in  
every essay,

poem,

play

by every dead white author  
I "forgot" to read  
in American Lit.

Three lessons a day,

thirty minutes apiece,  
followed by a quiz.

I zipped through each,  
passed with flying colors.  
*Thank you, CliffsNotes,*  
*thank you, Alexa.*

## AFTERNOONS

were made for Dali and me.

She'd show up  
unannounced  
carrying those  
special things  
with her,  
invisibly tucked  
in each pocket.

Two flags.  
One white—my favorite.

The metaphorical  
definition of surrender.

Waved it high,  
proud,  
with  
abandon  
as we melted  
into a rapture  
of *touchinglovingbreathing*

So long as the walls  
within  
kept the story of us  
untold, kept

Away from Shak  
who was busy  
workingchurchingballing

And then,  
the other flag.  
Red cloth

ripped,  
dipped  
in alert.

Only to be raised  
when sun bid moon  
farewell,  
as the sound of Shak's tires  
slow-rolled up  
my unpaved driveway.  
And for as much  
as afternoons were bliss  
the nights were equally so

Shak

Dali

Me

Gathered around  
the campfire.

Three girls  
now known  
lyrically  
as  
*Untouched*

scatting beneath  
navy skies,  
guitar in my hand,  
D major chords on repeat,  
mulling over the question  
that loomed above our heads:

*When do we tell our parents?*

"I know Nana and Pop are old and  
low-key clueless, but I think we gotta say something.  
No more sneaking off, ya know?  
Let our folks arrange all this for us."

"Arrange what, Shak?" I asked.

“Contracts? Lawyers? Don’t we need that stuff?”

“We don’t need all that.” Dali kept humming,  
soprano sweet.

“Merc wants us.”

“And what if he stops?” Shak’s eyes narrowed.

The songs of night blended with our own.

Crickets chirping.

Fire crackling.

Branches swaying.

“He won’t. He knows exactly what he wants  
from each one of us. We just gotta give it to him,”  
Dali said,  
the veins in her neck  
thick like tree roots.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”  
My fingers stopped strumming.

“Nothing.” Dali refilled her cup with rum,  
took a big-ass gulp.

“Oh, come on, *Say Say!*

You know it’s

MAD one-hit wonders out there.

All I’m saying is we need a  
backup plan if Merc loses interest.”

“Let’s not give him a reason to,” I said,  
swallowing my own fear of the what-if.

“Okay, *Whitney.*”

Shak raised her hands in surrender.

“You’re right, Dali. Merc’s obsessed with *Untouched!*”

Shak and Dali dapped  
and laughed to the moonless sky.

“Yeah,” I whispered softly,  
beneath D major chords.

“We’ll tell our family ... when the time is right.”

TUESDAY, JULY 2

I swear I heard angels,  
like a church chorus,  
the second we finally got the text.

Merc was in New York,  
back from his mini tour.  
And the only thing on his mind ...  
was US!

*Mannnnnn,*  
we dipped off  
hella quick,  
Pocono Mountains  
fading into skyscrapers  
kissing clouds.

Sick beats waited for  
our voices to light up the booth.

And so we did.  
We recorded the bridge  
and outro for  
“Once in Your Life.”  
And ...

We. Torched. That. Shit.

“Whew! That’s FIYAH!”

Merc screamed  
as he replayed the mix.

I checked my watch.  
We’d been there four hours.  
But it felt like four beats of a heart.

“I’ma need y’all back next Sunday!”

Merc walked us to the exit.

“No doubt!” Me. Dali. Voices merged.  
“Can we come another day? Like Thursday?  
Nana and Pop will flip if I miss mornin’ service.”

“Bless your lil’ heart.”

Merc mocked Shak’s southern drawl.

“I’m sure the Lord will understand.”

Then Merc buzzed us out,  
turned his back,  
and kept it moving upstairs.

On the ride home,  
we almost tore the roof of my Civic off  
interrogating Shak.

“You can’t miss ONE day of church?”

“Guys, I’ve already missed camp  
*and work and church.*

I love our singing group,  
but I have a lot goin’ on.”

“So, what are you trying to say  
about me and Denver?  
We ain’t got no life?”

“No! That’s not what I meant!  
It’s just with senior year comin’,  
and college tours,  
the juggle is a struggle, yo!”

“Chill with the college talk.” Dali  
rolled down the window and  
pretended like she was throwing up.

“And I don’t know how to say this ...  
but Merc creeps me out a lil’.”

Dali snapped her head around,  
*Exorcist* style.  
“You two kinds of crazy tonight, chica!”

“Look, I know! But when Meat  
*escorted* me to the bathroom tonight,  
one of those hallway doors was cracked open.  
And y’all know what I saw?”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Eyes. All veiny and yellow  
where the white part should be.  
Something was legit starin’ at me.”

“Ooooooh, maybe it was El Cuco!”  
Dali said,

which of course made me  
snort-laugh and  
almost dive right off the  
Lincoln Tunnel.

“No, Chucky!”  
“No, Freddy Krueger!”

Dali and I  
kept going like that  
for all of I-287.

But Shak  
didn’t find it funny.  
From my rearview mirror,  
I saw her roll her eyes  
and coil like a snake in the back seat.  
She was quiet  
the whole ride home.

Slammed my car door,  
raced up the driveway  
to her front door,  
slammed that one, too.  
And then Shak ghosted on us.

H

A  
R  
D.

JULY 6, 3:06 P.M.

**Me:** Four days, no call, no text? We love you Shak Attack, come back!

**Dali:** We're sorry. We promise we'll be more careful.

**Shak:** Glad you guys understand.

**Me:** Pick you up Sunday at noon, k?

**Shak:** WOW.

**Dali:** What you mean wow?

**Shak:** I'm not going. I told you why.

**Me:** So you just gonna play us like that?

Crickets.

**JULY 6, 3:10 P.M.**

**01905552702:** Sup, baby gurl. See u guys tomorrow?

**Me:** Merc? That you?

**01905552702:** In the flesh, well text, ha!

**Me:** New phone?

**01905552702:** I keep burners on deck. You know how it is. Gotta switch it up, keep crazy fans and the paparazzi off my back.

**Me:** Ok. Well, we got a problem. Shak can't miss church.

**01905552702:** Come anyway. We'll record and then I'm takn y'all somewhere.

**Me:** Without Shak? But we need her third harmony. And where we going?

**01905552702:** Just come. Will make it work.

SUNDAY, JULY 7

Old-school  
1990s R&B  
blasting behind  
the door  
of my room.

Sisters with Voices,  
better known as  
SWV,  
singing sweetly  
about all the things  
that make one weak.

Like this girl.  
Dalisay Gómez,  
honey and fire in human form

topknot,  
floral sundress,  
cherry-stained lips.

An in-the-room makeover  
of epic proportions  
for our big day with Merc.

I tossed on  
my cut-up black jeans,  
Converse,  
pink AliExpress bag,  
scrunched my hair with  
Miss Jessie's Pillow Soft Curls.

"You are the epitome  
of casual-cute, muchacha."  
Dali's fingers laced in mine,  
pulled me into her embrace.

I didn't hear the door fly open  
only saw the look on her face.

Hands unlocked,  
music stopped.

“Ma, what're you doing home?”

Two eyes,  
blue as moonstone,  
a genetic oxymoron  
against  
light brown skin.  
Her words,  
laser hot.

“Denver, let me talk to you.”

Dali grabbed her purse,  
said *Hello, Mrs. Lafleur*,  
and flew her ass straight  
down the stairs.

“Where you headed?”

“Girls' date,” I chirped, stomach tingling.

“And your third partner in crime?” Ma scanned my room.

“On our way to get her. Sleeping at Dali's.”  
I lied quick, easy.

“I forgot some files.  
I'm headed back to the hospital now.  
Pulling a double.  
You get to Dali's before midnight ...”

I took a deep breath,  
happy that was all,  
but I shoulda known  
Ma wasn't done ...

“And, Denver?  
That little thing

you think you're feeling?  
It's just a phase."

# PHASE /FÄZI/

(noun)

Definition (according to Webster's):  
an aspect or part (as of a problem)  
under consideration

Definition (according to Black folk):  
temporary disappointment,  
human hellbound

Definition (according to Ma):  
the waiting  
for an awakening,  
sharp thrust into reality,  
that life is already hard  
carrying the weight of the world  
in this Black body,  
this Black skin ...

Why make it harder  
as a ...  
*lesbian?*

Definition (according to me):

...

Nothing.  
This thing wasn't a phase at all.

## HITMAKER STUDIOS,

the place where stars  
are born

Singing in that booth  
without Shak  
felt like  
a too-small Band-Aid  
over a too-big wound.

Two girls,  
one new song,  
three harmonies,

One press of a button,  
vocal magic on a track.

Merc whipped out some Henny  
after we were done recording.

“I’ll pass,” I said.  
Needed to be alert for the long drive home.  
Shak woulda been hella proud.

Merc’s face went all cloudy on me.  
If the man had pearls, he woulda clutched  
them, too.

But I just hit him with the  
“Sorry, bruh” shrug.

Dali swooped her arm to the table,  
“I’ll take a hit!” gripped the red plastic cup,  
gulped the spicy liquid down.

One sip,  
two sips,  
three sips.

Eyes rolled back,  
smile grew wide,  
Dali's ass was flying high!

I laughed so hard, I thought  
my bladder would burst.  
"Where you going?" Merc said.

"Bathroom."

"You gotta ask permission to leave the room, sweetheart."

I laughed again and headed for the door.  
"You're so funny, Merc."

Meat,  
all six foot eight of him,  
blocked me at the exit.  
"He ain't kidding."

Merc stood up, grabbed hold of my arm.  
"I'll take her. Gotta protect my little star, you know."

And I swear I never felt so special.

Merc waited for me, like a real gentleman,  
to come out the bathroom,

slipped his hand around my waist,  
fingers pressed in the curve of my hip.

"You feeling all right?" he asked,  
lips close enough to brush against my nose.  
The smell of his breath, a mix of Henny and heat.

If this were one of those rom-com flicks,  
we woulda kissed and  
I'da melted right into his arms.

But WTF was I kidding?  
I'd feel nothing.  
Like, at all.  
Not to mention, Merc was like ...  
uncle status,

no matter how fine homeboy was.

“I’m good,” I said.

He loosened his grip,  
that whole movie image  
just in my head, then gone  
as he fist-bumped me  
like the homey  
I knew him to be.

And I had to laugh at myself  
for worrying about Shak  
and her stupid heebie-jeebies.

“I got two surprises for y’all.  
You ready, lil’ sis?”

“Always, bro,” I responded.

Right there,  
I told myself  
I’d always  
be ready,  
with open arms,  
for whatever  
homeboy  
had up his sleeve.  
For better or better.

### Surprise #1

I never noticed the single crack  
in the concrete floor before that night.  
It started from the entrance of the elevator  
and zigzagged its way from door to door.

Merc led me and Dali  
down the hall,  
the light above hissed  
*flick, flick, flick,*

past each door  
until we reached the one  
near the bathroom

cracked open,  
the sinking feeling  
that someone *was* watching us.

Merc gripped the knob  
and opened it fully.

Lights on full blast.  
Three smiling ladies,  
staring back at us.

And guess what?  
No boogey man.  
No creepy eyes!

Instead, there were  
racks of clothes  
lined against the walls.  
Labels for days!

Gucci  
Fendi  
Prada

Mirrored tables  
covered in those lights  
you see on Broadway shows.

Makeup brushes in hand,  
flat irons on deck.

“This is my new singing group, Untouched,”  
Merc said to the stylists.

“As you can see,  
these youngins need a little help.” He winked.  
“Give ’em the full treatment.”

Oh yeah, Big Brother Uncle Merc  
status was in full effect!

'Specially with this next-level hookup!

Dali did that nail-digging-in-my-wrist  
thing again.

Only that time, I swear  
that pain never felt so good.

## ONE HOUR LATER . . .

Every kink,  
every curl  
sizzled straight

into submission.

Bodies dipped  
in a Fendi disguise.

Red-bottoms clicked  
against concrete,

letting the whole world know  
Untouched had arrived!

Two-thirds at least.

Surprise #2

Meat at the wheel,  
Merc in the passenger seat,  
me, Dali, and Marissa,  
sandwiched in the back.

A ride  
in a Maybach S 650  
was like  
blue paint against navy skies  
matching the pants I wore  
shiny as chrome rims spinning,  
gleaming like stars and city streetlights.

Top down,  
summer heat  
threatening the return  
of kinky curls,

“Who cares, Denver?”

Dali shook my mane with her hands.  
“Let that shit go!”

And I didn't know  
if she was talking 'bout  
my hair ... or Shak.  
(or-Ma-or-Gwen-or-You!)

But it didn't matter.  
Nothing else did.

Because I was  
happily riding  
in that car  
with #TeamMerc,  
blasting Hot 97  
singing every lyric  
of that old-school Jay Z,  
“Big Pimpin’,”  
with my queen (Dali)  
and the KING (Merc)!

The ones who  
filled me with hope,  
freedom,  
and forgetfulness ...

Like the fact that  
Marissa had our phones.

And because of that,  
there were texts I didn't see.

JULY 7, 10:32 P.M.

**Shak:** Merc called me tonight. Told me since I bailed on him, the least I could do is send him a picture ... in a bikini.

**Shak:** Like ... really??? Yo, call me back.

## PAPARAZZI:

camera-flashing,  
immortal beings  
that followed Merc  
E

V

E

R

Y

W

H

E

R

E

!

(and I loved ev-uh-ree second of that shit!)

Flashing lights  
swallowed Merc whole,  
as me, Dali,  
Meat, Marissa,  
and the rest of  
Merc's nameless,  
wordless crew  
trailed behind him  
through the back entrance  
of Club LAVO.

Hip-hop thumped,  
shaking walls,  
bottles crowned  
with mini fireworks,  
the waitress led us to our own little corner  
of the world,  
no eyes,

no whispers,  
no pointing  
as Merc dropped coins  
—eleven g's—  
like it was nothing.

Just us,  
#TeamMerc,  
in our own little galaxy.

SUNDAY, JULY 7

That night

my brain was  
a place  
where memories  
went to  
die.

Wanna know why?

Because what good  
was a night of fun  
if you could remember  
all of it?

Memory morphed

into a repetitious  
play of  
hide-and-seek,  
flashes of my greedy ass  
trying every food passed my way.

Every drink color poured  
red, brown, clear  
equal parts burning  
and delicious.

The dance floor  
where me and Dali  
and Merc and  
even tight-faced Marissa let loose.

Hands on shoulders  
Waist  
Back  
Ass

A smiling Dali—damn, she looked so good that night—  
that gleam that's stayed  
with me since the day we first met.

The clicking of a clock,  
vibrations of more texts  
I didn't know existed.

**MONDAY, JULY 8**

**3:11 a.m.**

**Shak:** I can't sleep. You're not returning my calls. Something ain't right.

**4:28 a.m.**

**Shak:** Y'all leave me with no choice.

**MONDAY, JULY 8**

**8:21 a.m.**

Here's what I also didn't remember ...

How I got back to the studio  
and woke up in ...

that        bed  
that        blood  
that        sun.

## OXYGEN.

I didn't need it.

Sipped in one breath,  
held it there,  
deep,  
    deep,  
    deep,  
let it swell,  
blocked out the noise  
of New York City streets  
ten floors beneath cracked windows.

Begged my feet,  
to find the floor,  
knees vs. gravity,  
a battle of epic proportions.

Thoughts replaced breath.  
Why were my ...

pants gone,  
    shirt off,  
    bra still on,  
    panties ... with a pad inside?

Fingers gripped on satin sheets,  
    cocooned my exposed parts,

Door thrown open,  
feet flew beneath  
the *buzzzzz* of flickering lights.

Hands frantically  
pulled at each door,  
*locked-locked-locked* some more  
winding cracks in the concrete floor,

led the way  
until I reached the studio,  
busted through,  
my last piece of strength  
dried out  
soon after I screamed in F sharp.  
Dali caught me  
midfall, pulled me close,  
sat me on the leather couch.

“Tranquila, Denver! Calm down!”

Her fingers navigated  
swollen coils of my hair.

“SOMETHING HAPPENED TO ME!”

My voice, soprano-heavy.

up.

Chills. up,

Ran up,

Heat.

Descended down,

down,

down ...

*(there.)*

Merc, Marissa,  
ran in the studio.

Water bottle in his hand,  
pill bottle in hers.

“You okay, baby gurl?”

Merc touched my forehead,  
skull like thunder rumbling in dark skies.

I pulled away, head spinning,  
raised my voice once more.

“Why did I wake up like this?”

“You drank too much last night, Denver,” Marissa said,  
pressing two pills against my dry, cracked lips.

“And you got your period, like really bad,” Dali whispered.

That quiets me ... freezes me.  
Still.

Technically, it *was* that time of the month.  
but ... BUT never before  
had my period felt like  
someone took a drill,  
pushed it through my insides,  
all the way up to my esophagus,  
clicked the ON button ...

And forgot to turn it                    O     F     F.

Merc sat on the edge of the couch,  
his eyes meeting mine.  
But I couldn't look at him,  
looking at me ... looking  
like *that*.

But then he grabbed my hand,  
warmth pulsing through,  
and I did.

“I found you crying, bleeding, drunk as hell.  
So I woke Say Say and Marissa up to help.”  
Merc's eyes turned glossy. *Were those tears?*  
“I was so scared for you, baby gurl.”

“You were out of it, muchacha.  
I'm the one who got you undressed.  
(I even put a pad on for you.)”

Marissa chimed in.

“And I washed your clothes.  
You got a real one right there, Denver.  
That's a ride-or-die if I ever seen one.”

A single tear welled,

swelled in my left eye, ocean blue,  
fell down the earth of my cheek,  
until it reached the corner of my lips  
where it disappeared,  
taking the foggy memory  
of the night with it.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of.  
I grew up with four sisters. Trust me. I seen worse.  
Maybe next time a little less turn-up?”

I wanted to believe Merc,  
the doubt fading  
because of his words  
and Marissa’s.  
But more importantly, Dali’s.

“We gotta get outta here, Denver.  
Give me your keys.  
Go back to the room and change.  
I’ll drive us home.”

It took me  
a second or ten to  
ground myself in the space  
of the room I slept in.

Bed in the middle,  
pillows, comforter  
a visual definition of chaos at best.

Equipment lined the walls  
microphones,  
keyboards,  
guitars,  
tripod,

and on the floor,  
a dusty, old-school  
Panasonic camcorder.

I put my clothes on,

as fast as my hands would allow.

A tap at the door.

Marissa.

My phone in her hand.

“Didn’t want you to forget this.”

Soon as I turned it on,

I saw it.

A new text from Shak.

**July 8, 9:13 a.m.**

Two words, no explanation:

*I’m sorry.*

But I didn’t even have

the energy to respond.

## I SLEPT THE WHOLE RIDE HOME

as Dali navigated  
New York City streets  
and tree-covered Pocono Mountains,

every now and again  
grazing the palm of her hand  
against the highways of  
my cheek-neck-chest.

“Everything will be fine. You’ll see.”  
Her words, a whispered stitch,  
healing, weaving  
from toes to follicle  
(and hidden parts in between).

Behind closed eyes,  
I replayed the night in my head,  
Dali’s promise of  
*nothinghappenednothinghappened*  
on repeat.

Maybe it was the music,  
a sample of the new song we recorded  
last night that blocked it out,  
made it real ...

A low and slow ballad,  
equal parts  
Whitney and Mariah.

Just me and Dali,  
battling it out,  
singing as if  
tomorrow the world would end.

It almost hurt to  
not hear Shak’s

soul-filled tenor on the track.

A broken, empty,  
missing piece of the puzzle.

That hollow feeling that  
~~something~~  
I wasn't right.

**MONDAY, JULY 8, 11:07 A.M.**

On any given day

I could almost always find  
the curve of our driveway empty.

Your car eternally parked in the garage  
since you were rarely home, Papi.

Ma was always at work  
and my black Civic  
propped right in front of the red double doors.

That morning though  
it wasn't empty.

Four cars  
lined up  
and I recognized them all.

## THE FIRST THING WE SAW

when I unlocked the front door?  
Y'all.

Propped on the couch,  
equal distances  
of personal space  
in between.

You.  
Ma.  
Tía Esme.  
Pastor Brown.  
Grandma Brown.  
Shak.  
*Shit.*

The first thing we heard?  
Ma's voice, like a dragon  
unleashing fire.  
I could always count  
on that woman to get the party started.

“Where have you been?” Arms crossed, left foot tapping.

“At the Falls,” I said, “then brunch.”

“Walmart after that,” Dali added.

“And last night?”

Ma's question hovered in the air.

“¡Y dinos la verdad!” Tía Esme's finger pointed straight at Dali.  
Boy, when Dali's mom sided with mine,  
it was a WRAP!

They wanted the truth?

Well, the truth about a lie is

once planted,  
the seed—  
stubborn as the day is long—  
will grow  
whether you watered it or not.

Red veins piercing through  
brown cheeks,  
Shak spoke before  
Dali or I could get the words out.

“When you guys didn’t return my texts or calls,  
I got nervous that something happened to you.”

(Something did.)  
I wanted to say that,  
but the words tasted like lies  
on my tongue.

I felt the heat steamroll off Dali  
as she leaned forward,  
and spat out,  
“You’re being paranoid!”

I inhaled,  
Dali did the opposite.  
“We went out,” I said,  
legs struggling against gravity.

“With that there famous singer  
who asked Shakira for *naked* photos?” Pastor Brown said.

Something about hearing  
Shak’s grandfather utter the word *naked*  
made me want  
to fling myself in boiling water.

Dali sucked her teeth.  
“Shak, maybe you heard wrong.  
Merc wouldn’t do that.”

“Who is this Merc anyway?”

Papi, your voice was  
equal parts mad and oblivious.

“A musician, Papi.  
People say he’s a genius.”  
    But you shut me down  
    with a wave of the hand  
    and that same old eye roll.

Pastor Brown pulled Shak’s cell phone  
out his blazer pocket,  
swiped up, and clicked

P  
L  
A  
Y

“Once in Your Life”  
filtered in,  
in all of its  
bass-thumping  
booty-poppin’  
thot glory.

If Dali’s eyes  
were lasers,  
Shak woulda been  
laid out  
flat on the floor.

*“TURN THAT DEVIL MUSIC OFF!”*  
Grandma Brown yelled,  
hands clutched on white pearls.

I saw the tears build up  
before they fell down Shak’s face.  
Felt the sting of my own rising, too.

“It’s a good thing Shak told us,  
lest we never woulda  
found out what you girls been hidin’ for weeks.”

Pastor Brown passed Shak's phone  
to Ma, Papi, Tía Esme.

The truth on full display,  
a trail of texts  
going back to the  
very day I plotted this whole  
get-famous-or-die-trying  
thing.

## WHAT GOOD WERE LIPS

if the second I tried  
to use them to explain,  
you and Ma told me to SHUT UP?

What good were ears

if the only words  
that came from your mouths  
were sung in the key of:

NO

CAN'T  
& FORBIDDEN?

What good were tears  
if they weren't enough  
to stop what came next?

Accusations:  
"Your daughters are bad influences  
for our Shakira!"

And then, a battle

of epic proportions  
old-school vs. new-school

churchgoing, Bible-thumping pastors  
vs.  
three overworked parents

who hadn't seen the inside of a church  
since ...

Dang, when *was* the last time?

## SAD EYES

glued on wooden floors  
a scratch of the throat  
followed by a truth bomb,  
loud enough to slice through raised voices:

“Dali, Denver, I’m sorry, but  
I can’t sing with you anymore.”

And just like that

Shak’s grandparents  
rose up from the couch  
each hand  
locked in hers,

Bibles gripped  
firm in the other.

Noses pointed to the heavens,  
they ignored our  
*PleaseShakPlease*  
sobbing,  
    wilting,  
    broken  
cries,

And then ...  
they dragged her ass straight out the front door.

Which left  
me and Dali with  
YOU GUYS.

“I’d like a meeting with this so-called singer.  
TUH-DAY!”

Ma didn’t care about those tears,

my swollen-up eyes.  
Neither did you, Papi.

“That’s not how Merc operates.  
We need to trust him and his process.  
He’s the professional after all!”  
(NOT Y’ALL!)

I didn’t say that last bit though.  
Tía Esme came in,  
like soft rain  
after a violent storm.  
“¿Y cuánto saben de este hombre, Dalisay?”

“We know enough that he could change our lives.  
We could make albums ...  
have enough money to get a house.  
Not live like we do. Get our papers in order.  
Bring abuela and Tío here with us.”

That last bit shifted Tía Esme’s whole spirit.

She hadn’t been home in eight years—  
We had become her family.  
It wasn’t that she didn’t want to go to Santo Domingo.  
It was just the risk of never being allowed back was too great.  
And the money?

*Never enough to do enough.*

## THE VERDICT FOR MY CRIMES?

1. Driving privileges temporarily suspended  
(because punishments were still a thing even though I was turning eighteen soon)
2. A promise that me and Dali would never mess up like that again
3. A special meeting with Merc ... ASAP!

Why?

Because

according to Ma ...

Teenagers ain't

got no

business doing

business with

a grown

ass MAN

!!! !!!

It didn't matter  
that I, myself,  
was almost grown.

Almost.

## THAT NIGHT

got no better,  
long after Dali  
and Tía Esme left.

Behind the closed double doors  
of your master suite,  
television volume on full blast,  
but not enough to mask  
the crashing of objects,  
name calling,  
screaming voices  
hungry with blame.

And behind my own,  
there simply  
weren't enough  
scalding showers,  
maxi pads,  
and Midol  
in the world  
to empty  
that feeling that rose up  
inside of me.

All over again.

ONCE UPON A MIDNIGHT,

there lived a girl  
racked with pain,  
drilled down to the bone  
who suddenly felt  
her body was no longer her own.

A hymn in the key of what-da-fuq-was-wrong-with-me  
by Denver Lee Lafleur

## PAIN MANAGEMENT 101:

On the bi-leveled roof  
of the big, big house  
on Winding Brook Road,  
I sat beneath a black sky  
full of gleaming stars.

A freshly rolled blunt  
placed between my lips,  
I made a promise  
I'd *never* drink that much again.

I inhaled the earthy, smoky,  
herbal essence,  
let it glide  
    lowwww  
    slowwwwww  
all up and through  
whatever shards of me  
the night before left behind.

You didn't see me  
on the roof that night, Papi.

Didn't see me seeing you  
barrel out the front door,  
suitcase trailing behind.

Didn't hear me hearing you  
dial the digits,  
shift your tone from  
stone to honey,  
words whisper-soft ...

*I'm on my way.*  
*See you in a few hours.*

But I did, Papi.

And I wanted to raise my voice,  
scream that I wanted to escape,  
get the hell outta Shohola, too.  
But most of all,  
I wanted to demand  
you tell me who,  
of all people in the world,  
held the power to pull you away  
when I needed you most.

Because you knew I was hurting  
the second Shak  
ripped the music  
clean off my skin.

Merc woulda never left me like that.  
But you did.

Left me crying,  
once again,  
as tires rolled  
against gravel-covered road.

I cried for you,  
up there on the roof,  
for me,  
for us.

The us we once were,  
the us we were slowly  
*becoming*.

JULY 9, 1:03 A.M.

**Me:** I can't sleep. Hurts so much.

**Dali:** Me too.

**Me:** I keep replaying everything in my head. We gotta fix things with Shak.

**Dali:** Facts. I know just the place we should meet. I'ma text her.

**Me:** Think she'll come?

**Dali:** She'd be dumb if she didn't.

## SUMMER DAYS

spent at Shohola Falls,  
we watched the sun  
hover above the mountains,  
acoustic guitar in hand,  
Shak and Dali harmonizing by my side  
as if that waterfall,  
and that sun, was made just for us.

Like an earthly gift,  
a Magic Eraser of  
the bad (like that time me and Dali almost flunked freshman year)  
and  
the sad (like when Shak's parents got deployed)

Dali and I waited for Shak  
to show up at our spot,  
so we could apologize,  
explain the how, the why,  
the what's next???

But as sun turned to moon  
and blue skies turned pink,  
she never arrived,  
even though she promised.  
But we sure got that text though:

*Guys, I'm done. For real.*

## THERE'S A SAYING THAT GOES:

We don't lose friends.

We just learn who the real ones are.

And right there up on that rock,  
beneath a glowing white moon,  
Dali's head nestled in the crest of my shoulder  
I realized one thing:

Shak wasn't there from the beginning.  
Elementary all the way to high school.

But the girl next to me?  
Always was,  
always would be.

And that  
was not a "phase."  
At all.

JULY 12, 9:42 P.M.

**01905554506:** How's my star? Feeling better?

**Me:** Much better. Sorry I overreacted. I just never got that messed up b4.

**01905554506:** I woulda lost my shit too if I woke up like dat.

**Me:** We got some drama going here. Shak said you called and asked her for bikini pics?

**01905554506:** Nah, chill. I don't get down wit lil girls. We did ask for measurements tho. The wardrobe team needed it.

**Me:** Ahh, k.

**Me:** Our parents found out we been sneaking out. And they flipped. Now they wanna meet you.

**01905554506:** Bet. We'll make it happen. Lunch in the city soon.

**Me:** Annnnd Shak dropped out the group.

**01905554506:** Good.

**Me:** WHAT?!?

**01905554506:** Denver, ain't no room for liars n my crew. If there's nuthin else you'll learn 'bout this business, remember this:

Every  
body  
is  
replaceable.



## PART TWO: SECURITY

Monday, December 23  
Atlanta International Airport  
Time: 8:37 a.m.  
Destination: Home

# I REMEMBER OUR FIRST "FLIGHT" TOGETHER, PAPI.

Five years old,  
Teterboro Airport.

Me on the left  
Gwen on the right  
You nestled in between  
hands held tight.

Inside the hangar,  
our steps toward the Cessna 210  
slow, deliberate.

Gwen was afraid to fly,  
but I wasn't.  
You said I was born with wings.

In the pit,  
you placed me on your lap  
while Gwen sat,  
eyes glued  
to the ground below.

You let me press every button  
on the control panel, up!  
told me to close my eyes up,  
and picture myself going up,

Together, we soared above magical, distant lands,  
powered through turbulent clouds,  
never losing our stride,  
not even for a second.

The memory of it all  
follows me to this runway now,  
in the heart of Atlanta,  
as the ramp agent runs

our belongings through security.

And for some reason,  
I know I'm safe, Papi.  
Just as safe as I was  
all those suns ago.

## A TEXT FOR SHAK

**July 17, 10:34 a.m.**

I hate you.

I hate you for leaving us.

I hit the delete button.

Fast.

A text for Shak  
(part deux)

**July 17, 10:37 a.m.**

I miss you.

I miss us.

My fingers tapped  
out the words,  
erased them  
before I clicked send,  
before I could tell her  
it wasn't supposed to  
go down like that.

This text was better instead:

**July 17, 10:37 a.m.**

I wish you were here.



Because for three years,  
we made magic with our voices.  
I brought the funk.  
Dali brought the sauce.  
Shak brought the soul.

And on that day,  
it shoulda been the three of us  
in the van  
with our parents  
on the way to New York to meet Merc.  
Instead, I spent the whole ride  
staring at the two empty seats  
in the back row.

One for Shak.  
And one for you, Papi.

You gave me the wings of music  
and you couldn't even take  
ONE day to sit back and watch me fly ...

A day off

for Ma and Tía Esme  
was like  
Halley's Comet.  
That sacred,  
special,  
unheard-of event  
that only came around  
once in a blue moon.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 17

“Reservations, compliments of Mr. Ellis?”

Ma had her Bad & Boujee voice on.

“Right this way, ladies.”

The hostess led us  
through the ground floor  
of the Lobster Club  
to a private room  
where Merc stood  
with a bunch of folks I didn’t recognize.  
Except Meat and Marissa.

The whole time Dali’s mom  
was oohing and aahing  
at how nice the restaurant was.

But Ma was unbothered,  
unimpressed,  
*untouched*.

Meanwhile, Merc was ready to  
wine us,  
dine us,  
feed us  
with hope,  
promises,  
security.

“That’s Dr. Lafleur to you,”

Ma said  
soon as Merc  
dared call her MRS.,  
but Ma wasn’t done yet.

“Honestly, I never heard of you until recently.  
My husband and I don’t really listen to, what’s

it called? *Trap music?*”

If lightning could have  
bolted through the roof  
and turned me to ash,  
that would’ve been a good time.

“That’s not his only genre, Ma!”  
The words slithered between clenched teeth.

But Merc was cool AF in his Armani suit.  
Didn’t even flinch at Ma’s verbal lashing.

“Dr. Lafleur, my artistry is quite versatile.  
Not so much, as you call it, trap music.”

And then he flashed  
that fly-me-to-the-moon  
smile.

All the other times we’d linked up,  
it was singing hooks,  
tossing back shots,  
laughter with no expiration date.

That day?  
Merc was all business.

“I’m Esmeralda, but please call me Esme.”

Merc went to shake Tía’s hand,  
but instead, she stood on her  
tippy-toes, hugged him,  
and said,  
“Ay, so tall!”

Marissa invited us  
to take our seats  
at the large table.

A team of waiters filed in  
with our first courses in hand:  
miso soup and crispy squid.

No sooner than those  
plates hit the table,  
Ma popped off at the mouth.  
“So let’s get right to it, shall we?  
What thirty-nine-year-old man  
records music with teenagers—”

“And doesn’t talk to  
their parents first?”

Tía Esme came in with her two cents.

Merc swallowed before responding.  
“I assure you, Dr. Lafleur and Ms. Gómez,  
eh-hem, Esme,  
that I was under the impression  
everything was copacetic.”

“Well, it’s not.  
They’re only seventeen.  
Not even done with school.”  
Typical Ma,  
forever bringing up the s-word,  
steady forgetting  
I was ’bout to be a WHOLE adult!

Another round of waiters.  
Next course?  
ALL the sushi!

“What are your intentions with our girls?”

Tía Esme,  
shoulders out,  
back straighter,  
Ma’s juju  
rubbing off on her  
like sweet jam on toast.

“Oh, I have the best of intentions  
for their future and their career.  
This is why I wanted to have a  
meeting today with you and my whole team.”

“Go ahead.” Ma separated her chopsticks. “We’re listening ...”

## THE TEAM:

Producer

Vocal coach

Music instructor

Security guards

(led by aikido-trained Miguel “Meat” Parker)

Personal assistant (Marissa)

TUTOR

Merc started running down  
all their credentials:

Award-winning this ...

Professionally trained,  
college-educated that ...

Ding! Ding! Ding!

Homeboy said the magic word.

Or so I thought!

You’d think that  
whole college/tutor bit  
would be enough for Ma?  
Negative!

“This is all impressive,  
and we appreciate the offer,  
but how about this?”

A compromise ...

Ma:

“They can record with you  
but Esme, myself, or my husband must be there.”

Tía Esme:

“Pero not too much. Because I run a business  
and I’m working all the time.”

Ma:

“We need a proper arrangement ...  
in writing.  
Also, come September,  
they can’t be missing school for this,  
because senior year is not a game.”

Tía Esme:

“Got that, Señor Mercury?”

“Definitely.” Merc flashed that million-dollar grill.  
“In fact, I thought you’d bring that up,  
which is why I brought these ...”

Contracts—  
the basis  
for any business relationship.

“For security—  
for you ladies.”

Merc had nothing to lose.  
He was gonna make bank,  
whether we made it big or not.

That contract locked in  
every promise he made  
to Ma and Tía Esme  
and us.

Made every  
single  
what-if fade into the Milky Way.

Merc made two copies for  
Ma and Tía Esme to review.  
And when he passed it to Ma,  
I moved in close,  
chin propped on her shoulder.  
She kissed my forehead,  
and it was everything I’d hoped for.

Me, Ma

silently reading  
the map to my dreams.

Every word,  
every letter crashed  
into the next.

A black hole, of sorts,  
bursting with flashes of starlight ...

**THIS**

**AGREEMENT**

Reference is made to exhibits A, B, and C attached hereto aterms  
incorporated

Whereas **ARTIST** is a professional entertainer

**Demo** to be produced within six months

If **Nondisclosure** this N to be executed upon signatu **acceptance** of  
saontract.

Artist

Album

acceptance

need four

## NO ONE IN THE RESTAURANT

could see  
my unraveling,  
heartbeat bursting  
through  
shell of skin.

No one could see,  
*feel*  
that but me.

Because that contract meant  
it was legit,  
not just some pipe dream.  
A real chance  
at a real future.

And just like Cardi B,

I was like,  
WHERE'S MY PEN?  
'Cause I was ready to  
sign that joint!

Looked like I wasn't

the only one who thought that.  
Specs slapped on tight,  
Tía Esme  
oohed and aahed  
through each word,  
Dali nestled in her mother's embrace.  
"My Dalisay is gonna be a star!"

Next thing I knew,  
she whipped out a pen from her purse,  
and Ma whispered  
something in her ear.

And in my mind,

I knew Ma  
was asking to borrow a pen.  
Tía Esme signed with a quickness,  
asked Merc for a selfie with her and Dali  
so she could WhatsApp  
this moment to all her peeps  
back home.

The waiters served up  
the final course: dessert.

Ma folded up that contract,  
tossed it right in her Chanel purse,  
and plopped a  
green tea mochi in her mouth,  
like that contract  
and that moment  
never,  
ever,  
mattered.

“I gotta talk to my  
husband and lawyer first.”

## HOW THE MEETING ENDED:

with a yes  
a sorry-not-right-now,  
and my  
loud-ass sighs  
the whole ride home.

But still I felt frigg'n amazing.

Because ...

If that night of overdrinking with #TeamMerc,  
and that morning of *Family Feud* after  
broke me,  
and filled me with doubt,

then that day with our moms meeting  
Merc in the city  
put me back together again.  
For real.

Now Ma just needed  
to sign the damn contract!

JULY 17, 3:48 P.M.

**01905554848:** How was that?

**Dali:** You were perfect, corazoncito.

**Me:** Yeah, YOU were. My mom? Not so much.

**Dali:** See you when you get back from LA?

**01905554848:** Sure thing. And Denver, get mama dukes n check, aight? Can't have Say Say goin solo. 😊

## ONCE UPON A TIME,

there lived a mom  
and a dad  
and a sister  
and an other.

The mom  
and dad  
and Gwen  
fit into a perfect box.

Each line straight,  
each angle perfectly  
perpendicular.

But an other was just that.  
The other.  
Crooked.  
Bent.  
Jagged.

One day the mom  
and the dad  
packed the sister  
and the Other.

Big city left behind,  
whisked away  
to mountain-covered  
country,  
better schools (& brand-new jobs).

Full of hope that  
the Other would  
learn and mold  
and fit  
into this new box

they squeezed her in.

Little did they know,  
the Other  
would go on  
to build her own.

## THAT CONTRACT

sat on the kitchen counter  
collecting cereal crumbs  
for what felt like  
two thousand  
seventy-seven  
days.

Un     bothered  
Un     impressed  
Un     touched

## "DID MERC TEXT YOU LAST NIGHT?"

Dali shoved a spoonful  
of cookies & cream  
in her mouth.

It was Netflix night at her crib.  
Just me, her, and no Shak.  
Still wasn't used to that.

"Text about what?"

"He's back from LA  
and ready to work.  
Studio time is booked for next week.  
And get this ... he's sending a car service!"

"Mami was all:  
Dios mío, this guy's  
the REAL DEAL, eh?"

"She already said I could go  
but she's not trying  
to miss another day of work.  
So what's up? You coming?"

Here was the thing:  
Merc didn't hit me up,  
didn't invite me to jack,  
and I knew exactly why.

"Nah, next time."

Dali flung her hair  
across my lap,  
lay on top of me,  
lips all pouty.  
"I don't like that idea, Denver."

"Yeah. Me neither."

I clicked play

on *Jane the Virgin*,  
stuffed an Oreo  
down my throat,  
and tried my best to pretend  
that shit didn't taste like  
disappointment.

SATURDAY, JULY 27

**8:30 p.m.**

no sooner than you  
walked through the door  
I popped off with  
questions about that contract  
my dreams  
my future

The why? (weren't you at the meeting, Papi)  
The how? (could you forget about me)  
The WHEN? (would you and Ma sign)

Every answer  
that cascaded off  
your lips  
sounded like a  
running list of synonyms  
for the word  
NOPE!

Instead, you had  
something else on your mind.

“Denver?  
Your mother and I  
have something to tell you ...”

## SHOULDA SAW IT

coming years ago.

See, pretending is a talent  
we got on lock.

The perfect picture of  
a happy family:  
the successful doctor  
with her successful pilot husband  
their *one* successful daughter

Gwendolyn Jaylis Lafleur:  
Maker of dean's list,  
Doer of nothing wrong,

and the Other,  
singer of emo-ass songs,  
player of instruments,  
which was cute,  
but not enough to do enough.

The greatest show on Earth  
was the one where on the outside  
things seemed good,  
till you grabbed a microscope,  
looked deep,

saw the tiny crack  
stretching its way  
through years of "missed flights" home  
and late nights at the hospital.

When I was younger,  
I didn't see these things.

But time passed,  
and the cracks multiplied,

heavy under the weight  
of pretending.

## SEPARATION:

that funny little word  
that came before

D

I

V

O

R

C

E

All those years  
of stretched out days,  
endless nights,  
I listened to Ma  
cry for you  
to come back  
as you barreled out  
the front door,  
while I looked out my bedroom window,  
wishing you'd take me with you,  
watched you  
drive off to  
godknowswhere  
beneath a midnight sky;  
your absence  
a disease,  
your presence  
a present  
for all of us.  
It wasn't  
the first time

I'd heard  
y'all say  
you were done.

It was just

the first time  
I believed you.

## SEPARATION

was also code for:  
that contract  
and my dreams  
didn't mean jack

Because it didn't fit the vision  
of what life would look like  
for me  
for Gwen  
for YOU.  
(and Ma)

"BUT DO YOU GUYS

care about what I said?  
Dali is going to record without me!  
You're sabotaging my future  
because *your* marriage sucks!"

I expected to feel  
the sting of a hand  
against my cheek,  
a hard grip on my arm,  
fiery words  
to extinguish my own.

Instead

Ma hustled  
to her bedroom,  
cigarette smoke  
building beneath  
closed doors,  
then curling,  
swirling through  
every crevice like a whole mood.

And you, Papi, stormed off,  
yet again

tires skidding  
over unpaved roads ...

I headed to the basement,  
let it out  
the best way I knew how:  
lights dimmed  
candles lit  
fingers plucked Em chords,  
ready to record.

The thing about  
music was  
once it sparked,  
lyrics unfolded,  
a prelude  
to a flame  
that refused to die.

# I'M THROUGH

Written by Denver Lafleur

Verse:

*I always do what you say  
Put aside my dreams every day  
I give my time,  
sacrifice my life,  
Just so you could fly  
Now I wonder when  
I can begin  
to shine my light within*

Pre-chorus:

*Starting today,  
I'll find my way*

Chorus:

*I'm through with you,  
through with you  
through with you, ooh  
I'm through with your rules  
I'm putting me first  
'cause I know my worth*

## I BELTED OUT THAT LAST NOTE,

veins breaking  
through skin

Turned off the record button,  
pulled up Dali's and one of Merc's  
many numbers,  
clicked send

Heard the basement door crack,  
footsteps descend

Smelled the  
smoky stench  
before I saw Ma's face

"Merc's right, Denver. Your talent is endless.  
I know this little singing thing  
is important to you. Just like it was for your father  
when he tried to be a musician at your age.  
But jazz was never gonna pay the bills.  
We just need more time to decide."

*Little.*

Of course that's  
all I heard.

Little music  
Little phase  
Little dream

I forced myself  
to remember a time  
she ever listened to my music,  
stuck around,  
showed up.  
Came up empty.

We stood like mirrors,

ocean meeting earth,  
my eyes  
a reflection of  
both hers and yours, Papi.

Hurting

Wordless

Truth unfolding ...

Not sure

I had much time left.

**JULY 28, 12:22 A.M.**

**Gwen:** Denny, you up? I'm so sorry I haven't been returning your calls. Been so busy with interning and getting ready for next semester abroad.

**12:29 a.m.**

**Gwen:** I heard the news about them separating. Wish I was there with you.

**12:33 a.m.**

**Gwen:** You should get away for a while. My dorm is open. Think about it?

**12:48 a.m.**

**Me:** Sis, Ma started smoking cigarettes again. I think it's for real for real this time.

**Gwen:** I know. 😞

## UNDER A BLACK SKY,

void of stars and moon,  
there was a girl who quietly  
slipped out of her home  
on Chickasaw Lane,  
walked past the Trails End sign  
dimly lit at the exit,

crossed Route 6,  
sharp left on Springwood Drive,  
followed each curve,  
in long, hurried steps,  
until she reached Winding Brook Road,  
the crunch of gravel beneath her feet.

Quietly, she climbed the ladder  
on the side of the big house  
with the double red doors,  
until she reached the flattened roof

fingers tap-tap-tapped the bedroom window,  
~~awakening~~ rescuing me  
from the nightmare, skin-deep.

“Dali, what are you doing here?”

“I heard your song.  
No way I’m leaving you alone.  
Olive juice.”

## THAT NIGHT

as we lay in my bed,  
curtains drawn back,  
fingers exploring  
parts where pain  
once dwelled,  
two dueling meteor showers  
lit up Pennsylvania skies.

A silent, wordless  
burst of magic  
that was our universe,  
that was ... us.

There was no need to  
tell Dali what went down  
with you and Ma earlier.

The lyrics,  
the music  
communicated it all  
through  
    bitten lips,  
    bursting stars,  
    beating hearts ...  
a thousand different ways.

# SOME

times  
unabashed  
love  
only  
reveals  
itself  
under  
darkened  
skies,  
satin sheets, words unspoken, behind locked doors

...

An aria in the key of denial  
Written by us both

MONDAY, JULY 29

The next day,

that black Mercedes SUV  
cruised through Trails End  
music bumping,  
thumping off hip-hop beats.

I had a good mind  
to ignore you and Ma,  
hop in that ride with her  
and head to the studio.

“Don’t worry,” Dali said.  
“They’ll come around.”

The driver stepped out,  
suited up, blazer, bow tie, hat and all  
just like in the movies.

Folks in the trailer park  
stopped and stared  
as the driver reached Dali’s doorstep.

“Right this way, Ms. Gómez.”  
He opened the door.  
“Per Mr. Ellis’s request,  
I’ll hold on to your cell phone.  
He prefers that you study your lyrics.”

Dali handed over that phone,  
a look painted on her face like  
*How will I even survive????*

And honestly, I wondered the same.

## A DOZEN THOUGHTS

raced through me  
a disastrous remix of  
imnotokay  
thisisnotokay  
ishouldbegoin  
~~notyou~~  
withyou

Especially since  
meeting Merc would've  
never happened without ... *me*.

But the mere thought  
seemed selfish, wrong.

So the proper thing  
to do was

wave  
smile  
stand at the  
edge of the driveway

watching  
Dali  
and  
~~my~~ her chauffeur  
and my lyrics  
literally drive away

Suspense  
ate away at my nerves,  
hours passed,  
no word from Dali.

I missed everything that night.  
The pulse of the music,

soaking in chords, notes, melodies.  
Meanwhile, Ma didn't even come home.  
Nor did you, Papi.  
Typical.

**JULY 30, 3:16 A.M.**

**Dali:**

Home now.

He loved your new song,

but barely let me sing any leads.

Denver, I need you with me next time.

K?

**Me:**

k.

One thing  
I'd never done  
was broken a promise to Dali  
Ever.  
No sense in starting.

## ONCE UPON A TIME

there lived a girl  
who stared NO in the face,  
laughed at that shit,  
and took matters  
into her own hands.

A song in the key of *DO YOU, BOO!*

By Denver Lee Lafleur

## OPERATION GET IT DONE

And by *it*,  
I mean that contract.

Step 1: Read it (See, Papi, I *did* study sometimes!)

Absorb all of it—  
those  
mixed-up,  
mashed-up  
words  
like  
foreign-language  
too hard,  
too trapped  
beneath thick tongues

Step 2: Sign it

Because the longer  
I left my future  
in your hands,  
the quicker it was gonna  
slip

a

w

a

y

Step 3: Send it

One click of a button  
loud enough to  
let Merc know  
that this life,  
this dream,  
wasn't worth

stalling a second more.

JULY 31, 12:28 P.M.

**01905552702:** Aye, superstar! I see u got ur folks n check.

**Me:** Sure did.

**01905552702:** oh, baby gurl 😊😞😊

**Me:** ?

**01905552702:** Denver, I know your handwriting.

**12:51 p.m.**

**01905552702:** u there?

**Me:** BUT THEY LEFT ME NO CHOICE. Guess you're done with me now???

**01905552702:** Nah, we just getn started. 😊

## THESE WERE THE THINGS

I couldn't unsee:

the passing of time,  
no ginger-spiced  
Saturday mornings,  
no bittersweet  
Sunday goodbyes  
with you ...

Ma slipping  
into that sunken place,  
a bottomless pit  
of *woe-is-freakin-me*.

A zombie  
of a woman  
playing  
work-sleep-wait  
on

Repeat  
Repeat

A convenience for me tho,  
the perfect excuse  
to dip off  
sight unseen  
to the studio.

New songs in my journal,  
Dali at my side,  
Merc with the sick beats.

Time did not exist  
when I was there with them

Eventually

I figured  
Ma (or you) would notice  
I was gone  
—a bit too much—  
But right then and there  
I had'ta do what was best for ME.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 2

Memories

were like water.

Life giving,  
soul filling,  
moment in time.

Easy to be forgotten,  
if you couldn't hold them tight.

Maybe that's why  
I started to notice  
that camcorder,  
almost always at Merc's side.

With it, a duffel bag  
filled with VHS-C tapes,  
mini golden treasures,  
epic adventures,  
in the studio,  
on the road,  
fans screaming,  
songs written.

Merc said that Panasonic  
PVL453 was the first  
thing he purchased  
when he hit it big.  
And it was way  
too precious to part with.  
Plus it still worked.

I guess every celebrity  
has their weird must-haves.

To me,  
camcorders were on the

ancient end of the technology spectrum.  
Maybe they'd be worth a grip in the future.

Then again,  
maybe not.

Merc brought in a heavy hitter  
to help produce the final cut  
of our newest song,

“I’m Through.”

Bryan Lewis,  
hitmaker to the stars,  
white boy in a Bob Marley disguise,  
comin’ straight outta Australia  
just to work with Untouched.

fifty-leven takes  
was all it took  
to hear those magic words  
through my headphones.

“I think we’re all done, Denver!  
Merc will love it.”

Meat opened the door of the booth.  
“Sounding real good, girl!” He beamed.  
“You can come on out now.”

I zombie-walked  
my way past the control board,  
Bryan dapping me up,  
before I collapsed on the couch  
wishing Dali were there to catch my fall.

Instead, she was  
in studio B, down the hall,  
recording backgrounds on our next  
song for the last two hours.

“Where’s me ole mate, Merc?  
He needs to hear this!”

Bryan played the track from the top.

Mannn, that bass kicked in  
followed by the tap-tap-tap  
of the drum  
and then that voice.  
All buttery and,  
dare I say, *Whitneyish*.  
But all mine.

Next thing I knew,  
I was up on my feet  
swerving to the beat,  
hardly believing that that was me.

Bryan busted a move, too,  
dreads swinging,  
beatboxing!

Even Meat  
couldn't resist a two-step,  
awkward as his giant self looked.

“Oh, your voice is sick, Denver!”  
Bryan yelled over the bass.  
“I'm going to the Bottle-O downstairs  
for a pack of ciggies.  
Can I get you anything?”

“I'm good,” I said.  
“I'm just ready for Dali  
and Merc to hear this joint!”

Bryan nodded  
and shortly after he bounced,  
the song began to fade out,  
and I wanted to hear it  
again and again  
until every note sank to my bones.

I took a seat in Bryan's chair,  
the wide computer screen

drinking me in,  
ran my fingers over the mouse.

“Tsk tsk, Denver.  
You know not to touch the equipment.”

I swiveled in Meat’s direction,  
put on my best Dali  
bat-my-lashes, smile-like-the-devil voice:  
“I just want a copy of my song.  
Not a sample. Come on! You know it’s a hit!”

Arms pretzeled tight.  
“You tryna get me fired?  
Merc and the girls went to grab food.  
They’ll probably be back any minute.”  
I did that blink-and-pout thing on repeat.

“Don’t you look at me with those eyes!”

Hit him with that combo once more.

Then he started laughing.  
“I got a cousin with heterochromia, too,  
'cept she got one gray, one green eye.  
But the answer is still no.”

“Would you kill your cousin’s hopes like that?”

Meat dragged his hand  
across his bearded face,  
shifted on his feet,  
cracked the door open  
and looked down the empty hall.

“You got like two and a half minutes, girl.”

I jumped out the chair  
hands in the air,  
ready to hug that teddy bear,  
dressed in muscle disguise,  
but he hit me with the Wakanda arms  
hella quick.

“You betta not tell Merc about this.”

## REASON #145 WHY I'M SMART

(contrary to popular belief)

A true artist never  
leaves the house  
without her tools.

Which is why  
in my pink AliExpress bag,  
behind the song journals  
and

    pens  
and

    pads  
and

    packs of gum,  
there lie a tiny  
SanDisk flash drive,  
hidden in the  
small zipper compartment.

64 GB,  
to be exact,  
large enough to hold  
the MP3 file of  
the song  
that was gonna  
change our lives—  
*my* life  
forever.

One click,  
5 megs,  
a hurried download  
of epic proportions,  
Supermanned my ass

back to the couch,  
SanDisk tucked away,  
just in time  
for that door to swing open ...

“We’ve got ourselves a piss-up now!”  
Bryan walked in, cigarette dangling  
from his thin lips,  
a six-pack of Dos Equis in each hand,

Merc and Marissa  
trailing behind him,  
hands full of McDonald’s bags.

That cheesy, salty,  
oniony smell filling the space,  
throwing my senses all off balance.

I locked eyes with Meat  
for a split second,  
the look we shared,  
a reciprocal whisper  
of *shutyodammouth*.

“I thought Dali was with you?” I asked.

Merc plopped next to me on the couch.  
“Nah, she’s done for the night.  
Asked to take a nap  
before y’all bounce.  
Ay yo, Bryan, run the track.”

Bryan clicked play,  
volume on simmer mode this time,  
while we bopped our heads,  
cracked open the beers  
and those McDonald’s bags.

Merc handed me mine,  
I ripped that thing open  
ready to dive in to a Big Mac

only to realize he ordered me  
a Supersize McNope ...

As in a damn garden salad.

I could feel the  
color of my skin shift  
light brown to crimson.

“Just tryna get you  
ready for prime time, baby gurl.”

Merc quick-tapped my belly,  
making it jiggle right along  
with my bottom lip.

I tugged at my T-shirt,  
pushing it deeper into my belt.

Marissa giggled a toothy laugh,  
but no one else did.

And suddenly I was no longer hangry.

In fact, everybody  
was hella silent as the track  
played and played until it  
faded into nothingness.

“Well, thanks for the burgers,  
but it’s time for me to  
head back to my hotel.  
Early flight tomorrow.  
Catch you later, mate?”  
Bryan started gathering  
his things.

“Meat can drive you back.” Merc stood,  
dapping Bryan up. “Marissa, you can head out, too.”

I felt myself  
fold further  
into myself on the couch  
as I painted on a weak smile,

said my thank-yous and goodbyes,  
until all that was left behind  
was just me and Merc  
and that insult.

“You didn’t have to play me like that,”  
I whispered, eyes glued to the floor,  
trying my hardest not to cry.

“Oh, baby gurl,  
don’t get so caught up.  
You’re beautiful just the way you are.”

I sat straighter,  
only a little though.

“But you see, this music thing  
ain’t just about the music.

“It’s equal parts discipline,  
eating right,  
waist snatched,  
wardrobe on point,  
leveling up your game,  
musically,  
lyrically,  
physically ...

“Least, that’s what all the *big* stars  
do. Every day, Denver.”

I thought about  
every magazine cover,  
red carpet,  
every music video  
I’d ever seen.

Beyoncé,  
Cardi,  
Queen Yeli,  
all of them,  
flesh and curves,

beat to the gods.

A silhouette of perfection  
that would never be meant for me.  
And I was always fine with that ...  
until recently.

“Now come on, eat, baby gurl.  
You need your strength.”

Slowly, I lifted the  
fork to my lips,  
swallowed that bland-ass salad down  
and pretended like it was  
the juiciest burger I ever had.

Merc stuffed a wad of fries in his mouth,  
replayed our songs on low  
all over again.

The air shifted  
warmth replaced chill,  
like a whole mood  
filling the space.

And then ...  
Merc transformed into  
an open book  
on full display, just for me.

A subtle reminder of  
our connection from that first day  
at the studio,

And I don't mean in the way  
Ma thought—  
That whole grown-ass-man-  
hanging-with-teenage-girls thing.

It wasn't like that with Merc.

I'm talking 'bout  
the night when gravity

disappeared beneath my feet  
and he guided me through  
every missed note,  
    every off-key melody.

It was then  
that I knew  
what we had  
was on another level.

    “Back in the day,  
    I was the shy kid  
    living in the projects,  
    apartment crawling with roaches.”  
Merc popped another fry in his mouth.

    “I never was a good student,”  
    he admitted,  
and I nodded,  
'cause I felt that deep in my soul.  
“I hate math the most.” I laughed.

    “Nah. Reading was the worst.”  
And I felt that one, too.  
'Specially with summer school.

    “See, me and you?”  
Merc touched his temple.  
    “Only reading we  
    care about  
    is notes on bars.”

If you looked up the word  
*twin*  
in the dictionary,  
I was convinced  
there'd be a pic of Merc and me.

    “I wasn't like them

other kids, Denver.”

Instead of going out to play,  
Merc stayed in the house  
creating songs,  
melodies,  
a way OUT.

For some folks

OUT meant ...  
you made it big-time  
too good-for-the-hood:  
Money,  
Fame,  
Cars,  
Clothes,  
Paparazzi,  
sniffing up your ass.

“That’s why you gotta  
just do what I say & trust my intentions.  
People will talk about you,  
make up lies,  
anything to cop a dollar  
off what you built  
with your bare hands.

“And that’s why  
I’m so protective of  
y’all.”

His voice, mad sincere.  
Every part of me  
digested that convo.  
(right along with them slimy-ass tomatoes)

And I got it.  
All of it.  
I wished you and Ma could get it, too.

## CLOSE TO MIDNIGHT

Dali finally came in the studio,  
eyes barely open,  
yawning on repeat.

“We should get going,” I said,  
grabbing my pink backpack,  
pupils widening at the memory  
of what I’d done behind Merc’s back.  
The voice inside whispering,

*That song was yours to take.*

“You guys are welcome to stay,” he said.  
“Got plenty of rooms.”

But with two hours to get back to Shohola,  
slip in the house before Tía Esme,  
staying was not an option.

Always the gentleman,  
Merc rode the elevator with us downstairs.

In the tightness of the space,  
I could feel him staring down at me,  
and then he touched my backpack.

Heartbeat in full 8-count mode  
I tried my best to smile and pretend  
like that flash drive didn’t exist.

“I’m a have to get you a new purse, baby gurl.  
Where’d you get this? Walmart?”

“Close enough!” Dali giggled.

And I didn’t know if  
I shoulda laughed or swallowed

that ball building in my throat.

“It’s my favorite,” I said.

“It’s precious, kinda like that camera of yours.”

That made Merc smile  
wide enough to cover his whole face.

The elevator doors opened,  
Dali and I rushing out.

“Hey, Denver!” Merc growled.

My feet screeched,  
whole body jolted.

“Forgetting something?”

I turned around  
to Merc’s dimply smirk,  
and me and Dali’s cell phones  
dangling from his hands.

“Oh. Yeah. Thanks.”

We grabbed those phones  
and booked it outta there.

Fast as feet could fly,  
we zoomed to the Hudson parking lot.

“Why you acting all jumpy?”

Dali huffed beside me.

“*Gurrrrrrl*, you’ll never believe what I did!”

“Oh, DO tell, amiga ...”

Soon as I did,  
there wasn’t enough horsepower  
to get us through the Lincoln Tunnel,  
down 287,  
up Route 6,  
all the way to Trails End,  
where Dali’s laptop waited  
for my flash drive,  
fully loaded with a

little,  
stolen,  
musical treasure.

A crime of petty proportions  
that we both agreed I'd never  
commit again.

## IN AUGUST,

the Shohola air  
reeked of the worst  
odor in the world:  
SCHOOL.

Any other year,  
y'all woulda spent  
the summer  
up my ass  
telling me to study,  
read,  
hired private tutors  
to get my whole life together.

But that summer  
was when both of y'all  
took the lazy route,  
checked in for like five seconds,  
then checked all the way

O  
U  
T

Focus shifted to  
trying to seal up the cracks,  
Krazy Glue your faces  
into a permanent  
“Everything is all right” smile.  
When it wasn't.

'Cause for y'all  
the world—aka the folks back home—  
was watching,  
waiting  
for the too-good-for-the-hood

Lafleurs  
to go tumbling  
d

o  
w  
n .

## MONDAY, AUGUST 5

Soon as we wrapped up a session,  
Merc hit us with this piece of gold:  
“Y’all should come on the road with me.”

“You mean like to your concerts and stuff?”  
Dali couldn’t hold in the excitement.

“Concerts, video shoots, all of it.  
And you could stay in Atlanta  
—that’s the hot spot for artists.  
I’d set y’all up real nice,  
with your own space in the crib.”

Sneaking out  
all summer  
turned out to  
be easy enough.  
(epic showdown with the Browns aside)

In bed before the sun rose,  
before anyone noticed or cared  
that we had been out all night.

But this?  
This was different.

As in,  
let’s-run-away-from-home  
and-pray-y’all-won’t-kill-us  
different.

Then again,  
you knew a lil’ sumthin-sumthin  
'bout running away, too,  
didn’t you, Papi?

## FOUR THINGS I LOVED ABOUT WORKING WITH MERC

1. The music—three songs down, two more to go, to finish our demo before he'd shop it to record labels
2. The education—better than anything I'd ever get at school
3. The gifts—dude kept us stacked with the freshest kicks, jewelry, and clothes
4. The dream—that I got to live out with Dali at my side

Four things I hated:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

(nothing)

## NEW SONG TITLE: SECURITY

Written by ~~Denver Laffeur~~ Sean "Mercury" Ellis

Verse:

*Been wanting this for a long time  
Gonna take my chance  
I'm done with pretending,  
it's time to start mending  
the heart  
you tore apart*

*All good, 'cause I'm secure now  
I gotta go ...*

Chorus:

*It's time to leave  
I know it's hard to believe  
Don't be scared for me  
'Cause I got security*

*A place to go that's all mine  
cash money on flow  
Ya little girl will be fine*

*Day & night  
'cause I got security (security)*

## WE FINALLY

wrapped up recording my new song.  
Once again, Merc didn't change the lyrics.  
Just slapped his name on the credits,  
'cause according to our contract,  
that was "standard practice."

"In this industry,  
new peeps get no love,  
until they get a stamp of approval  
from someone big like me."

Soon enough though  
Merc promised my name would be on  
ev-er-ee-thang we put out!

And I wouldn't have to sneak  
to download my work,  
and live with the guilt of doing so.

All I had to do was prove myself  
as an artist,  
worthy and true.

I knew my time was coming.  
For real, for real.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 8

In a perfect world

I would have controlled time.  
It moved too fast,  
raced parallel to my thoughts,  
crashing into decisions,  
scenarios,  
the endless  
what-if?

Like ...

What if me and Dali could convince y'all to let us go?  
(Instead of us just dipping off?)  
What woulda happened if y'all said no?  
Would Merc forget about us, and find the next best thing?  
'Cause like he said,  
every  
body  
is replaceable.

Those questions

percolated in our minds  
as we did the math of how long we had to act.  
Thirteen days before torture school started  
Soon enough, Merc would hit the road—  
whether we rolled or not.

The verdict was in:  
Dali and I couldn't let that happen.

## BUT FIRST

we needed a plan,  
a proper way to say  
goodbye.

Of course, I figured it out,  
told Merc about it  
right before we wrapped up  
in the studio.

“Oh, baby gurl, that’s perfect.”  
Merc whipped out his phone,  
started pressing buttons like mad.

“What’re you doing?”  
Dali tried to peek over his shoulder,  
but he pulled away,  
big grin slapped on his face.

“Chill, Say Say.  
Just a little something  
to put that plan in effect.  
You’ll see when you get your phones  
on the way out.” He winked, walked down the hall,  
and disappeared behind one  
of the doors.

Meat escorted us to the first floor,  
where Marissa waited,  
our Androids in each hand.

“Safe travels home,”  
she muttered and then clicked the buzzer.

We headed outside,  
frozen in August heat,  
among hustling,  
bustling New York streets,

and waited for our phones to turn on,  
notifications ringing in perfect unison:  
A \$1,500 deposit from Cash App!

An email in our inboxes:  
Two tickets to Atlanta  
FIRST class!  
“OMGOMGOMG!”  
we screamed  
loud enough to pierce  
a hole through the sky.

Jumped up and down,  
tilted our heads to the sun.  
Ten floors above  
Merc stood,  
half his body  
dangling out the window.

“How’s that for a plan?”  
his voice thunder-  
bolted city streets.

“Thank you, papi-i-i-i!”  
Dali sang that last bit  
full-chest voice,  
jazz scat  
rich enough to  
make Ella Fitzgerald  
rise from the dead.

If my  
feet could  
grow wings,  
I woulda  
flew up there,  
squeezed  
the hell outta  
Merc  
till he couldn’t

breathe.

Of course  
he went all out for us,  
the next stars in his universe.  
Merc wouldn't have it  
any other way.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 10

Goodbyes

were permanent.

But *see you soon?*

Well, that  
sounded better,  
hopeful,  
something to cling on to.

## IN THE LITTLE BROWN TRAILER

on Chickasaw Lane,  
\$1,500  
perfectly placed  
on Tía Esme's altar,  
like a palm tree,  
a fan, of sorts,  
to cool the words  
written  
in the language  
of love,  
ink bleeding slowly  
on the paper beneath it.

*Querida Mami,  
Un regalo, para ti.  
Con amor,  
Dalisay*

I took the tips of my fingers,  
ran them through Dali's hair,  
making music out of it,  
like a harp,  
woven down  
chin,  
shoulder,  
arm,  
hand.

“We could stay, if you want.”

“No.  
Mami will be happy for the gift.  
There's more coming,  
Merc will make sure of it.”

Backpack gripped  
on stiff shoulders,  
Dali slid the trailer door shut,  
and didn't look back.

MEANWHILE,

on a granite countertop  
on Winding Brook Road ...  
there sat

A VASE  
filled with calla lilies.  
(Ma's favorite)

A REPORT  
of my online summer school GPA  
—3.06—not bad, right?  
and

A LETTER  
written to you both

*Dear Ma and Papi,  
I'll make you proud. You'll see.  
Denver*

I left that \$1,500 right in my possession,  
because let's be honest,  
did y'all even need it?

Tossed our luggage in the trunk  
of my Honda Civic,  
stuck the key in the ignition,  
and before I pulled off,  
whipped out my phone.

**AUGUST 10, 8:59 A.M.**

**Me:** Sis, hope the offer still stands. Me and Dali are on our way.

**Gwen:** OMG are you serious? Yay!

**Me:** But I got a secret and I'ma need you to keep it.

**Gwen:** You mean from Detective Ma? LOL! What is it?

**Me:** Tell you when I get there. You owe me this one.

**Gwen:** I know. DON'T REMIND ME. Geez!

**Me:** See you in a few hours. 

## HIDDEN DEEP

beneath the 4.0 GPA,  
the scholarships,  
clubs,  
sports,  
teams,

there once lived  
a sister with a secret  
of her own.

A classic high school tale  
of boy meets girl.

Chandler Pierce:  
Captain of the football team  
with the river-green eyes  
that turned chicks  
into human puddles of  
omg-he's-so-frigg'n-hawt!

Gwen Lafleur:  
Valedictorian by day,  
Chandler's brown little boo thang by night

A love (lust?)  
tended to  
beneath dark skies  
where no one else could see

And by no one,  
I mean Chandler's  
Confederate-flag-waving parents.

And you, Papi, with your  
"no dating until twenty-five"  
and "don't even THINK  
about bringing no white boy home"

policies.

## REAL LOVE LOOKED LIKE . . .

Hands on belly, brimming with heat  
both hearts taking turns to beat  
A longing look that begged

What if we're making the wrong decision?  
What if we keep it? (her?) (him?)

Real love looked like  
soft tissues mopping up  
falling tears

waiting for the nurse  
to call out:

*Patient Gwendolyn Lafleur?*  
*Right this way.*

Chandler wasn't there for none of that ...  
but I was.

304.8 MILES LATER,

Dartmouth College was ...

Too green

Too rich

Too smart

Too quiet

Too

CORNY

for

my

Black

ass!

## DARTMOUTH WAS ALSO

a reminder  
of all that you and Ma  
had ever dreamed for us.

You both went there,  
so you expected us to do  
the same.

Gwen followed in your footsteps.  
As for me?  
Well, I never been one for tradition.  
(but you knew that, didn't you?)

When receiving a hug  
from a sister you  
hadn't seen in months,  
it was best to  
lower expectations  
of breathing.

"I can't WAIT to show you guys around!"  
Gwen peeped.

Our campus tour  
was a stretch of:

Collis Center  
The Hop  
Leede Arena  
Baker-Berry Library  
and the Organic Farm  
where they made homemade pizza.

In other words,  
the tour was a big yawnfest.  
Pizza was bangin' tho.

“Bet you two  
want to apply here now!”

I almost spat my food out laughing.

“Nah, we wanna see the world,” Dali reminded Gwen.

“But you can,  
which is why I’m  
studying abroad  
in Paris starting next month.  
Putting our French to work, Denny!”

See what I mean?  
Perfect. Freak’n. Daughter ...

Three amigas  
sprawled out on the grass  
in front of Dartmouth Hall,  
pepperoni wasted.

Sun hidden within clouds,  
a breezy battle of  
heat and cool.

“So tell me, guys.  
What’s the big secret?  
I can’t wait a second longer ...”

## MY FOUR FAVORITE REACTIONS

1. Damn girl! You waited this long to tell me THAT?
2. PLEASE take me with you!
3. Wait. They don't know? You want me to tell them WHAT?
4. Girl, Ma and Papi are gonna KILL you something good.

**AUGUST 10, 5:03 P.M.**

**Gwen:** Attention parental units: Denny and Dali came up for a college tour! They'll stay on campus with me for a week-ish.

**Papi:** Bon nouvel! Good news! Best way to celebrate your birthday, Denver!

**Ma:** THANK YOU FOR THE NOTE, REPORT CARD, & FLOWERS. PROUD OF YOU, DENVER!!! EDUCATION FIRST. MUSIC CAN WAIT. PRIORITIES!

**Me:** Don't worry. I'm finally getting my priorities straight. Wishing the same for us all.

**Ma:** ???

**Me:** Love y'all.

SUNDAY, AUGUST 11

A promise is a promise

The next morning,  
I placed my car keys in Gwen's hand,  
she held on to mine two seconds  
too long,  
staring me down  
with those begging brown eyes.  
"You sure about this?"  
I'd never been so sure in my life.

"You just better be the first one  
to pump the hell out of our  
music when it drops!"

"Consider it done."

Our private car pulled up—  
a white Cadillac Escalade stretch limo—

The driver grabbed our bags.  
Gwen folded me and Dali in her arms.

"Be safe.  
And, Denny? Happy (early) birthday."

We hopped in the limo  
and made our way to  
Manchester airport.

Phone on mute  
because nothing else  
mattered at that point.

Eyes to the sky.  
I knew I'd be up there soon.

## IT WAS VIP FROM JUMP

the second we arrived:

*Miss Lafleur,*

*Miss Gómez,*

*follow us!*

The airport greeters took our bags,  
zipped us through check-in,  
security, and straight to the lounge.

Leather recliner seats  
Floor-to-ceiling windows  
A full view of the runway  
First-class seats on the plane

“A bon voyage drink,  
compliments of Mr. Ellis,”  
the waiter said.

Merc had magic like that.  
He wasn't even there  
and he was taking care of us!

I took a slow sip,  
let the alcohol-free  
coolness work its way down.

Wished it was something harder  
to wash away the small piece  
of doubt that still remained.

Taking a deep breath,  
I closed my eyes.  
Dreamt of the future,  
thinking of the past.

Like that summer of eighth grade.

A sky full of stars,



## SPEAKING OF WORDS,

it was only right  
to try one last time  
to fill the empty spaces  
with hope.

Dali's request.

One final group text,  
one last attempt  
to let Shak know  
that no matter what happened  
in the past  
that wouldn't change the fact  
that together we built  
memories  
to last us our whole lives.

**AUGUST 11, 9:11 A.M.**

**Me:** Shak, it's been too long. We love you. And miss you.

**Dali:** And we forgive you, too.

**Me:** Hope you can forgive us one day?

**Dali:** We're leaving for a little while.

**Shak:** Before y'all do something stupid, tell me one thing. How well do y'all know Merc?

**Dali:** Umm ... very.

**Shak:** <https://thedailygossip.com/parent-claims-merc-holding-daughter-captive>

# AUGUST 10

Written By: The Daily Gossip Staff

## **PARENTS CLAIM SEAN “MERCURY” ELLIS IS HOLDING DAUGHTER CAPTIVE**

During his 24-year career, Sean “Mercury” Ellis has sold nearly 50 million albums.

But it wasn’t always this way. Born in the inner city of Crenshaw, California, Ellis was raised in a single-parent home with seven siblings. Poverty and gangs plagued Ellis’s childhood. His mother raised him and his siblings in the church, where he honed his vocal and instrumental skills. At the age of fifteen, his soul-stirring performance on Showtime at the Apollo resulted in a production deal with Vibe Records. The rest, as they say, is history. Five Grammy awards, two Billboards, and a whopping seven American Music Awards.

But the cost of fame is high. In 2006, a videotape was discovered that allegedly featured Ellis and an unnamed minor engaging in sexual activity. The case, which took three years to go to trial, resulted in Ellis being acquitted of the charges because there was no evidence or testimony to verify that it was indeed him on the tape. This, however, did not derail his career. Instead, the case and dropped charges made him more successful in the R&B/hip-hop community.

Since then, Ellis has been hailed as a savior of sorts, having been responsible for the rise of such popular artists as Lil’ Mega and Shades of Black. Collaborations with megastars in pop and country have increased Ellis’s popularity and crossover appeal.

Now rumors are starting to swirl again. In an exclusive interview, the parents of a young woman we’ll call M allege that Ellis is holding their daughter captive.

“I haven’t seen or heard from my daughter in six years.” M’s mother claims Ellis met her daughter at a Chicago video shoot. The 19-year-old left home shortly after.

In response to the accusation, Ellis’s publicist, Raymond Markowitz III, stated, “This woman and her husband have contacted our office on two occasions threatening to sue if Mr. Ellis did not provide hush money for ‘kidnapping’ their daughter. It is unfortunate when ill-intentioned people insist on defaming an artist who adores his fans and works tirelessly to give back to his community. Perhaps that is the price of fame, but please respect Mr. Ellis’s basic right to privacy, by ignoring unfounded rumors.”

## I COMBED THROUGH EVERY WORD,

hearing that  
know-it-all sass in  
Shak's voice,  
thinking back to  
all the other times  
she was wrong about Merc.  
I wished I could press  
the mute button in my brain.

Sure he was a little strict,  
but perseverance breeds results.  
Didn't take a genius to understand that!  
And you know what?

We tried with Shak.  
Tried to do the right thing.  
Be nice.  
Make amends.

But the truth was clear as day.  
Shakira Brown was a hater.  
Guess she always had been.  
Took her  
sending me that  
lying-ass article  
to finally see it.

I couldn't wait to show Merc  
that garbage *in person!*  
He warned me  
about how  
some folks flip the script  
when you're on the come-up:  
The second they see it,

they do anything to knock you down!

I scrolled through my contact list,  
till I got to the letter S.

Mannnnn, my fingers couldn't hit  
that delete button fast enough!



## PART THREE: TAKEOFF

Monday, December 23  
Atlanta International Airport  
Time: 9:26 a.m.  
Destination: Home

ALL THOSE MONTHS AGO,

We're boarding now, Papi,  
and though we won't be  
seated together  
—you gotta step up your pilot perks, bruh—

I took off,  
only to *take off* again,  
but this time with you.

I'll spend this flight  
praying that you'll hear  
the apologies running  
through my head,  
feel the cold darkness fade  
and the light pour in,  
as I beg for a do-over.

SUNDAY, AUGUST 11

I-85 North:

I had never  
ever  
ever  
ever  
seen a highway  
THAT congested.

Dear Atlanta,  
I'm gonna need y'all to get it together!

Signed,  
Ya girl Denver

## GPS

might have been  
the biggest lie  
ever invented!

A forty-two-minute ride  
from the airport  
was really code for:  
Might as well take a two-hour NAP!

## ALPHARETTA, GEORGIA

(A Suburb of Atlanta)

home to

Tyler Perry,

Ne-Yo,

Usher,

Whitney Houston,

Merc,

and now ...

US!

In other words,

welcome to

Black Hollywood!

## IRON GATE,

tips dipped  
in 24-carat gold,  
closed tight.

Stayed that way  
till the voice  
waiting on the  
other side of that intercom  
heard the driver say:

*Denver Lee Lafleur  
and Dalisay Gómez  
have arrived for Mr. Ellis.*

The buzzer rang,  
gates opened,  
chrome wheels  
rolled against  
smooth pavement,  
snaked its way  
past sky-kissing trees,  
a pond filled with koi fish,  
basketball court to the left,  
tennis to the right,

me and Dali,  
arms linked,  
100 percent  
GEEKING OUT  
till we reached the front steps  
of the biggest house I had ever  
seen in all my life.

## MARISSA

waited at the door for us,  
my disappointment settling  
that it wasn't Merc.

She led us to a two-story foyer,  
chandelier elevated,  
each crystal  
capturing a piece of the Earth's sun.

Soon as she opened  
those puckered hot-pink lips of hers,  
the midnight of her words  
swallowed daylight whole.

“I'ma need your phones, ladies.”  
One hand out,  
the other propped on her hip.

“What for?” Dali asked.  
“Ain't like we recording right now.”

“Yeah,” I said,  
“we're actually gonna  
be staying up in this piece.  
Can't live without our phones.  
How are we supposed to call our—”

But then the sun in our universe walked in,  
muting all  
my words.

Merc had that camcorder in his hand  
finger pressing the record button in  
3 ... 2 ...  
“Welcome home, my stars!”  
His voice echoed through the first floor.

Me and Dali squealed like schoolgirls,  
ran to him  
like a father gone  
too long.

“How you like the crib?”

“Oh, it’s perfect!”

“Ditto what Dali said.”

“Wave to the camera, Say Say, baby gurl.

Do a little turn,

show ’em what you working with.

You too, Denver!

“Welcome to the journey of  
my next multiplatinum artists,  
Untouched!”

We waved and blew kisses  
to imaginary fans.

Merc stopped recording  
and handed the camcorder to Meat,  
who secured it in that duffel bag.

“Now first order of business  
I can’t have y’all  
rocking these old-ass phones—”

Marissa cut Merc off.

“I told them to give ’em up—”

Merc raised one hand,  
and like a soldier, homegirl stood at attention.

“Now, now,  
I’ma have to ease them into this.  
This is new territory for them.

See I’m ’bout to take y’all on a whole journey,  
and for starters, I’ll need your complete attention.

“All work.  
No distractions.”

Merc pulled out two boxes wrapped in  
a pretty pink-and-silver bow.

We opened them  
like two kids on Christmas day.

Two brand-new iPhones  
for us to keep with us at all times,  
which woulda been cool,  
'cept they had  
only one saved number (Merc's),  
no internet,  
NO social media,  
and a code  
only he knew to unlock  
it all when necessary.

“Come on, Merc! Why so extra?”  
I couldn't help it.  
No matter how Dali looked at me  
with those *pleasebabyplease* eyes.

The crease around  
Merc's mouth deepened.  
“Never forget, baby gurl,  
distractions breed failure.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.”  
Shoulders went in full slump mode.

I mean, I got it.  
Didn't mean I wanted to.

When it came to Merc's plan  
to get us to the top,  
Dali and I agreed there'd be

no clapback,  
no compromise,  
just a nod  
and a yes

to give in  
to his  
every demand—  
no matter how bad  
~~we~~ I felt like popping off  
at the mouth.

Because with an opportunity  
of a lifetime  
staring me in the face,  
what other choice did I have?

Give up (and break my promise to Dali) ...  
or *lean* in? (and make my wildest dream a reality)

Uhhh-hmmm.  
EXACTLY!

I may not have liked  
that whole no-technology  
caveman living,  
but the next part  
made up for it ...

Sort of.

BEHOLD!

A walking tour through Merc's castle,  
just me and Merc,  
while Marissa took Dali godknowswhere:

Indoor swimming pool

Gym

Sauna

A never-ending  
freaking Wonderland ...

Barbershop

Salon

And then,

upstairs,

a ~~little~~ big palace ...

## WALLS

painted black  
rhinestones scattered  
to offset the darkness.

Windows dressed  
in thick velvet curtains,  
a bed fit for a queen  
tucked in the  
deepest corner of the room

A Gibson Montana Hummingbird  
on top of the bed.

Next to the guitar, two journals  
each one labeled: FOR YOU.  
Inside inscribed:

*A place to hold  
lyrics waiting  
to turn to gold.*

*Your biggest fan,  
Merc*

“Wow, thank you, Merc.  
I can’t believe you got this for us.”

“Us? No. Just you.  
This room and everything in it  
is only for you.”

I looked around the large space,  
feeling hella small.

“But what about Dali—”

Merc grabbed me by both hands.

“Baby gurl, you are a genius in the making.  
I need you focused, separate. Say Say’s talented and all,

but you? You're the real star. She'll catch up ... eventually."

I felt a burn incinerate my whole chest.

*Was that a compliment?*

But most of all ... *did I like it?* (yes. wait, no. right?)

Merc snapped his fingers.

"Enough about that! Take a look around your master suite!"

In the hall, leading to  
my bathroom,  
a walk-in closet,  
full of designer clothes,  
(why did I even pack?)  
shoes, jewelry,  
everything I was gonna need.

A spa-like bathroom,  
white marble soaking tub  
to the right,  
walk-in shower  
with twelve jets  
to the left.

And in the center of the floor,  
a digital scale  
staring back at me.

"Baby gurl

It's not that you're fat ...  
It's not that you're skinny ...  
It's just that you're ..."

*A lot?*

Those last words didn't come out of Merc's mouth,  
but I saw them in his eyes.

Once upon a time,  
he called me *strong*.

“Don’t worry,  
I got you a trainer  
and errthang.  
We gonna get you *tight!*”

Merc tapped  
my shoulder,  
turned his back,  
and headed out of my suite.

Two feet,  
quick step on the scale.  
The numbers  
flashed bold and blue  
on the screen.

I folded myself  
arms to gut,  
caught up to Merc in the hall,  
pressed down those feelings,  
(of too muchness?)  
whispered to myself ...  
*Just a little off the top, right?*  
*How hard can it be?*

Speaking of feelings

Moving in with Merc  
*felt* like  
some kind of  
reality show  
where the most disciplined,  
most focused  
ended up the winner.  
Grand prize!

Set for life!

Which wasn't far off  
from how things were  
for the Lafleurs back home ...  
that whole #workhard #teamosleep  
philosophy instilled since birth.

So if hard work was what  
it was gonna take  
to make it to the top,  
then that's exactly what  
I'd serve up.

Black girl:  
mixed with grit,  
stardust,  
spice,  
magic.

## DALI'S ROOM

was on the opposite end of that  
big ole castle of a house.

I would  
tell you what it looked like  
if only I was allowed in it.

## BACK IN THE MAIN HALL,

we sat on plush sofa chairs,  
in front of a huge bow window  
overlooking peach trees.

An older lady,  
dressed in a full-on maid uniform,  
brought us glasses  
of something bubbly.

“Thank you, Ms.... what’s your name?”  
I asked, but she didn’t even  
make eye contact, nor did she respond.  
Just propped up the serving tray  
and hurried back to the kitchen.

*Well, alrighty, then.*

Dali nudged me in my side.

“Show him, muchacha.”

I asked Merc  
if I could use the internet,  
like a goddamned kindergartner.

Marissa passed me a tablet,  
I pulled up the link,  
and handed it to Merc.

He squinted his eyes,  
stretched the tablet back ...  
“Tell me what it says, Denver.”

The whole room

Merc

Meat

Marissa

Dali

went silent,  
lips sealed,  
eyes open,  
ears tuned in

as I read  
the fiery words  
of that article Shak sent.

“Captive?” Merc said.

I couldn’t tell if  
that was a question  
or flame.

Merc couldn’t hold  
it any longer.  
Laughter poured out  
like a rushing river,  
lampshades trembled  
with each stomp of his foot.  
Meat and Marissa  
joined in like a chorus.

“Baby gurl ... Say Say ...”  
Merc hunched over,  
drowning in his own laughter,  
extended a finger.

“I’d like for you to meet M.”

Marissa waved at us,  
a smile  
big enough  
to clear furniture  
out the room.

## THREE THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW

(according to Marissa)

1. Does it look like I'm being held captive? Or a whole-ass woman with a job?
2. Never read (or believe) the media. It's all FAKE NEWS.
3. My parents are batshit crazy, which is why I left in the first place.

And honestly,  
I was so relieved  
I coulda laughed and cried  
at the same damn time.

But not Dali.  
She had this look  
painted on her face.

“So ... you used to sing? Not anymore?”  
Dali's eyes shifted from Marissa to Merc,  
lightning speed.

“Turns out it wasn't meant to be.  
Not everybody's cut out for fame.  
I'm good on the business end.”  
Marissa winked at Merc, brushing her hand  
on his knee.

“Well ... you're happy, right?”  
Dali whispered, so soft  
I almost missed it.

But Marissa bolted up from the sofa,  
leaving Dali's question  
hovering in the air.

“Follow me, girls. Merc's got something to show you.”

**"SURPRISE!!! HAPPY BIRTHDAY, DENVER!"**

a crowd of cheering people shouted  
soon as we reached the patio  
decorated with  
balloons,  
streamers,  
confetti,  
cake,  
presents,  
the WORKS!

I scanned the faces  
in the crowd,  
most unfamiliar,  
but some definitely not ...  
like  
Lil' Mega  
and  
DJ Syncere  
and  
every! single! member!  
of B-Unit!

A party  
of epic proportions  
with the stars!

I ugly-cried,  
Dali jump-hugging me,  
eyes all glistening.

"You knew about this, Dali?  
But my birthday isn't until—"

"Tomorrow?" Merc said, hugging both of us,  
Papa-bear style.

And for a moment,  
I ached for family, for home,  
until I remembered how empty it we were  
for so long.

“Don’t worry, Denver, you ain’t seen nothing yet.”

## STAR TREATMENT MEANT

sipping champagne  
with celebrities  
to celebrate  
the arrival,  
the unfurling,  
of  
US,  
the adulating  
of  
ME.

Fine cuisine,  
hip-hop,  
R&B,  
OUR SONGS(!!!)  
blasting,  
me and Dali  
losing our freaking minds!

Sun setting,  
moon creeping,  
mind made up  
I was NEVER going back to Shohola,  
drowned my whole self  
in spirits of every color:

one shot  
two shots  
three shots  
FLOOR!

## DAY TWO, MY ACTUAL BIRTHDAY

Head spinning,  
sun blinding,  
pain building,  
gut releasing,

every!  
single!  
thing!

my lips had touched  
the night before.

(no monster period that time tho)  
(and also ... no Dali)

ELEVEN P.M.

I tossed and turned,  
in the dark,  
loneliness and  
dreams taking root.

I saw myself,  
so clear,  
two feet planted on the floor,  
rushing out the door,  
dashing down the hall

The walls were long  
winding,  
bending,  
emotions sending  
me on a  
tailspin

I grasped at each doorknob,  
door after door,  
each one  
locked, locked, locked  
some more

It was too dark,  
too quiet back in that massive suite  
and I needed someone,  
anyone,  
a taste of home.

A ghost appeared  
a transparent image  
that morphed into  
a mindfuck on repeat  
First Ma  
then Shak



walking us both forward,  
leaving my question unanswered.

We reached my door.

“Merc wants you focused, Denver.

So try and rest. He’s got a lotta  
plans for you coming up. You’ll see him in a few days.”

“Days?” My throat felt raw.

“Where is he? Is Dali with him?

Answer me!”

But he didn’t.

He closed my door, locked it with a key, and whispered, “I’m sorry.”

That’s when I knew I wasn’t dreaming at all.

## ONCE UPON A BIRTHDAY,

there was  
cake (red velvet)  
and candles (ages 1–9)  
and  
family  
and  
kompa music  
and careers on pause  
least for that day,  
sometimes longer.

But that all stopped  
many moons ago,  
leaving me  
to start traditions of my own,  
with my girls.

Tonight brought me back  
to the memory  
of forgotten birthdays.

No need  
for codes to  
unlock phones,  
to check for texts, calls,  
a message or two,  
because  
time told the real truth

Pretty sure I stopped mattering  
to y'all  
a long time ago.

Yet, other thoughts  
arose, unshakable:

*Was this the surprise Merc had for me?  
Birthday turnup with a side of isolation?*

*Did Dali forget about me, too?*

I undressed myself in the bathroom,  
tried to rinse it all off  
but there wasn't enough  
soap in the world  
to wash away  
the questions  
that remained  
three layers deep  
beneath my skin.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 13

Day Three: Makeover

Before the sun  
kissed the sky,  
Marissa tapped on  
my bedroom door.

“Rise and shine, Denver.”  
Her voice,  
surprisingly syrupy sweet.

“Is Merc back yet? I need to talk to him!  
What’s with Meat locking my door? And where’s Dali?”  
I hated how desperate I sounded.

“You’ll see everyone soon enough.  
Merc really wants you working hard  
on yourself. Even if that means staying in your room.  
Separation breeds focus, remember?  
Now get up, let’s get you all the way  
together. Starting with this tragedy ...”

Marissa grabbed a thick chunk  
of my hair,  
grimacing when her fingers got stuck  
halfway through.

“This needs work, sis! Get dressed and meet  
me in the salon in ten.”  
And then she bounced.

Two hours later ...

Every hair follicle,  
from the crown to the kitchen,  
Marissa braided into submission  
hella-long extensions,

all silky-n-smooth,  
stared at my reflection,  
like  
*New hair,*  
*who dis?*

When she was all done,  
Marissa snapped her fingers.  
“Yas! Now this, honey, is a *lewk!*”  
I liked it and all.  
Woulda liked it better if Dali was there to see it.

## TEXTS ON MY OLD PHONE I DIDN'T SEE

**August 14, 3:01 a.m.**

**Gwen:** Ma and Papi called on your birthday and the next night, too. What's our next move?

**Gwen:** Denny, you there?

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 14

Day Four: still no Dali

But there was this ...

A six a.m.,  
Listerine-spiced  
SHOUT:

“Wake up, superstar!”  
Merc hovered over me,  
jolting me outta my sleep  
and I just about tackled him to the floor.  
“Looks like somebody missed me,” he said.

And I hit him with questions, rapid fire.  
“How come I haven’t seen Dali?  
Or much of you, for that matter?  
Why aren’t we recording music?”

“Whoa, slow down! Say Say’s fine.  
I just took her on a little trip is all.”

And something about that felt like,  
I don’t know ... ~~a threat?~~ A game.

“Without me? Where? Why?”  
Each question a siren, sounding off  
inside of me.

Merc threw some extra honey in his voice.  
“I’ll let you see her soon, but first, put this on.”

Then he handed me a pair of Nikes, some yoga pants,  
and a T-shirt.

“Come downstairs. I got somebody I want you to meet.”

## AHMED RAKIM:

cut-up,  
ripped-up,  
veined-up,  
muscle of a man,  
aka personal trainer to the stars.

Hired by  
Merc  
to mold me  
into someone  
I wouldn't recognize  
come the dawn  
of the New Year.

His words,  
not mine.

## GREEN GRASS

stretched to  
the end of  
God-knows-where.

Trees hovered.  
Sun hid.  
Nikes laced tight.  
I hadn't been outside in days.

"It's so quiet out here," I said  
to Ahmed.

"Better be.  
Merc's nearest neighbor  
is over a mile away."

Geez.  
And I thought our crib  
in Shohola was bad!

Ahmed blew his whistle.  
"Buckle up, Denver.  
Time to put in that work."

Merc winked at me  
and then disappeared  
inside the house.

## WANNA KNOW WHAT PAIN IS?

Pain is ...

running the entirety  
of Merc's campus-sized  
grounds,  
not once,  
but twice  
while Ahmed drill-sergeant-yelled,  
and Meat hung in the shadows,  
half watching,  
half glued to his phone.

Pain is ...  
pushing,  
grunting,  
while picturing yourself  
singing for thousands of fans

Pain is ...

squatting  
through muscles  
hidden beneath  
cushions of the flesh  
that needed  
smoothing out ...

a few pounds  
here,  
a few inches there  
to snatch the  
lady lumps

to a size  
suitable  
for TV,  
magazines,

the  
WORLD.

Did I like it?

Negative.

I call bullshit on the whole  
notion that less is best.

But if having a certain type of body  
was gonna make my voice heard,  
then I had to make it do what it do.

## ALL MY LIFE

I'd been told a  
thing or two  
'bout this body—  
too thick for Shohola guys,  
just right for Caribbean eyes—

See 'cause where  
my people came from,  
big bodies  
on small islands  
were a stamp of wealth,  
prosperity,  
success

But to level up to that grand stage  
it's funny how I had to shed  
parts of myself,  
school,  
    family,  
    friends,  
and now this body.

A loss for a win,  
of sorts,  
the cost of fame  
was expensive AF.

And I'd only just begun  
paying off my debts.

## LIFE AT CASA DE MERCURY

became a ~~endless~~  
~~repetitive~~  
necessary routine  
of six a.m. workouts

nasty-ass,  
bland-ass  
egg whites,  
turkey burgers,  
spinach

served by silent employees  
—a new one, each time—  
who wouldn't even look me in the eye

Me eating meals by my damn self,  
or worse, with Marissa hovering

And sometimes ...  
No food at all.

No songs recorded,  
no beats swimming through  
headphoned ears.

Only new lyrics written,  
guitar chords played  
in the corner of my room.

And still NO DALI.

## MORE QUESTIONS

“Are you playing some sick game  
that I can’t see Dali or record  
until I fit some kinda model image?”

“When can I call my sister?  
My parents?”

“Because  
when they figure out  
I’m *gone gone*,  
they gonna beat my ass.  
Twice.”

Responses

“It’s important that we’re careful how  
we reach out to your folks.  
And you’ve done so good, baby gurl,  
being patient and disciplined.  
How ’bout tonight we  
finally make some magic?”

Those words tumbled  
off Merc’s lips like sap  
slow-rolling  
down the bark of a tree.

**TEXT FROM MY OLD PHONE I DIDN'T SEE**

**August 20, 8:48 p.m.**

**Gwen:** Denny, call me ASAP. THEY KNOW.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 20

Finally!

Merc brought Dali to my suite.

A reunion that  
started with  
a laugh, a hug,  
a lift, a burst  
of home.

“Don’t ever leave me like that again!”  
And I said that with one eye on Dali, the other  
aimed at Merc. “Where have you been?”

“Château Élan.”

Dali spoke in a fake-ass  
French accent.  
Fireworks sprang in my chest.

“You left the country?” I tried to rein it in,  
but damn.

Merc laughed.

“Nah, baby gurl, it’s a resort,  
with a state-of-the-art spa,  
here in Georgia.”

But that didn’t help. One bit.  
Especially since I was here  
all this time. Alone.

“I got a makeover, like you.  
If you think my hair is short here,  
you should see the rest of me.  
I have, like, zero body hair now.” She giggled.  
“Oh, and I got my teeth done.  
See? Ta dah!” Dali flashed  
a braceless grill.

Dali's hair,  
once cascading  
like dark waterfalls down her back,  
now barely touched  
the tips of her ears

A spiky,  
choppy,  
badass  
blond of a girl,  
complete  
with a silver ball  
pierced through  
a swollen tongue—  
that had never  
existed before.

“You stayed there? At the resort?”

“Well ... yeah.”

“Together?”

“Whoa!” Merc cut in  
before she could answer.  
“Slow down, baby gurl.  
No, not at all.”

Dali and I stood,  
eyes locked on each other,  
pieces of us both  
slowly drifting,  
changing.  
“Look at *your* hair.”  
Dali ran her fingers through it.

“So pretty!”

Merc coughed.  
“Should I leave or something?”

And I swear, right there,  
I wanted to kick Merc out my room  
and lock the door.

Instead, Dali laughed it off,  
like that look and that touch  
didn't even matter.

This is the spell Dali cast on me:  
the ability to drink me in,  
and spill me out at will.

I'd played her game  
for years,  
but a tiny voice inside wondered  
*Is she the only one playing me?*

## ALL SINGING GROUPS HAD

A look ...  
Unforgettable

“I’m just trying to get you two to *look* like a unit.”  
Merc grazed his hand across my waist.  
“See, baby gurl, you’re getting there. Keep it up!”

A sound ...  
Iconic

“When I’m done with you, folks will be calling  
Untouched living LEGENDS!”

And speaking of sound ...  
The time had come to work on ours.

“Say Say, Baby Gurl,  
I wrote a new joint for y’all.  
Now let’s put in that work!”

Relief  
washed over me.

She was back.  
So was he.  
And together, that felt like

H  
O  
M  
E

I think.

BOMB!

Really, I couldn't think  
of any other way  
to describe Merc's studio.  
You would've loved it, Papi!

State-of-the-art  
keyboards,  
mics,  
soundproof walls,  
digital converters,  
amps ...

a secret,  
hidden  
paradise  
to sing ...

“Alone.”

I felt the whole planet  
pause on its axis when he said that.

“If Denver records by herself,  
then where do I come in?”

But Merc ignored Dali's question.  
Just pointed a wordless finger  
at the black leather couch.

Handed me a sheet of lyrics,  
had Meat lead me to the booth  
empty,  
confused ...  
solo.

## WHAT BECOMES

of a voice  
muted  
far too long?

I'll tell you what ...

mine turned into spiced air.

A welcome blend  
of hushed tones,  
belted riffs  
over C minor chords,  
blasting through  
glass enclosures  
soaring,  
floating,  
landing  
next to

two brown eyes  
that refused  
to connect with my own.

Two takes

was all it took  
to record "Just Breathe."

And Dali refused  
to look at me the entire time.

"That's a wrap!  
Did you hear that, Say Say?  
That sound that came out  
of Denver?  
New?"

Fresh?  
Hungry?

You ain't hungry enough.  
Yet."

I left the booth,  
joined Dali on the couch,  
whispering, "Olive juice. Next time."

She pulled away and whispered back,  
"It's all good."  
(Was it though?)

Our (my?) session ended  
in a reward—for both of us—  
though I'm not sure you could call it that.  
Because we both knew what was waiting  
on the other end of the receiver  
was anything but a prize.

CALL #1, AUGUST 20, 8:49 P.M.

Subject: Tía Esme  
Dominican aunties be like:

“¡Muchacha de mierda!  
Tú te estás volviendo loca, eh?!  
¡Coño!”

With a side of:

“Cuídate.  
Te quiero.  
Mi amor, I don't want to stop you from your dreams.”

And a promise from Dali to put out the fire:

“I'll be careful. I love you, too, Mami.”

CALL #2, AUGUST 20, 9:07 P.M.

Subject: Ma and Papi  
(yelled in the key of WTF)

“Where the HELL are you, Denver?  
And don’t lie because we already  
spoke to Shak and Gwen!”

UGH!

Traitors, número uno and dos.  
But was it wrong that I smiled through the threats?  
Was it wrong I was happy that ...

Y’all were home.

Together.

For once.

Missing ME?

You didn’t see it yet,  
but my leaving,  
my journey,  
had already started to fix us.  
But my words meant nothing, apparently.

You:

“If you’re not home by tomorrow night,  
I’m calling the cops on that sick pervert  
for kidnapping you.”

Ma:

“It’s gonna get ugly real fast, Denver.”

Me:

“Kidnapping? Dramatic much?  
He’s a musician, Papi, like—”

But YOU hung up,  
leaving my words

harmonizing with the dial tone.

“Can they do that?” I asked.

According to Merc, y’all *could try*.

But it wouldn’t do much.

Because

his lawyer told him that

WE chose to leave home.

Merc didn’t force us (true)

And he didn’t threaten us (also true)

Plus, we were FINE!

So, it was all good.

Not everyone needed to be

close to their family ...

or their friends.

Success came with sacrifice,

just like Merc said.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 21, 6:24 A.M.

Weight: 8 lbs down

Breakfast: Roasted oxygen

Today's workout with Ahmed: Cardio (aka hell)

    Around the big brick house

on Pristine Road,  
Ahmed and I jogged

and I thought about Dali,  
like always

Same house and yet  
two different corners  
of the world

I ran past  
a pond  
with some ducks,

a green forest  
full of blood flowers,

a row of trees bearing  
red-cheeked fruit,  
and behind it,

a metal gate  
with a big ole hole ...  
begging for repair.

And for a split second,  
I pictured myself  
running through it,  
if for nothing else  
to see what existed outside  
La Casa de Merc,  
the place I'd been trapped in all month.

But who was I kidding?  
Everything one I needed  
was right in that house.

Ahmed thought otherwise though.  
“There’s a whole world of opportunities  
outside of this place,  
but I’ll take what I can get ... for now.”  
He winked.  
But I just rolled my eyes.  
I didn’t have time for small thinking.  
Not then, not ever.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 22

Eleven thirty p.m.

A revolving swirl  
of red and blue  
poured through my window,  
awakening me  
from my sleep.

A call from Merc on my phone:

“Get dressed.  
Grab your wallet.  
Meet me downstairs.  
Put a smile on your face.”

There was  
a double-entry  
set of steps,  
each leading  
to a different wing of the house.

To the right,  
my wing.  
To the left,  
Dali's.

Our rooms  
separated by  
long hallways,  
bedroom doors,  
security  
guarding  
us like precious jewels.

But on that night,  
no one was up there,  
from what I could tell.

Not Marissa, not Meat,  
or any other zip-lipped servant.

We met at the top of the stairs  
before going down,  
darkness enveloping us.  
I wanted to lace my fingers in hers,  
but it was the first time I felt  
unsure of where things stood.

“Do you know what’s going on?” I whispered.

“Got no clue,” Dali whispered back,  
wrapping her arm around mine.  
“I miss you, chica. That part I know.”  
“Me too. I can barely sleep at night.”  
I stuttered over my words.

Under the cover of darkness,  
Dali pulled me in  
lips on tongue  
like ocean waves,  
crashing against the shore.

“Ay yo!” Merc screamed from below.  
“What’s taking so long?”

We released ourselves,  
walking separately down the steps  
just as Merc opened the front door.

“Officer Parsons, Atlanta Police Department.”  
One hand flashed his badge,  
the other propped on top  
of his gun belt.

“Is something wrong, sir?” Merc asked.

“Here to do a welfare check  
for Denver Lee Lafleur.  
Mind if we take a look around?”

Two policemen—

Officers Parsons and Anderson—  
stepped into the grand foyer.

Parsons, with a face of stone.  
Anderson, on the other hand,  
had the swivel neck going,  
big ole smile across his face,  
like he ain't never seen  
Swarovski crystal chandeliers before.

“We received a call from a Captain Antoine Lafleur claiming  
that you, Mr. Ellis, were holding his daughter against her  
will.”

And I was surprised for a moment  
that it was you, Papi, not Ma.  
Guess all I had to do to get your  
attention was leave, which made sense.  
You certainly had ours when you dipped off.

I realized everyone was looking at me,  
waiting for an answer.

“That’s not true!” I said. “My father is lying!”

“How old are you, miss?”

“Eighteen.”

I flashed my driver’s license,  
my entire body brimming with heat.

“Looks like you just had a birthday?”

“Yes, sir.” I nodded.

“And you are?” Parsons pointed to Dali.

But before she could answer,  
Merc whipped out our contracts:  
“These ladies are my recording artists.”  
Parsons scanned the papers,  
turned his back to Merc,  
like this wasn’t his house,  
and whispered in my face,

“Can you state with certainty  
that you are in no danger?”

“Yes, Officer.”

“And you left Pennsylvania of your own will?”

“Absolutely.

I could play you some of our music,  
if you like? We’re even going—”

Merc cleared his throat,  
eyes morphed into red lasers.

Officer Parsons’s radio beeped.

“Going to?”

“Nowhere ... Officer,” I said, staring at Merc.

Officer Parsons paused,  
as if he waited for me to say more,  
then lifted the radio to his lips,

“All clear,”

and slapped it back on his belt.

“Given Miss Lafleur’s age,  
and own admission,  
we have no cause to pursue  
further action.  
We’ll report back to the parents  
that she is safe and in good health,  
despite their wishes that she return home.”

Officer Parsons pulled  
his contact card from his back pocket  
and then handed it to me.

“In case you change your mind, young lady.”

“I won’t,” I said.

But I slipped it in my robe anyway.

Officer Parsons  
shook Merc’s hand

and headed to his car.

Anderson lingered

just enough so

Parsons didn't see

him hand Merc a

blank sheet of paper:

“Can I get your autograph for my daughters?”

## FOUR THINGS I LEARNED THAT NIGHT

1. You wanted me home.
2. But on what terms? Yours? Or mine?
3. And I wasn't sure how I felt. Happy you missed me? Disrespected? Both?
4. So because of that, I would stay in Atlanta. For me. This was my life, my dreams.

Still,  
the reality of it all  
was enough to send  
my feet flying,  
crying all the way upstairs.

## BACK IN MY ROOM,

the mirror  
reflected the whole  
mess of me  
  
satin bonnet  
sliding down  
swollen curls,  
  
white-hot tears  
against  
crimson cheeks,  
  
a tornado of a girl  
dipped in deep thought

*When would my dreams  
ever be good enough?*

A knock at my door  
“May I come in?”  
There was a tenderness in Merc’s voice,  
like soft jazz at midnight.  
“Dali thought you might  
need some company.”  
  
I didn’t want  
to be seen like that.  
Hair, face  
toe’ up,  
stained with rage.  
Bones all exposed.  
But Dali knew.  
I didn’t want to be left alone.  
  
Dali came in first,  
Merc followed.

“I’m so sorry, Denver,” Merc said.

“I know that was probably scary for you.”

He pulled us both close to him,  
our faces nestling in the cushion of his chest.

He reminded me  
to breathe through every sob.

“I went through this when I left home, too.”  
Merc handed me a bottle of water.

Slid a blue pill  
onto my nightstand.

“In case you want to take the edge off.”

But before I could do anything,  
Dali flinched next to me, and then chirped,  
“I’ll take it!” and snatched it so quick,  
popped it in her mouth  
and swallowed,  
no water needed.

“Damn girl,” I half chuckled,  
Dali’s theatrics pulling me  
out of the moment.

“Sorry.” Dali smiled sweet, more at Merc than me.  
“But tonight was just stressful.”

“That’s cool,” I said.

“I didn’t want it anyway.”

“Suit yourselves.” Merc shrugged.

“Say Say, you can stay with her  
for a few minutes, but then  
head back to your wing.”

Merc flicked the lights,  
and shut the door behind him.

I grabbed the bottle,  
gulped all of it down,

and fell into Dali's embrace.

# WATER

life-giving,  
soul-filling,  
cool,  
magic,  
washing away  
tears,  
dreams,  
fears.

Blue eye, brown eye  
part earth, part ocean  
drifted away  
arms,  
legs,  
mind  
became  
weightless

Twilight  
and memory  
turned  
endless ...

## NINTH GRADE,

cutting eighth period,  
hanging out,

hidden room  
in the school basement.

One touch,  
one kiss  
split us  
in two

“I’m not ... like that.”

And I whispered back,  
“Pffft, me neither.”

And it was true.  
Least I thought.

What was the point  
of labels anyway?

‡ We tried to forget that day,  
but trying was like  
begging the moon  
to not show its face.

## FRIDAY, AUGUST 23

My bed was empty, cold.  
Dali gone,  
disappeared in the middle of the night.

Ghosted on me  
like some kinda hookup  
gone wrong.  
Did she want to leave?

That room,  
that bed,  
never lonelier.

As I stood and walked  
to my window

Officer Parsons's card  
fell out of my robe,  
wedging itself  
in a crack of wooden floor.

Was that you again, universe?  
Some kinda sign?

The weight of my foot,  
loosening the wood even more.

Big ole  
brand-new-looking house  
with a floorboard  
like a removable puzzle piece.

I left the card right there,  
let it fall between the cracks,

went to my bathroom,  
washed away the stains of  
cops banging on the door,

the pot of trouble you and Ma  
stirred up.

I dried my face and headed out my bedroom,  
but Meat was there,  
leaning back in a chair.  
Dude was everywhere.

“Good morning, Denver.”  
He stood up soon as he saw me.  
“Ready for breakfast?”

“Bro, I’m next-level hangry.”  
We both chuckled.

I walked down the stairs,  
through the halls,  
through the kitchen  
Meat trailing my every step,  
until I reached the double doors  
that led to the patio in front of the pool.

Dali was already there  
dressed in a white robe, white towel  
wrapped around her ice-blond hair.

The maid served me my plate—  
two celery sticks and water.  
On the rocks.

I wanted to say thank you,  
but I knew she wouldn’t respond.  
It’s like Merc had a revolving assortment  
of staff, mouths on mute at all times.

Meanwhile she piled Dali’s  
and Meat’s plates with pancakes and thick bacon.

Marissa sauntered  
through the French doors,  
beckoning. “Merc, I need you for a sec.”

Soon as that man turned his back,  
Dali, smile like the devil,  
raised a finger to her lips  
darted her eyes at Meat and whispered  
*shhhhhh*

passed me a piece of salty,  
greasy, crunchy slice of heaven.  
I slid it between my lips,  
rolled my eyes all around in rapturous delight  
Meat chuckled,  
“Y’all are hilarious!”

Chewed it up hella quick  
before Merc saw

“Special announcement!” He clapped  
his way back to the patio,  
ending my bacony bliss  
in a hurried swallow.

“I think you ladies are ready  
to hit the road with me ...  
Next Saturday.”

And me and Dali LOST IT!

Jumping up and down,  
almost knocking over our food,  
hands clasped real tight.

“Omg, Dali, stage lights,  
fans screaming! We did it!”

“Together.”  
Dali folded her  
whole self into me.

“There’s just one little thing  
I have to change.”  
Merc sat back down,  
pierced his pancakes

fork and knife,  
took in a big bite.

“And, Say Say, you ain’t gonna like it,  
but it is what it is.”

## DEFINITION OF UNDERSTUDY:

As in  
Substitute

As in  
Fill-in for Denver, in case her voice needs a rest

As in  
“Maybe we’ll need your vocals, Say Say.  
We probably won’t, on this tour.  
But don’t worry ...  
I’ma keep you busy.”

Dali’s scream?

Guttural.

Her words?  
A staccato of arrows,  
    darting  
without destination.

“What about me?  
You PROMISED, Merc!”

“Be patient.  
You just need a little more practice.  
Denver’s ready ...  
    right now.”

Patio chair  
tossed to the ground.  
Meat reached for her,  
    “Calm down, Dalisay,”  
    his words, gentle,  
  
but Dali wasn’t trying to hear it.  
Bare feet stomped on pavement  
legs flew through the kitchen doors,

utensils dropped  
next to the chair,  
I chased the wind of her wings.  
“Dali, hold up!”  
I grabbed hold of her arm  
before she reached the stairs,  
her robe slipping off one shoulder,  
revealing a small blue-purple bruise.

“What happened to you?”

Dali yanked away from me  
as though my own hand was diseased.

“Hit myself on the stupid closet. It’s nothing.”

“Hey, I’ll talk to Merc.  
Convince him to let you sing.  
I don’t wanna do this without you.”

“I don’t need your favors, Denver.”

Her words left  
a trail of fire and ice  
on the steps.

There was a tightness  
working its way  
from hair follicles  
to toenails.

I did not want this.  
I did not want this.  
I did not want this.  
(Not like this.)

“She’ll get over it.”

Merc strolled in  
like World War III  
didn’t just pop off.

“You need to fix this NOW!”

I don't wanna sing without Dali!"  
I screamed straight at the  
gray dawn of Merc's eyes.

He licked his lips,  
smirk growing  
from zero to a hundred.

Veiny hands wrapped  
around my arms,  
soft at first,  
but then hard to the point  
my blood stopped flowing.

"I'm not putting in all this  
money, time, and effort  
to be dealing with Say Say's  
drama or yours!"

I yanked away  
from his hardened grip,  
the print of his fingers  
remained  
reddened  
beneath my skin.

A sudden chill  
filled that whole room.

"I'm sorry, Denver.  
I didn't mean to ..."

"Don't ever grab me like that again, Merc!"  
I choked it out, and it took all my courage  
to draw the line with the very person  
who controlled my future.

"I know. I don't know what got into me.  
I just believe in you so much.  
I want the best for you.  
We good?"

I nodded hesitantly through his honey-coated words.

“That’s my gurl.  
Now, meet me in the studio in ten.  
Need you to link up with the other background singers.  
It’s gonna be a long week.”

## SHARMAINE AND ALTHEA

powerhouse,  
church-bred,  
Atlanta-born  
voices from heaven.

Every day and night,  
we practiced background  
to all the songs in  
Merc's catalog.

We sang through  
every note,  
every harmony

Mine, folded into theirs  
like a blanket  
on a cold winter's day

But that's all we did together though.  
Sing.

And when I tried to  
strike up a convo,  
they hit me with

“Merc said we're here to work.  
Not make friends.”

Which sent a chill  
slowly growing inside

Only thing that coulda  
fixed that  
was if I had Dali  
and that skin-deep soprano  
melting right along with mine.

## SATURDAY, AUGUST 31

Weight: 13 lbs down

Breakfast: what is breakfast again?

Last workout with Ahmed before the tour: cardio, weights  
(equal parts torture and hell)

Lunch: celery, ½ can tuna, sautéed tears

The afternoon rolled in

Four tour buses waited for us  
at the edge of the driveway.

It was the first time I saw just  
how tight Merc ran his operation

Backup singers and dancers,  
all girls,  
single file in front of  
bus number four.

The band,  
all guys,  
lined up in front of the third bus.

The second bus was for the security team—  
and me.

Dali, Merc, Marissa,  
and management  
rode on the lead bus.

Without me.

It's like Merc played Ping-Pong with us:  
Who's the favorite today?

“Why can't I ride with you and Dali?”

I was all for discipline,  
but life on the road

shoulda been a little fun, no?

“We’ll swap midway through,”

Merc said.

“Gonna take some time to work on Dali’s upper register.

You want her to sing with you eventually, right?”

The doors on the bus closed in my face.

Meat told me to make myself at home.

## IN CASE YOU WERE WONDERING

what a tour bus looks like,  
picture an apartment on wheels.

Inside:

a mini kitchen,  
table with a cushioned bench  
against double windows

a row of single beds,  
six of 'em,  
each with curtains for privacy

a small bathroom  
with a small shower  
and even smaller toilet  
clearly not made  
for humans,

and in the back,  
Merc's private bedroom  
always locked  
whether he was in there or not.

## RULES OF THE BUS

Rule #1: Each crew was to remain separate—  
for focus, of course

Merc didn't need no one messing up his vibe  
That focus was what made his show  
Top notch  
The best there ever was

Rule #2: Don't nobody talk to Dali or Denver

Rule #3: annnnnnd vice versa

## SEPTEMBER

A new city each week

Nashville

Charleston

Raleigh

Richmond

Spotlights zoomed  
on Merc

Dancers grinding  
Band grooving

Me

Sharmaine

Althea

The perfect  
soprano-alto-tenor blend  
beneath  
the bass of his  
melodies

while Merc  
was center stage  
living his best life

That girl behind stage right,  
off in the shadows?

That was Dali

watching, watching, watching.

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 26

Two a.m.

Hunger pangs  
ricocheted through my ribs,  
up to my eyes, blasting  
me awake.

In the bunks around me,  
everyone  
was snoring hella loud.

Outside my window  
a crescent moon followed  
the bus down I-95.

I got up  
for the bathroom,  
ran cool water on my face,  
headed to the kitchen,  
quietly poured half a can  
of Pringles in my mouth,  
saw the blue light blinking  
laptop open, headphones attached,  
crying out

*Denver, come talk to me ...*

What was life

without checking  
email,  
Instagram,  
text messages?

Hard at first,  
easier as the weeks went by.

But that open screen  
was like dangling a steak magnet  
in front of greedy lips.

From: drlafleur@wemail.com

To: denverleexoxo@wemail.com

Cc: captainlafleur@wemail.com

September 10

Subject: Please come home, baby

Dearest Denver,

From the moment I felt your first kick inside my womb, I knew you were my special girl. Feisty. Fearless. You entered this world singing in the key of C sharp, so says your papi.

And when we laid eyes on you, all pink and wrinkly, one brown eye, one eye blue, we made a vow. To love you down to your bones. To always be there, listen, support your dreams. To allow you to spread your wings, let you love how you choose, let you make mistakes along the way.

I think we may have failed you in our promise. Papi and I understand why you left. It's not your fault. We will take some of the blame. But your "music producer" is not without fault. The way he manipulated you into leaving has left us empty.

Mr. Ellis recently sent Esme a check for \$5,000. His team contacted us as well to offer the same, but your father and I declined. We do not care about money. We care about your well-being.

It's not too late to come home, Denny.

Love,

Ma and Papi

PS: Attached is a gift from Papi.

PPS: I am worried for your mental and physical health.

## I SLIPPED THE HEADPHONES ON

and clicked play

The video opened  
and I heard Ma whisper,  
“It’s recording.”

She tried her best to hold  
the camera steady,  
zooming in on  
an image of hands  
I knew all too well

                    fingernails begging for a trim  
                    ashy-ass knuckles (you stay needing lotion, Papi)  
                    and that ebony skin.

You sat at the piano in our basement,  
the one you hadn’t touched in years

From the very first chord  
of Prelude in E Minor,  
you  
gutted me,  
broke me,  
tears warm  
and thick,  
falling in rapid succession.

The memory  
of you both  
lovingandleaving me  
on repeat,  
was enough  
to make me click  
STOP

Because that song

and that video  
were like a heavy anchor  
on the soul.

I suppose that's just  
the way Chopin (*y'all*)  
intended it to be.

## GOOGLE TOLD ME

Three things:

1. I wasn't some victim.
2. It's not like Merc kidnapped me.
3. Even if I wanted to leave, I wasn't going nowhere. Not without Dali.

I had so much more to say to y'all  
but all I could email back was:

*I am not sick.*

*I am safe, I promise.*

*Now, please, just let me live.*

## LIKE AN OLD FRIEND,

Google and I reconnected once more.  
Told me all the things  
I already knew about Merc

Superstar  
Award-winning artist  
Tour dates  
Collabos with the finest in the industry

Page after page  
of all that was right  
about the King of R&B.

It wasn't until I got  
to page sixteen  
that I stumbled on  
a clickbait site with  
that stupid article Shak sent.  
*Seriously, who even digs that far?*

My next search, Marissa Avent,  
produced an Instagram page,  
six years ago, not a single post since.  
A fresh-faced, messy-bunned Marissa,  
pressing play on her iPod,  
volume up on the instrumental track  
for Merc's "Strawberry Lipstick."

The second she opened her mouth,  
vocals set fire to my ears,  
a gut-deep blend of  
Lizzo-meets-Adele,

which begged the question ...

*Why on earth would she give up singing*

*just to be Merc's personal assistant?*

## I HEARD

a rustling coming from the bunk beds,  
a planting of feet against the floor.

I cleared my history,  
put the screen to sleep,  
and dashed to the sink,  
cup in hand  
just in time to hear

“What’re you doing up?”

It wasn’t a lie  
that I was thirsty—  
both in the literal  
and metaphorical.

Either way,  
it was enough to  
make Meat believe  
that nothing more,  
nothing less  
took place in the dark.

## SATURDAY, OCTOBER 12

Weight: 22.9 lbs down

Breakfast: we don't get down like that no mo'

Lunch: celery, tuna, crackers, air

Dinner: see lunch

Today's workout: Ain't nobody got time.

Life on the road was

practicing background vocals,  
studio time after the show  
till the wee hours of the morning,  
while Dali looked and looked and  
nothing else.

Life was me  
questioning  
the when,  
the why,  
the how much longer,  
he would do my girl like that?

Though I never spoke up.

Life was Merc  
honey-coated promising,  
capturing special moments,  
camcorder gripped in hand.

Life was shopping sprees,  
clothes and jewels and kicks  
to purchase the "forgetting"  
of who I once was.

Life was being spotted by fans,  
girls drooling at Merc's feet,  
hard eye-rolling at me and Dali

as if we were in the way.

And sometimes life was  
a nosy-ass TMZ cameraman,  
in hot pursuit  
as we walked back to the tour bus.

## A SEARING QUESTION

“Merc, what do you have  
to say about  
the recent accusation  
you are holding girls hostage?”

And you know me and my tongue  
these teeth  
this mouth  
was never afraid of unleashing the heat!

“Look around, idiot!  
Does it LOOK like any of us are hostages?  
It’s not 1821!  
You got your centuries wrong, bruh!”

Merc started laughing,  
still walking,  
but didn’t stop me,  
so I kept going.

“I swear the media tries so HARD  
to bring a Black man down!”

“I’m sorry, miss. And you are?”

“Denver.  
Half of Untouched—remember that name.”

“Lafleur?”

Legs on full stop. The whole crew, too.

“Excuse me?” I said.

“Any comment on the latest article in the *Buzz*?”

TMZ dude, paper in hand,  
reached toward me,  
too slow for Merc’s swift snatch.

Merc laughed a laugh  
that I couldn't quite read.

Part amused?  
Part shocked?

“No comment.”

Stuffed that paper in his pocket,  
climbed on the bus,  
as if those TMZ folks  
never existed.

OH, THE SHADE!!!!

But I was still standing there,  
teeth gritted,  
eyes rolling like  
*Y'all can keep it moving.*

Dali yanked me by the arm  
extinguishing the rest of the heat  
I wanted to let out,  
pulled me onto her bus,  
just in time for the driver to close the door  
and dip off.

**"AY YO, SAY SAY!**

Read that out loud for me."

Dali smoothed out the crumpled-up paper,  
cleared her throat,  
and began ...

OCTOBER 10

Written By: The Buzz Staff

**SECOND SET OF PARENTS STEP FORWARD WITH ACCUSATIONS AGAINST SEAN “MERCURY” ELLIS**

An article in the *Daily Gossip* featured an interview with parents who have asked to have their names withheld. After further investigation, it was found that the daughter is indeed safe and thriving as a valuable member of Mr. Ellis’s Merc World Productions team.

A new report has cropped up, this time from a married couple out of Shohola, Pennsylvania. Dr. and Captain Lafleur claim their 18-year-old daughter, Denver, and her best friend (name withheld) left home and dropped out of school, under Mr. Ellis’s influence.

“It is our belief that Sean Ellis has brainwashed our daughter,” Captain Lafleur tells us. “Because of that, we are worried for her safety,” the mother added.

Attempts to file kidnapping charges proved futile after Atlanta PD conducted a wellness check to verify that Ms. Lafleur was indeed safe. Ms. Lafleur left home in August to pursue her musical ambitions under Merc World Productions, and turned the legal age of eighteen shortly after her arrival. The parents claim they have not heard from their daughter since.

In response to these new allegations, a representative for Mr. Ellis stated: “The parents of both girls signed contracts, allowing Mr. Ellis to take them under his tutelage for the purpose of developing them into recording artists. Their relationship is professional. Further, both families have been compensated to assist with expenditures, though they have since repeatedly requested more money.”

## THERE'S A SAYING THAT GOES

where there's smoke,  
there's fire.

Well, I was on the defense with that one.

Where there's smoke,  
sometimes that's all it was.

A gray cloud of nothingness,  
the truth lurking behind  
just waiting for the smoke to clear.

"HONESTLY, DENVER,

your parents are starting to become a problem!"

That act with the TMZ folks—  
the soft chuckle,  
the "take the high road" demeanor  
was just that—  
an act.

The Merc inside the walls of that bus?  
His mood slowly unraveling.

"I don't know why they did that,"  
I said, leaving out  
the part about  
our email exchange a few weeks back.

I looked at Dali,  
seated at the kitchen table,  
literally folding into herself,  
locking in all the secrets I'd shared with her:  
that song I stole on my flash drive,  
that email I sent,  
that Google search.

The reality settled  
that even though that *Buzz* article  
was covered in lies,  
there was one part that was true.

Dali's mom needed that money.  
Every cent of it.

But mine didn't.  
At all.

"Did my parents really try to stick you for coins?"

Merc looked at me,

like how dare I ask such a question?

“I told you how folks get, Denver.  
How fame and money  
make people change.  
Like it or not,  
even your own blood will  
do whatever they can  
to stop what you got growing.  
It’s up to you to make a decision:  
You in or you out?”

Dali zapped me with those pleading eyes.  
I couldn’t turn back.  
Not when I knew what was waiting for us.  
Radio. Videos. Red carpets. *Fame*.

“What can I do to  
kill the noise and get them off our backs?”

Merc finally smiled,  
pulled me in for a hug  
as Dali stared at us both,  
finally exhaling a trapped breath.

I nodded, eyes sealed,  
safeguarding defiant tears.

“You my little ride-or-die chick,  
aren’t you, baby gurl?”

“I got a little project for both of  
y’all.”

## IF MERC COULDA BEEN

anything in the world  
other than world-famous,  
legendary,  
the best to ever  
throw down on a beat,

he woulda been a director  
and gave  
Ava and Spike  
a run for their money.

That iPhone,  
that tripod,  
those hands  
blended together  
like the perfect coverup.

The script was done—  
he wrote, Dali and I memorized—

We looked like  
a real-deal  
singing duo,  
matching black-and-silver outfits.

Our newest song  
“Brand-New Me”  
played low in the background,

lights on,  
me and Dali  
side by side in our seats,  
quiet on set,  
going live on Instagram  
in three, two, one ...

**SUNDAY, OCTOBER 13, 12:09 A.M.**

**Interviewer** (aka Meat, off camera, news reporter voice down pat):

What would you like to say in response to your parents' accusations?

**Me:** As you can see, I'm fine.

**Dali:** We both are.

**Meat:** Why do you think your parents went to the media?

**Me:** Control.

**Meat:** How so?

**Dali:** That's what parents do sometimes. And I won't speak for Denver's parents. My mom, on the other hand, isn't that controlling. She didn't like that I left school and home, but I know that she understands why. This is a chance to make something of myself, to pull my family out of the situation we're in.

**Meat:** What do you want Merc's fans to know?

**Me:** That he is an incredible human being, an amazing musician, who puts other people first.

**Dali:** That's why he's taking all this time to help us grow as artists.

**Meat:** Do you think your parents are exploiting the situation for money?

**Me:** ...

**Meat:** Denver?

**Me:** ... I can't speak on that right—

Merc swiped his hand across his throat.  
CUT!

## COMMENTS I DID NOT SEE

275,953 views

**MERC PROTÉGÉ BREAKS SILENCE AFTER HOSTAGE ACCUSATIONS.**

View all 3,812 comments

**Justbecool:** Time to #MuteMerc. Seeing this headline creep up again on this dude.

**\_Markani4:** Damn, even parents tryna stick you for your paper!

**WeKangz:** Anybody see the hand shadow, telling that poor girl to shut her mouth?

**Ballershak:** Praying for my sisters. Wake up @denverlee01 @dalisaybabe!

**GwennieLafleur:** @denverlee01 what is happening to you? You look emaciated and pale!! I'm taking the semester off and coming back home to help find you. Please, please call me! I promise I will answer.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 17

Detroit, Michigan  
The tour bus pulled behind  
Little Caesars Arena.  
My nerves?  
a bubbling-hot mess  
That feeling never got old.

Lines wrapped around the whole building  
crowds huddled in epic proportions  
I scanned the faces upon faces as we entered,  
heard the chants,  
the fans screaming Merc's name.

But then in the distance,  
I saw a small  
cluster of signs  
held high in the air.

Venom spewing through  
every painted red word:

**Merc is a monster!**  
**Merc is a predator!**  
**#MuteMercNow**

Merc wasn't perfect,  
I knew that.

The isolation,  
the separation,  
of me,  
Dali,  
Us.

I hated how he  
had me spoonfeed lies  
about my own parents

on Instagram.

But y'all lied first.  
We weren't prey.  
And he wasn't a monster.  
Wasn't no hero either,  
but who said we needed one?

There was a huddle  
in front of the double steel doors  
Flashing lights  
a whole chorus of voices  
calling out Merc's name

Meat and a large security team  
sandwiched us all in  
singers, dancers, musicians,  
claustrophobia settling in my bones

“Sha ...”  
A familiar voice,  
drowned deep within the noise.  
“Shashou?” I whipped myself around.

Heartbeat quickened,  
I jumped up  
scanning the crowd,  
searching for hair,  
thick and always piled  
to the heavens.

When we were little  
Gwen and I  
would call each other  
Shashou,  
Haitian Creole for  
my baby,  
my sweetheart,  
Sha for short.

The huddle grew tighter  
moved faster

among a sea of faces,  
black, brown, and everything  
in between,

double doors slammed fast  
behind #TeamMerc.

I ran to them,  
dropping the bags in my hand,  
Meat blocked my path.  
“Gonna need you to  
head to the dressing rooms, Denver.”

“I think my sister’s here.  
Let me out,” I begged.

But Meat just stood there  
scrunching up his face.

“Does she work for *Billboard* magazine?”

“No.” My eyes began to sting.

“*Hollywood Edition? Vogue?*”

“No.” Sting turned to water.

“Then I doubt that was your sister.  
Those people have media passes.  
Now Merc needs you down in hair and makeup.  
Show’s starting soon.”

Was I losing my mind?  
I know what I heard.  
*Sha ...*

If it was Gwen,  
she would  
have tackled  
herself through the crowd.

Yeah, that felt about right.  
Plus, it couldn’t have been my perfect sis.  
She was studying abroad in Paris,  
going on with her life, her dreams.

I grabbed my things,

and made my way downstairs,  
told myself I had my  
own dreams to chase.

Like Meat said,  
we had a show to do.

## REMEMBER THAT NIGHT

back in June?  
At the Prudential in Newark?

Three girls with  
starlight in their eyes,  
swooned

and swayed  
and prayed  
that they could  
be up there  
singing with Merc?

And remember that moment  
he pulled Dali  
from the stage,  
serenaded her with  
his signature song?

Fast-forward  
four months.

As the bass thumped,  
Merc jumped off the stage,  
landing directly in front  
of a girl,  
cornrowed,  
Merc's face plastered  
on her red T-shirt,  
faced stained with omg tears.

"What's your name and age?" Merc sang into the mic.  
"Isabel Fadden! Old enough, ha!"

"Wanna sing with me?"

"OMGOMGOMG!!"

Merc grabbed

homegirl by the hand,  
pulled her center stage,  
and together they sang “Do Me”  
while her friends went apeshit!

Homegirl sounded a HAWT MESS  
as her body folded into Merc’s,  
lights dimmed low, curtains closed.  
End of the show.

In our dressing room,  
Dali paced the floor  
like she missed an appointment or something.

“You okay, girl?”

“What’s taking him so long?”

“Who, Merc? Beats me.”

“Did you hear that girl? Wack-ass vocals!

Teeth all jacked up? Toe’-up braids? Dancing with Merc?”

I laughed hard  
'cause Lord knew  
Dali was telling the truth.

“Who cares?

It’s just an act anyway.

No different than

what he did with you the first night.”

Dali stopped pacing.

Then she just busted out crying.

Thick tears,  
rapid succession.

“Dali, what did I say?”

“Just STOP!” she screamed at the top of her lungs.

“Stop what?”

Back pressed against the dressing room wall,  
Dali slid down to the floor.

“You don’t get it.

Everything works out for you, Denver.  
You write the songs, you perform background,  
and I just sit and watch. And I'm trying to be happy  
for you, I swear, but it's hard. And I hate myself  
for feeling this way."

I knelt down beside her.  
Grazed my fingers through her spiky hair.

"He's gonna put you in the next show.  
I can feel it, Dali."

"Is that all you feel about Merc?"

My mouth twisted,  
brain fogged up hella fast.

"I mean, he's kind to you, right?  
He's never tried to ..."

Silence took precedence  
over unfinished sentences.

"Tried what?  
Something fresh?"  
—I could feel bile catch in my throat—  
"Um, no. Why? Did he try  
something with you?  
Like that time he took  
you to that resort ..."

"No, no, no." Dali wiped the last of her tears,  
nestled her head against my chest.

"I thought I saw Gwen tonight ... well, *heard* her,"  
I said, a hint of disappointment settling.

"Ain't she at some fancy French school?" Dali asked.

"Yeah." I choked out my response. "I was just tripping."

"I think I miss home, Denver."

"Me too."  
The weight of those words  
lived, breathed, grew  
inside of me.

Saying it loud,  
like Dali did,  
split me open,  
made me feel everything  
I'd been trying not to.

I missed Brooklyn  
I missed Ma  
I missed YOU, Papi  
I missed Gwen  
I missed Shak

And Shohola—  
a little bit.

“We’ll visit soon,” I said.

“First thing I’ma have Mami do  
is make you some Dominican food.  
Getting too flaca on me, girl.”  
Dali tapped my stomach,  
only it didn’t jiggle like it used to.

The thought of  
Tía Esme’s sancocho  
with a side of avocado awakened my  
whole spirit.

“You sure we’ll go home again?” Dali asked.

“All celebrities visit  
their old stomping grounds. Right?”  
I winked.

But she didn’t answer back.  
Just stared at me  
hella hypnotic  
trapped me into  
a push and pull  
of yes and no

Lips touched,  
tongues intertwined,

memories sparked,  
drowning deep,  
hands folded,  
melting,  
blending,  
into that thing  
I (she? we?) always did,  
but never spoke of  
again  
    and  
    again

But ...  
a loud tap  
rattled the door,  
pulled us straight out.  
“Time to roll!” Marissa yelled through  
the crack, then slammed it.

Dali jumped up,  
started grabbing her things fast.  
“I can’t do this anymore!”

I sat on the floor,  
stunned for a second,  
wanting to remind her  
of who-kissed-who

And that all those other times  
it wasn’t me, Dali, it was ...  
*you.*

    Even though  
    I never stopped her.

Was she ashamed of us?  
Was I?  
I think the answer was both  
no and yes

Me and Dali  
were the visual representation of  
a question mark, in human form.

But the real question was ...  
Did I care?

I liked  
the perfectly  
imperfect  
broken  
hidden pieces of us.  
And for me,  
that was enough.

“I’m out!”  
Dali bolted through the door.

Running after her,  
I saw Merc walking past the buses,  
Panasonic in hand,  
Isabel with the fuc’d-up braids  
diva strutting for the camera.

I swear groupies stayed thirsty.  
Ready at a moment’s notice to give it up to Merc  
or anyone in his entourage.  
Glad me and Dali weren’t like that.

Meat told everybody to keep walking,  
but Dali slowed her stride  
once she saw Merc,  
cursed “I hate you, pendejo,”  
clutched her stomach  
and just let ...

G  
O  
!!!

I started rubbing my hands  
against her back, like mad.

“What’s wrong with you, Dali?”

“Get off me, yo!”  
She yanked away,  
as if my touch was a disease.

Then she hunched over again  
and kept going-going-going.

Merc’s ass didn’t even stop to help.  
Instead he and that girl  
made their way to the limo waiting.

“Ay yo, Marissa, make sure you clean that shit up!”

Limo doors slammed.  
Merc sped off beneath a full moon.

## BACK IN DALI'S HOTEL ROOM,

Meat poured a glass  
of ginger ale  
laid out saltine crackers  
and a steaming Cup of Noodles.

“You gotta stay hydrated.”  
Meat tried to feed her,  
but she didn't even flinch.

I ran cold water  
over washcloths,  
whispered *olive juice*  
as I wiped her sweaty face,  
but she wasn't having that either.

“I ate something bad.  
I'll be better tomorrow.

Just leave me alone, both of you.  
I don't need your fuc'n help!”

She sprang up from the chair,  
led us to the door,  
and slammed that shit  
in both of our faces.

## TEXTS I DID NOT SEE

**October 17, 11:57 p.m.**

**Gwen:** I get it. You're upset with me for ratting you out. But I'm not sorry for worrying about you. You didn't have to sic four bodyguards on me tonight. I just wanted to see you again. Make sure you're okay. We're falling apart without you, Denny. Please, just call me back.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 18, 7:11 A.M.

The rising of the sun  
brought a morning  
I wasn't prepared for.

Three buses lined up  
all set to head back to Atlanta  
each crew with their own.  
I recognized every face,  
except the one I needed  
to see the most.

“Let me talk to Dali,”  
I told Merc.

“She left. You'll ride with me.”

“What do you mean *left*?  
Like to use the bathroom inside the hotel?  
I can wait.”

“Nah, more like adiós.”

“She wouldn't do that,” I said.

Though the memory  
of her words  
still rang fresh in my ear.

“But she's coming back, right?”

Merc shrugged.

“Doubt it.

She left you this note though.”

*Denver,  
Do you. You were always the most talented one anyway.  
I'm out.  
Dali*

"WHAT I TELL YOU?"

Not everyone is built for this.  
But you? You're a real one."

But I didn't *hear him* hear him,  
because I was too busy  
trying to form thoughts  
into words.

Dali woulda never up and left.  
Not without me.  
Not without a real goodbye.

And definitely  
not with that trash-ass note.  
Right?

.....

(right.)



## **PART FOUR: LANDING**

Monday, December 23

Lehigh Valley International Airport

Time: 10:35 a.m.

Final Destination: 41.325560° N, -74.808130° W

G O D

promises a safe landing,  
but not a calm passage.

You used to always say that, Papi.  
I thought it was your fancy pilot talk.

But now?

The message is like a stain I can't wash out.

I am home. (almost)

I am safe. (finally)

(thankyouthankyouthankyou)

## LADIES & GENTLEMEN:

*the temperature in Lehigh Valley, Pennsylvania,  
will be a high of forty-seven degrees,  
with a low of thirty-four degrees,  
and partly cloudy skies.*

*We will arrive  
in approximately  
forty-five minutes.*

*We here at Spirit Airlines  
would like to thank you  
for flying with us today  
and wish you and yours  
happy holidays.*

*Flight attendants,  
please prepare the cabin for landing.*

## I ONCE READ

that when a white-browed  
sparrow weaver  
begins to sing,  
its partner joins in—  
their duet in perfect tune.

I know you can't  
hear me singing  
from where you're seated, Papi,  
but soon as we land,  
I'll raise my voice  
loud enough to harmonize  
with yours.

And when we  
get to our destination,  
can you play  
Prelude in E Minor  
for me ...  
for old times' sake?

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 18

How Merc reacted to Dali dipping off:

A shrug

a hug

Silent ride

walk inside

The house

lights out

Like

she

never,

ever

mattered.

## HOW I REACTED:

Two a.m.

I lay in bed  
tears rolling,  
biting down  
on the pillow  
to muffle words,  
curses,  
screams,  
apologies.

I imagined her  
next to me in the mass  
of that lonely room.

*Olive juice, Dali.*  
I'm glad I said it last night,  
and I meant every word.

Even though she  
didn't say it back  
that time.

I'm sorry it wasn't enough  
to keep her.

Maybe I was the one  
who was never enough for Dali.

Was she with her family?  
With mine?  
Did they miss me?  
Did she?

And Merc,  
I know he never really saw Dali.  
Not the way I did.

I should have

spoken up,  
said something,  
anything  
to make Merc see

that her voice  
that gift  
was just as good,  
if not better,  
than  
(mine.)

A tap on my door  
before he opened it  
and walked in.

“I can hear you all the way downstairs, Denver.”

“I just need to talk to her.  
You have to let me call her!  
She’s more important to me  
than your stupid boot camp rules!”  
I cried out.

Those last words,  
a roundhouse kick to Merc’s gut.  
His face hardened, but his words  
did the opposite.

“Okay, baby gurl.  
You win.”

Merc pulled out my phone,  
and through my tearstained fingers,  
I did everything I could to  
catch a glimpse  
of the digits  
Merc typed  
before he handed it to me.

0-2-2-7

Got it.

Dali's number rang ...  
and rang ...  
into nothingness.

“Why won't she answer?” I sobbed and sobbed.  
“Maybe she left her phone at the hotel?”

I was uncontrollable now.  
Back convulsing,  
tears and snot merging as one.

“No, baby gurl, she's got her phone.  
She just doesn't wanna talk to you.  
Or me. You gotta let her go.”

Letting go  
was never an option.  
How could he not see that?

“Denver, you're gonna cry  
yourself into a fever.  
Here take these.”

“What are they?”

“They'll take the edge off.”

I thought back  
to the night Dali took that pill  
Merc offered.

Strange as it sounds,  
I wanted to take them  
if for nothing else,  
to transport me back to that night  
of her, me, together in my bed.

I popped two pills in my mouth,  
gulped down the large glass  
of water he handed me,  
praying it'd be enough to do enough.

“That's my girl.”

Merc tucked me in,  
just like Ma used to do  
when me and Gwen were little.

He pulled the curtains open  
so a patch of moonlight  
poured through the window  
and down on my face.

“How am I supposed  
to do this without Dali?”

“That’s easy,” Merc said.

“Like every other solo artist.  
One song,  
one lyric at a time.”

Solo  
never  
fit the image  
I dreamed  
for myself.

How was I supposed to be hopeful  
when I felt  
SO  
LOW?

SOME

times  
the  
very  
best  
dreams  
take  
root  
with  
your  
eyes  
wide

O  
P  
E  
N ...

TUESDAY, AUGUST 28

First day of third grade

backs pressed against  
the playground wall.

Two new students  
silently watched,  
    children playing,  
    world moving,  
    barely existing.

Took in the wonders  
of a world that was new to us:  
Shohola, Pennsylvania.

Transported from different places:  
me from Brooklyn,  
and Dali,  
from Dominican Republic.

Two boys—one scrawny, one tall  
ran up to Dali.  
“Say something in Mexican!”  
Dali twisted her face, in classic WTF.

“Like tacos!”  
the other one laughed.  
    “I’m not Mexican. I’m from Santo Domingo.”  
    Dali’s words barely  
    broke through the playground noise.

“What’d she say? Burrito and finito?”  
Skinny ass teased.  
Tall one laughed,  
like it was the greatest  
joke ever told.

Little did they know,  
when you were from Brooklyn,  
iron knuckles cracked easily on loose lips,  
induced racist white boy tears,  
made feet scatter like roaches.

Some friendships

are born from  
coincidence,  
knuckle sandwiches,  
and  
school suspension.  
(with a side of música)

That was the beginning  
of the story of  
*us*.

## TEXTS I SNUCK FROM MY UNLOCKED PHONE

**October 19, 1:02 p.m.**

**Me:** I know you're coming back here, so stop overreacting. I'm waiting.

**Dali:**

**October 22, 4:29 p.m.**

**Me:** I'm sorry. Can you forgive me? I'm still here, waiting for you.

**Dali:**

**October 26, 2:36 a.m.**

**Me:** I can't stay here any longer. Not without you. I'm coming home.

**October 26, 2:37 a.m.**

**Dali:** Don't.

OCTOBER 26, 2:38 A.M.

I dialed  
and dialed  
and dialed  
breath paused.

It rang  
and rang  
and rang  
calls ignored.

I paced  
and paced  
and paced  
until she left me  
no choice.

Packed my bags,  
under the cover of darkness.  
Told myself,  
*Tomorrow, I'm going home.*

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 26

First, the smell  
woke me up.

A mixture of  
meat, heat, and mildew.

Then it was the sound,  
heavy, constant  
panting.

I opened my eyes,  
and staring back at me?

A little,  
happy  
bundle of fur,  
licking,  
slurping  
my face  
like an ice cream cone.

“You got a puppy?”

I wasn't sure who was  
smiling more,  
Merc or the dog.

“You mean YOU got a puppy.  
I couldn't watch you moping  
around here another day.  
Thought this little guy  
would cheer you up.”

“Omg, thank you! What is he?”

“An Otterhound,  
rare British breed,

can get up to 125 pounds.  
Sucka cost a grip, too,  
so you better like him.”

I wrapped my arms  
around that ball of fluff so tight,  
it almost made me forget about my plan.

“Oh, I love him! I think I’ll call him ...  
Fluffy!”

“Nah, too fairy-tale.  
How ’bout Chance?  
Something to describe the journey,  
ya know?”

Merc stayed dropping wisdom.

“Yeah, Chance.  
That’s perfect.”

Merc placed Chance’s leash  
on my nightstand,  
started for the bedroom door.

“Get dressed and meet me in the studio.  
I got another surprise for you.”

“Merc, we should talk  
about Dali ...  
I need to go—”

“Trust me, baby gurl.”  
Merc hit me with a  
wink-smile-nod three piece.  
“You wanna see this.”

## HERE WERE THE THOUGHTS THAT SWIRLED IN MY HEAD:

1. Dali came back.
2. Dali came back.
3. Dali came back.
4. FOR ME!

I washed my face.

I brushed my teeth.

I combed my hair.

I got dressed.

I  
never  
ran  
so  
fast  
in  
my  
life  
!!!

Down the steps,  
past the kitchen,  
past the library,  
past the  
gym

spa  
salon

the music boomed  
LOUDER  
stronger.

Our songs,  
*Untouched*,  
masterfully retouched,

trumpets blazing,  
harmonies grazing  
the inner pieces of me.

I heard that  
classic Denver-Dali  
blend  
as I turned the doorknob,  
swung open the studio door,  
screamed over the bass,  
“I knew you’d bring dat ass back, chiiii ... ca!”

Two leather chairs  
swiveled around,  
Merc on the left, camcorder in hand,  
and NOT DALI on the right.

Instead,  
a candy-lip-coated,  
Timberland-wearing,  
finger snapping  
Nayeli Terron.

Aka  
Queen Yeli  
Aka  
female rapper  
who knocked  
Cardi B off  
the #1 Billboard spot  
not once,  
but four times ...  
this year!

I don’t remember  
who spoke first  
but that smile  
and that hug  
sucked up

every word  
that raced through my mind.

Merc recorded that whole moment,  
my reaction, that squeal,  
Queen Yeli laying it on  
hella thick ...

“So nice to meet you, Denver!  
Your vocals are crazy dope!  
We definitely gonna have to collabo!  
When I get back from my European tour fo’ sho!  
I got the perfect song for us!  
You’ll still be here in December, right?”

Two hours spent  
chilling in the studio  
with the hottest artist  
on the charts,  
she took selfies of the two of us  
making kissy faces, tagged my name  
and posted on Instagram for  
the WHOLE world to see us flexin’!

Every passing second  
felt like  
freedom  
amnesia  
bliss  
a middle finger to the one  
who called this dream of mine *little*.

After Queen Yeli left,  
Merc and I took a walk around  
the grounds of his massive property,

the Atlanta sun  
playing coy behind thick clouds.  
At the pond,

we tossed food at the fish

as autumn leaves  
drifted in the breeze.

“You believe in fate, baby gurl?” Merc pointed to  
the heavens.

“Yeah, I do.”

“Denver, what we got, our music, this empire  
we’re building? That’s just for us. Nobody else.  
Time  
to start cutting folks off, you feel me.”

I felt something, all right.  
Equal parts  
Yes-and-no-and-maybe.

“Now, where’d you wanna go again,  
Denver?”

I tipped my face to the sky,  
surrendered my voice to the wind.  
“Nowhere, Merc.”

(I wasn’t going nowhere at all.)

I tucked away my exit strategy,  
remembering Dali’s text.  
She didn’t want me around, no how.

So why leave,  
when the chance to fly  
was right there in Atlanta?  
(and beyond)

(Almost) back to normal,  
Merc ramped up my schedule again,  
minus the workouts with Ahmed,  
—*Homeboy don’t match our vision*, Merc said—  
We recorded music on repeat,  
hit up the hottest clubs  
and hookah lounges at night.

An added bonus,

taking Chance for walks  
around the property,  
just nowhere near  
the hole in the fence  
by the peach trees.

Merc cautioned me  
to keep away from the front gates, too.  
Why?

Because on the  
other side,  
~~paparazzi~~ monsters  
lurked in the shadows.

## TEXTS I DID NOT SEE

**October 31, 11:10 p.m.**

**Papi:** Pitit mwen, my little one, how I miss you. Please return to us.

**November 1, 12:01 a.m.**

**Ma:** WE WON'T GIVE UP ON YOU. WE LOVE YOU, DENNY.

## LONG AFTER

sun turned to moon,  
sky filled with stars,  
vocals laid over  
thumping beats,  
Marissa headed to sleep  
and Meat finally off the clock,  
which left me  
    and Merc  
        and that duffel bag on the floor  
in the studio ...

a  
l  
o  
n  
e.

“Let me hit the head  
before we call it a night,”  
Merc said.

He walked down the hall  
and that bag,  
half zipped open,  
and for a moment  
I wondered ...

Was the video of me and Queen Yeli in there?  
And if it was, maybe I could send it to Dali,  
with a love note, maybe even a new song.  
Would it be enough to bring her back?

The duffel bag was filled with VHS-C tapes,  
but no camcorder.

I quietly ran my fingers across them,

sloppily tossed around the bag,  
no organization whatsoever.

Each was labeled with a name  
the first was Marissa  
the rest were some names I didn't recognize.  
Until I saw two  
at the bottom of the pile:

Dalisay  
Denver

I was sure  
those were all  
the homemade tapes he'd made,  
over the years of working with different singers.

Studio sessions,  
life on the road,  
clubbing,  
all the good times  
on repeat.

I could send her ours,  
a peace offering of sorts,  
a reminder that it wasn't all bad here  
when we were together.

I looked around the studio  
for a VCR and saw nothing  
that remotely looked like one.

I was sure he had one at least,  
somewhere in that  
castle of a home.

I was also sure he wouldn't miss  
the two tapes, if I borrowed them  
for a little while.  
I just wanted to see Dali again,  
even if it was through the screen.



exhaling,  
finally.

Those tapes weren't  
the first thing I stole from Merc.  
Something told me they wouldn't be my last.

## A RANDOM CONFESSION:

At night  
when I lay in bed,  
next to Chance,  
I pretended it was Dali,  
which I knew was stupid  
given the way she played me,  
but it was enough to  
chase away the lonelies.

Another random confession:

In the big brick house  
on Pristine Road,  
there lived a girl  
in a big black room  
with a loose floorboard.  
The perfect hiding place  
for bags of plantain chips  
stolen from the pantry  
(because celery dinners were boring AF),  
a police officer's contact card,  
a SanDisk with my song I ~~stole~~ downloaded,  
and  
two tiny VHS-C tapes.

**MONDAY, NOVEMBER 4**

TheBuzz\* Follow

Buzz STAFF: Bella D! @belladblock\_

### **CONCERT CANCELED AMID ALLEGATIONS**

Crossover R&B star Sean “Mercury” Ellis was scheduled to perform at Pepperdine University this Saturday; however, after a petition from students and faculty, the Los Angeles school has decided to cancel the concert. Link in bio for more details.

Liked by [IamJessie](#) and 298,512 others

[View all 7,703 comments](#)

**GwennieLafleur:** My sister @denverlee01 went missing after @kingmerc kidnapped her. Denny, if you can see this, PLEASE reach out to your family! We went to the @kingmerc Detroit concert to find you. His squad shut us down. We are #hurting so bad sis.

**Damnboi23:** Dumb move Pepperdine. Nobody turns down the KING!

**GoneFlying:** @gwennielafleur I just saw her w Merc @HaloLounge downtown Atlanta. She ain't missing. She just don't miss YO ASS! #drama

**MommaBear:** @gwennielafleur can you DM me? My daughter @IsabelFaddenBae went to Merc's concert in Detroit too and never came home. I called the cops, the news, no one cares cuz #BlackGirlsDontMatter

**WeStillMatterOrg:** DM for details on the next #MuteMerc protest, coming to a city near you.

## I NEVER SAW

that post on Instagram,  
never saw the comments,  
only heard the aftermath  
of Marissa telling Merc  
about the concert being  
canceled.

And I thought:

Mannnnn ...  
cancel culture was  
alive and well!

Dumb folks  
sure loved  
getting  
trapped

By rumors  
By hearsay  
By lies  
By FAKE NEWS!

Canceled shows meant

hours-long meetings  
in the studio,  
with lawyers,  
executives,  
every single important  
#TeamMerc decision maker.

An epic scramble to  
clean up traces of dirt,  
the residue of lies  
spread online.

And for me,

hours spent in the  
great big black room  
on Pristine Road,  
where Merc said I had to stay,  
only to leave for dog walks and meals.

Nothing but time to kill,  
guitar on my lap,  
song book at my side,  
lyrics took over ...

# I'LL RISE

Written by Denver Lafleur

Verse:

*There was a time I was down  
and no one else was around  
but you ... you knew  
just what to do  
to make me feel that*

Chorus:

*I'll rise  
(with you here by my side)*

*I'll soar  
(your love, it makes me fly)*

*I'll touch  
(the stars and the sun)*

*I'll reach  
(all the way to #1)*

*Everything I could dream,  
it's because you love me.  
So, I'll rise.*

## THIS WAS MERC'S GAME PLAN FOR DAMAGE CONTROL

1. A pre-Thanksgiving concert (right in his old 'hood)
2. Free tickets, free food
3. A brand-new show

Bags packed

First-class plane tickets purchased

Georgia to California

Operation #MuteTheHaters was in full effect!

## WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 6

*(just before dawn)*

It all happened so fast,  
I thought I was dreaming.  
The swish of the door,  
the tap-tap of Chance's nails on the floor,  
bolting down the steps, happily breaking free.

I didn't feel her hands  
wrapped around my shoulders.  
It was the tearing of skin  
from manicured nails  
that blasted me awake.

Black eyes,  
red hair,  
illuminated by a silver moon.

"Where is it?" Marissa whispered.

"Where's what?" I asked, voice yawn-coated.

"You took something from Merc."

Lights flicked on,  
Marissa began pacing my room.  
clothes, hangers,  
books, drawers  
tossed like mad.

I kept my eyes on her,  
refused to look at the floor ...  
that hidden wooden cave,  
keeper of chips, a business card,  
and two tapes I'd never fess up to stealing.

"Maybe you're the one  
who took something from him."  
My words, a threat,  
slowed the movement of her steps.  
And then she got all up in my face.

“I told Merc he’s too trusting, that he needs cameras all through this house. You’re lucky he’s afraid of his shit being hacked, otherwise I’d have you on tape with your little sticky-finger ass! Never understood him bringing you and your little lover girl up in here anyway.”

Just before storming off,  
Marissa hit me with one final blow.

“Clean this shit up!”

Then she slammed that door,  
and I begged my whole body  
to stop trembling.

That night, I was sure of three things:

1. There was no surveillance in that house whatsoever.
2. There was something on those tapes that I wasn’t supposed to see.
3. Marissa ain’t trust me. Not even a little. And if she wasn’t watching me before, homegirl was about to start. For real for real.

WEIGHT: 30.6 LBS DOWN

Breakfast: nothing  
Lunch: nothing  
Dinner: See above  
Snack: 71 plantain chips

The human body is  
a confounding thing.

We feed it,  
stretch bellies,  
skin,  
limbs  
to the limit.

The body splits itself  
in two.

The before  
and  
The after

The before was for me;  
an imperfectly sculpted  
shell of who I chose to be.

The after,  
that is for him,  
or I guess,  
*them.*

The world that is filled  
with sweet melodies,  
whispering in your ear:

*Perfection is near.  
Keep going.*

## SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 16

Seemed like all of Crenshaw  
showed up for the free  
holiday meal  
and of course  
to see  
the King of R&B  
unplugged,  
talent  
unmatched.

Vocals stripped  
down to just him  
and the music.

No booty-twerking  
backup dancers.  
No Sharmaine,  
no Althea,  
no *me*.

I stood  
by the  
backstage curtains  
and watched that man  
rip and belt  
through acoustic versions  
of his hit songs

until he reached  
the end of the set.

“My last song is an exclusive.  
Singing it for the first time ...  
wrote it just for y’all. It’s called ‘I’ll Rise.’”

Then he had the nerve to look at me ...

and wink.

Heartbeat ripped through my chest,  
every lyric  
ripped from the pages of  
MY BOOK  
from  
MY ROOM

poured from his mouth  
leaving me feeling  
robbed,  
touched,  
*naked.*

Made me wonder ...  
*What else did he take from me?*

I pictured myself running onto that stage,  
grabbing that guitar,  
that mic,  
and giving the song its rightful home.

Because I never gave it to him.  
Never even sang the melody for him.  
He took my words,  
flipped it  
slipped it  
dipped in ...

But I'm frozen in place  
because much as I hate it  
what he's done with the song is ...  
genius.

But he built that genius on something  
that wasn't his to take.

The crowd applauded  
like thunder  
at Sunday church service.

Lights flashed  
People chanted

*Merc!*

*Merc!*

*Merc!*

Screaming,  
begging  
him to sing  
that song,  
*my* song,  
one more time.

And I just stood there,  
like a dumbass,  
watching him  
swallow up my shine.

In the dressing room,  
just us,  
away from the lights and the crowd,  
my mouth became a torch.

Accusations,  
rapid fire,  
heat building up

“How could you do that, Merc?  
I shoulda been up there  
singing my own lyrics,  
getting my shine,  
my credit  
as a SOLO artist.”

Hands gripped on shoulders,  
Merc slammed my back against the wall  
over and over and over ...

“You got a lot of nerve, Denver!”

My breath came out fast and hard,  
skin on my back

tingled, puffed,  
red-black-blue  
slowly building

I stared into his eyes  
counting veins  
weaving through  
blackened pupils.

Like a monster.  
Is that who he truly was?

Papi, you woulda been so proud of me.  
Ma, too.  
Cuz I slapped him right in his face.

Merc inhaled so loud  
I thought he might swallow me whole.

I cried,  
one burning tear,  
splashing right on his hand,  
gripped around my arm.

Something about that seized him,

woke him up,  
the monster slowly fading,  
left me wondering  
if when  
he'd be back.

Merc served up his apology  
with a side of grown-man tears.  
“I wanted to surprise you, baby gurl.”

Pulled me in close  
held me tight  
a fatherly touch  
I didn't realize I needed.

Tears leaked rapid pace

my mind swirled with hunger  
and loss  
and longing  
for the familiar. Dali, Family, Home.

“I’m so sorry I got angry with you.”

Merc poured on all the reasons:

grueling schedule,  
big things on the horizon,  
lack of sleep,  
fighting the haters  
tryna bring a brotha down.

“I promise I’ll make it up to you.”

And he did.

Merc went outta his way:

gifts on Thanksgiving,  
nights out on the town,  
that track recorded with MY name as cowriter,  
plus it turns out  
the whole song mix-up was my fault  
—left my lyrics in the kitchen by accident one day—  
Merc thought it was a gift ... from me to him—  
not like he copped it from my personal space.

Was it all enough  
to make me stay?

The bruises on my back  
said one thing,  
but then \$25,000  
said something else.

25 g’s secured in a trust fund,  
money that, according to Merc,  
I’d made for writing “I’ll Rise.”

The same song that  
a week after performing,  
blazed the radio airwaves.

The more the song played,  
the bigger that number would get.

25 g's wasn't enough  
to break away,  
step into my own spotlight.  
Not yet, at least.

Still! I had an instant #1 hit! A future record with Queen Yeli on deck!

I wanted to shout all the way to Shohola  
so that you and Ma would know  
I was making moves ... and I'd be just fine. See?

ONCE UPON A BROOKLYN,

I thought I understood  
the meaning of love.

Until I got to Atlanta  
and learned that  
love sometimes equaled

rules  
and  
pills  
and  
bruises  
and  
memory loss  
and hunger  
both  
literal  
and metaphorical  
and  
gifts  
and  
promises

andandandand ...

The type of love  
where when I looked  
at the image in the mirror,  
I barely recognized  
the me I  
allowed myself to *become*.

Yet, still  
hidden beneath  
Denver2.0

pianissimo notes  
so, so soft  
brewed within,  
singing almost hauntingly ...

Wake up, girl ...  
And every morning,  
it was Chance who woke me up,  
licking,  
panting,  
scratching at  
walls,  
vents,  
doors,  
really anything  
to feed his curiosity.

And as silly as it sounds  
to be inspired by a dog,  
something about him  
resonated with me.

I decided to be more like Chance.  
Light a torch beneath questions  
simmering within ...

about this whole  
situation I put myself in.  
It was time to dig.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 5

BlackHollywoodReporter\* Follow

BHR STAFF: Alex Rodriguez @AnotherARod

**SEAN “MERCURY” ELLIS LANDS LEAD ROLE IN BIOPIC**

The King of R&B is ready to flex his acting muscles! According to Entertainment Weekly, the “I’ll Rise” chart topper has signed with Warner Brothers for a biopic of the legendary soul singer Marvin Gaye. Filming in Atlanta begins early December, followed by shoots in Los Angeles and DC. Read up on the latest. Link in bio!

Liked by RealQueenYeli and 512,049 others

View all 12,962 comments

**Simm0625:** Look at God! You get’em Merc!

**Rissa914:** When they go low, we go high. #BlackBoyMagic

**Honeypie:** That’s my dude right there!

**LeeLeex:** SMH! Marvin Gaye is turning in his grave right now!

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 6

**1:21 a.m.**

Sometimes when I slept

I heard  
an endless stream of  
different voices.

A cry here,  
a scream there.

That night, it woke me up  
and I saw Chance  
scratching at the air vent,  
his little voice letting out  
the saddest whimper.

“What’s wrong, my pup?”

The noises I dreamt about weren’t there—  
maybe it was Chance crying  
but he was still scratching  
like he was looking for something.

Or ...

maybe I needed to take lil’ man  
outside to handle his business.

## THREE THINGS FOLKS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT OTTERHOUNDS:

1. Squirrels are equal parts friend and food.
2. Open fields are too hard to resist.
3. And so are holes in chain-link fences.

I should have probably  
thanked Ahmed  
for the supreme running stamina  
'cause my feet flew fast enough  
to chase Chance  
past the peach trees  
all the way to that glorious  
hole in the back fence.

I threw my arms around his body,  
right before he sprinted through.

And thank God,  
because behind that fence was  
something that was missing  
from the front of Merc's house:

an actual road  
with moving cars,  
streetlights,  
civilization!

Hands gripped tight  
on Chance's leash,  
we walked through the grass,  
past the pool house,  
a crack of the front door  
stopping me in my tracks.

"Can I get something to eat now?"  
a voice whispered.

I whipped around hella fast,  
almost tangling myself  
in the leash.

Two eyes pierced the darkness.

“Who are you?”

Silence.

“What’s your name?”

“Nobody.”

Then “Nobody” closed the door.

“HEY! Open up!”

Heartbeat quickening,

I twisted

and pulled

on that knob,

open-hand-slapped

the door on repeat,

the sound of each slam

echoing all around the yard.

Inside the main house, the kitchen light

flicked on

and Merc swiftly emerged

into the dark.

“Yo, Denver, what’s the problem?”

Anxiety on 100,

words poured like lava.

“There’s someone in there!

Who is that, Merc?

Why is she asking for food?”

“My cousin Natasha,”

Merc cut me off midflow.

“She’s visiting from New York.”

“Why wouldn’t she come out?”

“Somebody’s extra nosy tonight.  
She’s sick. Probably thought you were the maid  
bringing her soup.”

Here’s the thing.  
The maid was gone for the night.  
And that girl didn’t sound sick.  
She sounded ... *lost*.

“Get back to bed, Denver.”  
He stepped forward, I stepped back.

“But ...”

Warm hand laced into the coldness of mine,  
voice changed from stone to honey.  
“Come on, baby gurl.”

Merc walked Chance and me  
back to my room,  
but sleep was the last thing on my mind.

Eyes wide open,  
I had a dream that night.  
I stood on a mountaintop,  
eyes scanning the clouds.

In the distance,  
beyond green meadows,  
rushing rivers,  
and sky-kissing castles,

a beautiful sculpture of a man  
clenched his fists,  
limbs, muscles, veins  
transforming from human  
to green-skinned dragon.

In the moon-crescent of his eyes,  
the target of his hunger ...  
me.

Wings spread wide,

he flew above the clouds,  
licked his fangs at the sight of me  
standing mountain-tall,  
fire gathered, belly-to-throat

I drew my arrow,  
steel-coated,  
lightning fast  
and let it soar,

the arrow lodging in its left eye,  
the fire-breathing dragon,  
went tumbling  
*down.*

And I tell you, Papi,  
it was the realest  
fucking nightmare  
I ever conjured up.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 9

Merc's new movie role  
meant my time in the studio  
went from seven days a week  
to negative zero point nothing.  
Then one night ...

“Wanna watch some Marvin Gaye  
classics with me, baby gurl?  
Help me get into character before I head to set?”

Merc, standing in my doorway,  
for the first time in days.

Took me a second  
to realize that a classic  
Marvin Gaye performance  
just might be  
played on a VCR.

“Sure, Merc.  
I'd love to.”

## IN THE FAR END CORNER

of the great big house  
on Pristine Road,  
there was a room  
I never knew existed.

“Whoa!” My eyes bugged out as we walked in.  
“This place is magical, Merc.”

The Galaxy Room  
built of wood, painted black,  
a constellation of stars  
drawn on the ceiling  
  
comfy oversized couches  
fluffy pillows everywhere,  
a big movie screen,  
and behold ...  
a VCR!

I wouldn't have even known  
had I not seen Merc  
open the doors to a  
large, mirrored wall unit,

inside revealing  
an entire library of  
1980s classics like  
*Ghostbusters*,  
*The Goonies*,  
and *Coming to America*.

And next to that,  
a Panasonic PV-4661 VCR.

We sat on the floor together.  
As he showed off his ancient pride and joy,  
I ran my fingers across Merc's collection.

“Do you use these to record  
on your camcorder?” I asked innocently.

“Nah, baby gurl. My films are VHS  
tapes. My personal recordings are done  
on VHS-C.”

He proudly held up two tapes  
showing me the difference.

“For this little one, you need an adapter  
to watch it.” He rummaged through the wall unit,  
and then held it up. “See, like this.”

He placed the small VHS-C  
into the large adapter  
and like magic  
the video could play in the VCR.

Then he put the adapter back in the wall unit,  
my eyes taking note of exactly where

*bottom drawer to the left*

“Let’s get started, shall we? I’m a  
introduce you to *my* King of R&B!  
You ready?”

I nodded fiercely.

Merc pulled a tape from his collection:  
*Marvin Gaye Live in Belgium, 1981*  
and slipped it in the VCR.

Then he walked around the room,  
drawing the blinds,  
shutting off the lights.

On the great big screen,  
grainy images  
sprang to life,

a singer turned actor  
studied Marvin Gaye’s every move,  
repeating lyric for lyric,

line by line  
while the girl  
with eyes of fading starlight,  
watched the musical genius from the floor.

Just when the credits rolled,  
there was a bang at the door.  
Marissa stuck her head in.

“Time to go ... Merrrc ...”  
Marissa held out his name  
extra long soon as she saw me.

Homegirl was all done up  
in a little black dress,  
material so shiny,  
looked like she took it  
straight out the Hefty box.

“Don’t you look nice!” I lied,  
but Marissa rolled her eyes.

“Baby gurl, thanks for the movie date.  
We’ll do it again real soon.”  
Merc hugged me.

That one touch  
birthed thorns on my skin.

“Tell Meat to bring the car around.”  
Merc zipped his leather coat.

“Meat should stay here ... with Denver.”  
Code for: Marissa didn’t trust my ass one bit.

I could see Merc consider it for a second,  
until I squeezed his wrist and said,  
“I’m tired, bro. I’ll just go to bed.”

Merc clapped his hands.  
“See? That’s my baby gurl. Let’s roll.”  
Then him and Marissa and that *face*

booked it outta there.

Once I was clear they'd left  
the grounds,  
I raced to my room,  
lifted the loose floorboard,  
two VHS-C tapes clutched  
beneath my robe,  
Chance trailing behind.

I flew through the dark,  
empty house,  
past the dining room,  
past the kitchen,  
through the hall  
lined with bookshelves,  
until Chance stopped  
and began sniffing and licking books.

“That’s not food, silly!”

I grabbed him by the collar  
and hightailed it back  
to the Galaxy Room.

Whipped open the door,  
that old-school VCR staring me down ...  
*Let's do this.*

I popped  
the tape labeled *Dalisay* in.  
The screen, fuzzy at first,  
followed by a clearer,  
yet shaky image.

Dali danced seductively  
and I figured it was an act,  
maybe something  
we would've used in the show,  
until the screen faded to black  
and a new image poured in.

Dali ... *my* Dali on her knees,  
pink cheeks,  
fresh tears,  
lips quivering,  
video revealing  
the fullness of her  
and the bottom half  
of a man  
as he unbuckled his belt,  
yanked Dali's chin toward him *it*,  
and she opened her mouth  
W I D E.

Hands cupping my whole face,  
I couldn't look  
I couldn't look  
Anymore.

What was he doing?  
Why didn't Dali tell me?  
Who was that guy?  
It wasn't Merc.  
It couldn't be.  
He would never ...  
ever ...  
Right? RIGHT?

I looked at the screen  
again.  
It was then  
that I noticed  
her outfit ...  
the same one  
from the concert,  
the night we first met ...  
*Merc.*

I yanked that tape—*HIS* tape—  
out so fast

wanting to light a fire,  
toss it to the flames.

Blood  
turned to ice  
turned to heat  
turned to rage  
turned to fear

I needed to talk to someone  
and not Merc  
and then I remembered ...

the day after Dali left  
he unlocked my phone features  
with a special code  
But then he changed it again.

I thought of the first code,  
asked myself why was it so special

0-2-2-7

0-2-2-7

Wasn't that when ...

he won his first Grammy?  
February 27

So what other dates would  
mean just as much to him?

Fingers trembled  
through several  
four-digit combinations,  
getting them all wrong,

until my brain,  
like a camera,  
flashed a memory,  
June 14, the day we first met.

Could that be special to him?

0-6-1-4

And just like that,  
the home page  
flashed into view.

Fingers held steady  
as I dialed

One ring ...

*The number you have reached is disconnected.*

*Please hang up and try again.*

Next number.

It rang ...

and rang ...

and rang ...

And then ...

“Hello?”

“Shak, it’s me.”

“Denver?”

Shak screamed in F sharp,  
and I shushed her fast.

“Where’s Dali?” I asked.

“Denver, are you ... *crying?*”

“I just need to get ahold of Dali.” I sniffed back  
tears.

“Why you asking me?”

“Well, don’t you see her at school?”

“School? Dali doesn’t go to school.

Aren’t you guys on tour?”

“Shak?”

“Yeah.”

“Dali went home two months ago.”

“Denver?”

Nobody’s seen her around here  
since the day y’all left ...”

## THIS WAS THE PART WHERE

I called the police, Papi.

This was the part where  
flashes of light  
red-white-blue,

broke through  
iron gates,  
chain-link fences,  
and rescued

the stupid girl  
with stars for eyes,

drove past  
Georgia peach trees,  
snaked through  
snowcapped Pocono Mountains,  
until they took her  
all the way

home

to Ma  
and Gwen  
and *you*.

Except

this is the part where  
that didn't happen.

Because I needed to find Dali.  
And I needed to know something else.  
If she didn't tell me about this,  
what else did she keep from me?

## CHANCE LAFLEUR:

expert licker  
master barker  
bionic listener  
of faraway sounds  
I could not detect

His groan, a low, slow boil,  
as I began to switch  
from Dali's tape to my own,  
but then it came in hot, rolling, fast

Chance scratched at my knees,  
then ran to the window  
facing the driveway,  
and clawed at the glass.

Somebody was coming home  
and we needed to haul ass ...  
FAST!

Both tapes lodged beneath my arms,  
cell phone tucked in my pocket,  
feet zipped through halls,  
past bookshelves,  
kitchen-dining-living room(s)  
—car door slammed—

up up up  
I skipped steps,  
two, three at a time,  
Chance hot on my trail

phone on my nightstand,  
tapes hidden beneath wooden floor,  
foyer doors opened below,  
buried myself deep  
under thick covers.

Me and Chance taking turns panting  
as hard shoes click-clacked  
up up up wooden steps.

I smelled the scent of her  
—lilacs and trouble—  
before I saw the shadow  
of her heels beneath the door.  
Hovering ... listening ...  
as I begged my lips to remain muted.

This is the call she thought  
I didn't hear

“Meat, yeah, it's me, Marissa.  
Listen, I'm gonna need you  
to beef up security around here.  
I'll get extra detail on Merc.  
But I need you based here ...  
to keep an eye on things.”

I should have left,  
I could have left,  
I *would* have left

But Dali.

And there was this other thing,  
this feeling burrowed deep inside.

Spent my whole life  
being made to feel like I wasn't  
smart enough  
good enough  
*doing* enough

But there in that moment  
I KNEW exactly who I was  
fearless  
gifted  
brilliant ...

Way smarter than Merc  
for all his fake-ass genius  
and money  
and power.

I had those tapes, didn't I?

And I was smart enough  
to figure a way to make his ass  
pay for what he did  
to my best friend.

That night,  
in the great big house  
on Pristine Road,  
I prayed that God  
would transform me into a spider.

Black body,  
hard shell,  
belly brimming  
toxic secrets,  
spinning silken threads  
plunging  
fearlessly,  
noiselessly  
into a web of truths  
waiting to be revealed.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 10

Meat aka glorified babysitter  
on active double duty.

—Marissa’s request—

But I caught that man  
beginning to slip a long time ago.

Starting with that song  
he allowed me to  
~~steal~~ download  
when Merc wasn’t around,

And those nights where  
even though I know he was told to,  
he “forgot” to lock my bedroom door

A soft teddy bear of a man,  
hardened exterior unraveling  
with my every joke,  
my every pouty request

And lately,  
always on his phone, texting,  
Snapchatting for hours  
while Merc and Marissa  
stayed on set.

“You must got a girlfriend or something?” I asked.

The blush of Meat’s cheeks,  
a gentle plunge into my web.

Nancy Dixon,  
thighs thick enough  
to make grown men cry,  
worked in downtown Atlanta  
at Babette’s Café.

They had been kickin' it  
for a hot minute,  
but extra hours on the job  
meant less hours for her.

“She’s mad cuz  
it’s the third time  
this week I bailed on her.  
And I’m tripping, too.  
I can barely do my job right.  
Shortie got me falling hard.”

“You should go,” I said, coughing.  
“I don’t feel too good, so I’m going to sleep.”

“Nah. Merc’ll kill me if I leave you here alone.  
I’ll get up with Nancy another day.”

“I won’t tell.”

“Denver, don’t do that blinky, cutesy eye thing!”

My web grew longer, stronger.

“... orrrr you can keep letting her down  
but don’t be mad when she dumps you.”

“Fine. You win. Just don’t say nuthin!”

## SOMETIMES

the  
threat  
of  
losing  
is  
enough  
to  
bring  
anyone  
to  
their  
knees.

## SOON AS I HEARD TIRES ROLL,

I grabbed my shit  
from the floorboards,  
couldn't get to the  
Galaxy Room fast enough,  
Chance racing ahead of me.

I slipped the tape with my name  
in the adapter and  
then the VCR and pressed  
PLAY.

It was a video of our  
first night clubbing with Merc.  
We were dancing, drinking,  
but then the image cut into a new one.

Location:  
Hitmaker Studio in New York,  
the one with the bed  
and the doors  
and the lights  
and the blood.

My naked body,  
eyes closed,  
legs wide open,  
mouth on mute,  
one arm dangling,  
and the monster unfurling,  
growling on top of me.

**AND**

I

broke

and

broke

and

broke

into

a

thousand

tiny

S

H

A

T

T

E

R

E

D

pieces.

## I FELT WHATEVER

was left  
inside me

S  
N  
A  
P

Crying  
screaming  
longing to break something  
break HIM

But it would've  
nevereveryever been  
enough.

Everything became clear:  
that pain I'd felt the next day,  
the blood after,  
feeling split to bits, inside out.

My skin no longer  
felt like my own.

I wanted to rip myself  
out of myself  
leaving behind  
the touched,  
torched,  
humiliated  
shards  
of me.

Eyes burning with tears,  
rage,  
terror like I'd never known

I had to get out of there

Me and Chance and

...

he wasn't there.

Someone else was.

Quiet servant

frozen shadow

I

never

ever

learned

her

name

mouth gaped

eyes wide

At the image

still playing on the screen

A montage of guy-on-girl

Planet Mercury,

all 800 degrees

of fiery surface,

incinerating

what lay beneath to ash

"I'm so sorry!" she stuttered,

"Please don't tell Merc!"

And then she ran away so fast

I didn't get a chance

to beg the same of her.

## I PRESSED

STOP,

grabbed that tape,  
ran through the halls,  
mind spinning I-am-not-safe-I-am-not-safe,  
tears gushing fast and furious,  
until I found Chance scratching  
at that bookshelf again.

This time, so hard  
a few books fell to the floor.

I put them back,  
every limb trembling,  
pressed too hard, I guess,  
because the shelf  
*click-clicked*

and the  
whole wall  
opened like a door

and that's when I saw ...  
stairs.

## CHANCE

darted into the pit of darkness  
sniffing and whimpering  
every step of the way

And I  
ran-and-ran-and-ran  
sobbing through panted breaths

A long, winding maze  
two walls lined with doors  
three to each side.

Chance stopped at the first one  
started scratching at it like mad.

That's when I heard a voice:  
“*Who's there?*”

## IN THE BIG BRICK HOUSE

on Pristine Road  
there lay a hidden maze,  
its winding halls  
padded with silence,  
ceiling to floor,  
six doors, equidistant,  
each one complete  
with a tiny covered window.

If you lifted the first one,  
you would see a girl on a bed,  
tucked in the corner,  
hands clutched on swollen belly

And the second you did,  
you would search frantically  
for something, anything  
to open that door  
and break her

F

R

E

E

## I CRIED HYSTERICALLY

as Dali stood and ran to me,  
her hands reaching through the window,  
the warmth of her touch  
not enough to keep me from  
trying to rip that door off

“I’m so sorry!  
I’m so sorry!”

We finished each other’s words

*I        didn’t*

*know    he*

*did      that*

*to        you*

...

*us*

But that chorus set me off even more

“THIS IS MY FAULT!” I cried.

“I thought if I just did  
what Merc wanted, we’d get famous faster.  
I didn’t think he would hurt you, too.  
I should have said something, Denver.”

Dali started sobbing  
whole body convulsing,  
sliding down the door.

I yanked and pulled,  
begging the universe  
for Herculean strength.

“I’m getting you out of here right now—”

Chance started barking like mad.  
Was someone here?

“You gotta go back up,” Dali begged.

“I can’t leave you down here!”

“No one will believe us, Denver!

It’s our word against his.

Plus he’s got on us on Insta

saying we chose to come here.”

“Dali, I’ve got the tapes of what he did.  
Evidence.”

“And he is never gonna let you leave  
this house with those tapes. You need  
to get upstairs now, before we’re both  
trapped down here!”

“Okay, I’m going, but I will get you out  
and I’m gonna make him pay, Dali!”

“Denver?”

“Yes?”

Dali pointed her lips down the hall.

“There are more of us.

They are everywhere.

All around

if you look close enough.”

## I HAULED ASS TO MY ROOM,

video evidence tucked beneath the floor,  
my mind a revolving swirl of

the girl down the hall from my room  
the girl at the concert  
the girl in the pool house  
the broken girl in the bed (me)

teeth sinking  
deeper into bloodied lips.

All the jagged,  
splintered  
pieces of me  
left behind in that studio in New York  
without me even knowing  
just how far things went

Fragments  
left behind with my best friend,  
in a hidden dungeon in this house,  
left behind onstage  
when Merc claimed what was rightfully mine

And a plan began to form in  
my good-enough  
smart-enough  
brilliant brain

I was going to mute this  
MONSTER  
for good.

## TUCKED IN BED,

covers over my head,  
Merc cracked my door open,  
walked slowly to me  
and touched my hair,  
that one touch  
turned me to a mountain of ice.

Pretending I was sleeping,  
deep breaths in and out,  
he whispered in my ear

“Heard you haven’t been feeling good.  
I gotta film for a couple days, so I won’t  
see you. But Meat will be here,  
on double duty. And when  
I get back, I’m all yours.”

He kissed my forehead,  
and walked out my room  
I opened my eyes  
and didn’t close them  
for the rest of the night.

ONCE UPON A TIME,

the gray-eyed monster  
kissed his prey  
in the still of the night,  
not knowing  
that come morning,  
that one kiss  
would birth another monster  
far more powerful,  
its fangs and claws  
dripping with  
honey-coated venom.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 12

**1:59 a.m.**

Sprawled out on the couch,  
Meat slept beneath  
a cold December moon,  
I explored la Casa de Merc,  
spider legs scuttled silently,  
searching undiscovered rooms,  
    hunting,  
        gathering,

until my AliExpress backpack  
was filled with  
envelopes,  
tape,  
bubble wrap,  
and the most precious  
find of all  
tucked in an office cabinet:

shiny  
black  
metal

fire  
ready  
for  
angry  
fingertips  
at a moment's notice.

I'd never seen a gun in real life before  
not in person  
not even in our old 'hood  
that Ma and Papi thought was unsafe

At first I couldn't  
bring myself to touch it

It felt heavy  
and  
dead  
and  
cold

A bludgeon  
An anchor

I had no choice  
but to steal it

Figured it was safer with me  
than it'd ever be with him

And I was safer with *it*  
than I ever, ever was  
with Sean "Mercury" Ellis.

## THURSDAY, DECEMBER 12

**5:21 p.m.**

Pulling at the darkening skin  
sagging beneath his eyes,  
Meat gazed at his reflection  
in the mirror above the fireplace.

Cologne freshly sprayed,  
bald head, coconut-oil shining.  
“Denver, I gotta bounce for like  
two, three hours, or my girl’s gonna kill me.”

Hands clutching my belly,  
a performance worthy of an Emmy,  
I begged, “I need a ride to the store.”

Long, drawn-out sigh. “For what?”

“Maxi pads.”

“Merc’s got plenty of that stuff in the—”

“We’re out. I checked.”

A pause.  
I could see Meat’s  
brain percolating.

“I mean, I guess you could go  
and I’ll just tell Merc and—”

“Nah, he’s still away. I’ll just bring ’em to you.  
Er, what kind?”

“Always.  
With wings.  
Overnight.  
Lilac scented—”

“Let’s just hurry up.

Bout to make a brotha late late!”

“Thanks, let me grab my backpack!”

Downtown Alpharetta was lined with  
Christmas trees, and hordes of people,  
street parking almost impossible to find.

“Can I have some money?” I held out my hand.

Meat shook his head.

“We got a name for folks  
like you, where I come from:  
Beggin’ Bertha!”

He reached into his pocket and  
then pulled out a twenty,  
and I hoped it would be enough to do enough.

“Why don’t you stop at that florist down the street?  
Get your girl some calla lilies.”

“Nah, I’ma wait. Walgreens is  
right there,”  
Meat insisted.

My stomach rumbled  
tryna figure out how to  
get this man OUT my face.

“I mean, I guess if that’s how  
you wanna roll up on shortie.  
Late *and* empty-handed.”

Meat eyed the distance  
from the pharmacy to the florist.  
Close, but not close enough to walk.  
“What you say again? Calla lilies?”

I hit him with a nod,  
slammed the car door,  
and exhaled loud as hell,  
as he busted a U-turn in the middle of  
Main Street.

## A RACE THROUGH TIME

to zip in and out  
of that post office  
next to Walgreens.

Heart pounded,  
waiting in a line,  
that seemed ten  
minutes too long,  
I didn't have that kind of time.

I went up to one of those  
speedy self-serve machines,  
typed in the address,  
fingers frantically  
pressing  
all the proper buttons  
to select media mail

I didn't care that it'd  
take up to ten days  
to reach the destination  
all that mattered was that it arrived

A hot tear sprinted  
down my cheek  
as I bypassed  
the long line  
and placed my package in the outgoing bin

“Miss, are you okay?” the clerk asked.

Could she see  
my hands trembling?  
Hear the mezzo forte  
of my beating heart?  
“I'm fine.” I wiped my face,

and hauled ass to the pharmacy,  
grabbed the cheapest pads  
I could find,  
self-checkout to hurry the process.

And just as I walked out  
the store,  
I bumped into Meat  
holding a beautiful bouquet  
of calla lilies.

“How’d I do?” He beamed.

“Not bad, lover boy.”  
I slapped his shoulder,  
walking back to the car.

“Ay yo, where’s my change, Denver?”

“Change?” I smirked  
as I opened the door.

“Man, you really don’t know much  
about women, do you?  
Here’s your quarter.”

## I SMILED THE WHOLE RIDE HOME

because  
despite all the pain  
brewing within,  
I found a gift ...  
a reason to smile that night.

Meat pulled up to the front steps,  
put the car in park,  
to let me out.

“Hey, Denver.” He rolled down the window.  
“I know this music thing is taking a toll on you.  
On the real, I think you can do better  
than Merc. Be *bigger* than him.  
But you ain’t hear that from me.  
Try and feel better, okay?”

And for a second,  
I almost felt bad  
for lying to him.  
Almost.

“That’s the plan,”  
I replied.

And then Meat and his gentle smile  
and those flowers  
pulled off beneath a darkening sky.

I took one last look  
at that mansion,  
and whispered to the cold wind,  
“I did it, Dali. *We* did it.”

## SOON AS I GOT THROUGH

the front door,  
my feet hit the floor running.

I unlocked my phone,  
having memorized a series of  
codes

Merc changes at will

Fingers scrambled through combinations  
till I landed on the most obvious of all

1-2-2-9

his birthday

Home page sprang to life  
I couldn't dial fast enough

She picked up  
on the first ring.

“Ma?”

“DENVER?”

Sobbing and screaming became one.

“I don't have much time.

I just called to say I'm sorry  
and

I love you

and

I'm coming home—

“Both me and Dali ...

Tonight.”

## IT'S LIKE

there was a button  
inside me  
and someone  
clicked ON

I flew down the hall,  
backpack strapped  
to my shoulders

Pushed on the bookshelf  
hard, not caring if  
I broke it

Jumped over steps,  
two, three at a time  
until I reached Dali's door,  
lifted the small window and saw ...  
no one.

EVERY

single

door

empty.

MOUTH,

dry.

Hands,

wet.

Feet,

RUN!

UP UP UP the steps!

panic rising

time ticking

... ..

## "LOOKING FOR SOMETHING?"

I heard the monster's voice  
before I saw  
his shadow.

My vocal cords  
exploded.

"I know what you are," I spat at his face,  
"and I know what you did to me.  
You're a fucking MONSTER!  
Now tell me where Dali is  
before I call the cops!"

But he was fast.  
Too fast.

Two gloved hands  
wrapped tight  
around my neck  
the weight of them  
crushing my instrument  
slowly.

But free hands  
turned to Brooklyn fists  
slamming hard against  
Merc's eyes,  
mouth,  
nose,  
knees-to-nuts,  
the final blow.

Chance barked wildly,  
darted down the steps,  
jumped on his hind legs,  
smiling, licking both of us  
like it was a goddamned party.

I grabbed a vase  
launched it straight at Merc's head,  
heard him wince and fall to his knees

I hauled ass out the kitchen doors,  
Chance right on my tail,  
past the patio,  
past the peach trees,  
eyes scanning the darkness  
for that broken,  
open chain-link fence.

But I was the only one focused  
because Chance saw a squirrel  
and zipped off in a different direction

There was no time  
to grab him

Not when  
I realized  
Merc was chasing me

Just a few feet more,  
I begged my feet to move faster

Because once I got through  
that hole,  
I was gonna flag down  
the first car I saw.

But I heard him closer,  
the pounding of his steps  
drawing near,

I took one look behind me  
and just like the white girls  
in the horror movies  
what did my Black ass do?

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Merc  
pounced on top of me  
and started screaming,  
“Bitch, you trying to ruin me?  
After everything I did for you?”

That voice echoed up to the clouds

slapping kicking  
punching rolling

My backpack ripped open,  
black metal rolling out,  
reflecting  
beneath starry skies ...

Some monsters were made of  
storms and fire,

with hands  
fast enough  
to wrap  
fingers around  
triggers and

P

U

L

L.

A single shot  
through my gut

muted *Merc*  
but didn't end me.

Yet.

Earth's rotation on pause,  
a staggered sip of breath

the gun unreachable  
in the grass

But it was fine,  
because I won,  
no matter what  
the universe chose for me next.

The world would know  
that Sean “Mercury” Ellis is a predator.

That he hurt Dalisay Gómez  
and Denver Lee Lafleur  
and God knows how many more?

I didn’t let him get away with it  
because my voice **STILL** mattered  
even though he tried  
to take it away from me.

## EYES FLUTTERING,

ever-so-slowly,  
I saw Marissa  
dart through tree-lined fields,  
moonlight haloing fiery hair,  
as Merc towered above me,  
sobbing wordlessly as I bled and bled

O

U

T

I heard the panting of her breath,  
the desperation in her voice.

“What did you do, Merc?”

“Denver found ... She was gonna ...”

“Don’t say another word!

You can’t be here!

I told you not to trust this one.

Get back to set. I’ll take care of this.”

I saw Marissa’s gloved hands  
wipe down the gun,  
collect the shell off the ground.

Run back inside the house  
crash expensive vases,  
statues, glasses  
against Brazilian cherry floors.

Paint the picture  
of a crime  
of epic proportions.

(Just not the one that actually happened.)

Grab her phone,  
dial three digits,

“I’d like to report a robbery,”  
voice faux-coated with tears,

while I lay there  
frozen still in the grass:  
cells, muscles, organs,  
dying-dying-dying.

I WAS COLD, Papi.

But only for a moment.

Then ...

I WAS WARM  
I WAS TIRED  
I WAS ALONE  
I was fading

(s

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y)

## RED LIGHT

white light,  
blue light

I recognized Officer Parsons  
from the night of the wellness check.

Could he hear my words,  
muted behind sealed lips,  
closed eyes, halted breath?

*Follow the hole in the fence.  
That's where Merc went.*  
But he didn't hear.  
No one did.

I tried to hang on, Papi,  
and wait for you.

Even after they tossed me  
on the gurney,  
drove me godknowswhere

Even after your  
emergency flight  
Pennsylvania to Georgia,  
fast as wings could fly ... it was too late.  
Uber ride  
zipped down I-85  
even when your feet reached  
the cold, sterile room,  
where coroners drew curtains back,  
your hands pounding  
against Plexiglas

the wailing  
the sobbing

the identifying  
that that body was  
*me.*

The Earth tilted  
slowly on its axis  
as you signed on the dotted line,  
giving examiners  
permission to  
poke me,  
prod me,  
open me,  
fill me up,  
drain me,  
OUT

and sew the broken pieces  
back together again.

Until all that was left  
was a  
lifeless  
breathless  
shell.

## WEIGHT:

Does it  
even matter

any more?

I am weightless now.

Can't you see?

Look how the universe holds  
me.

## IF ONLY I COULD

have waited a little longer ...

like ... I had so much to tell you

these were the things money could buy:

alibis,

covered-up lies,

friends in high places,

the silence of Black and Brown girls

looking for a come-up, a payday

a way in ...

(and a way out)

And also ...

that I messed up.

I was wrong about Merc.

Ma

and

you

and Shak

and the Browns

were right all along.

But also ...

Y'all messed up, too.

You were wrong about ME.

I was

smart

talented

*enough.*

MONDAY, DECEMBER 23

But I guess it's too late, huh?  
Especially since I am here:

On this plane,  
in this box.

Flying VIP  
doesn't always mean  
first-class seat.

Sometimes it means  
boarding first on the plane  
hidden away from eyes,  
ears,  
tears  
that will surely come if passengers  
see ramp agents  
loading dead bodies  
in bottom bunks.

41.325560° N, -74.808130° W

Final destination: Stroyan Funeral Home, Milford, PA

Will

Ma

and

Gwen

and

Tía Esme

and

Dali

and

Shak

and the Browns

and

all of Brooklyn

and

Shohola

be there

waiting for me?

Can you make sure of it, Papi?

And when we're all together again,

will you play our special song?

You know the one, right?

**DECEMBER 13**

**EIGHTEEN-YEAR-OLD PROTÉGÉ OF SEAN “MERCURY” ELLIS  
SHOT DURING SUSPECTED HOME INVASION**

Funeral planned post-Christmas holiday

**DECEMBER 14**

**R&B STAR QUESTIONED IN ROBBERY/MURDER AT ATLANTA  
HOME**

Atlanta PD confirms Ellis cleared as a suspect

**DECEMBER 28**

**MEGA PRODUCER SEAN “MERCURY” ELLIS, SET TO  
CONTINUE FILMING MOVIE**

R&B star back to work after mourning the death of his soon-to-debut protégé, Denver Lee Lafleur

**JANUARY 3**

**FOUR YOUNG WOMEN, ALLEGED VICTIMS OF SEAN  
“MERCURY” ELLIS, DENY ACCUSATIONS OF BEING HELD  
CAPTIVE**

Rumors surface they were paid off

MARCH 28

## Grief

There is no cure,  
no magic pill,  
no on or off button

It comes at will,  
sits still deep within,  
a keeper of sorts,

With a mind of its own  
it tells *you* how long to stay,  
three months in this case,  
surrounded by  
mountains

and

tears

and

family

and

H

O

M

E.

But it will also  
tell you when to let go,  
move on,

A silent, gentle whisper  
that reminds you (Gwen)  
of the gift that had been waiting  
all along ...

DECEMBER 12

Gwendolyn Lafleur, R.A.

Dartmouth College

1256 Hinman

Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

Dear Gwen,

I can already FEEL you side-eyeing me!

I'm sure I'm gonna spend a long time paying for the worry I put you, Ma, and Papi through.

But I did get to live out some part of my dream at least. And I'm nowhere near done.

Merc tried to break me. Tried to take away my talent, my voice, my music. But what I'm gonna take from him will be far worse.

That's why I need you to hold on to this package for me. Please don't tell Ma and Papi. I'll explain everything when I get there. You got me, right? Last time. Promise.

See you soon,

Denny

**APRIL 6**

**MURDER INVESTIGATION INTO THE DEATH OF DENVER LEE LAFLEUR REOPENED AFTER DAMNING VIDEO EVIDENCE SENT TO ATLANTA PD**

**APRIL 7**

**R&B STAR SEAN “MERCURY” ELLIS ARRESTED IN HIS HOME. MISSING GIRL DALISAY GÓMEZ FOUND IN BASEMENT WITH BABY.**

**APRIL 13**

**VIRAL AFTER DEATH: DISGRACED R&B STAR’S MURDER VICTIM’S ORIGINAL SONG, “I’M THROUGH,” DEBUTS AT #1 ON THE CHARTS**

JUNE 14

They say the greatest love stories  
begin as a cliché

boy meets girl  
boy and girl fall in love  
and they live  
happily  
ever  
after

But that's not how our story  
~~goes~~ went

One day,  
when  
the wounds  
have healed  
and her ghost  
subsides,

I will tell you a story,  
of two girls lost in the fire,  
set by  
El Cuco ...

the monster  
with the fangs  
and claws  
and tiny hands  
hidden in deep pockets,

how he cast his web  
put a spell on ~~me~~ us  
and weaved and weaved  
until † we almost had nothing left.

But for now,

I gotta go.

My baby girl,  
Denver Lee Gómez,  
needs her mami.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There's a certain relief that washes over me every time I type those magical words: *the end*.

I'm not sure I felt that this time around. I worried for the characters, for the families impacted, and more importantly, I still worry for the real-life Denvers and Dalis of the world.

So, I begin these acknowledgments by saying: I see you. In some ways, I am you. But above all, I *believe* you. And I know I'm not the only one. There's a whole village waiting to rise up and stand by your side.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Tami Charles** is the critically acclaimed author of numerous books for young readers, including *Like Vanessa* and *Becoming Beatriz*. In her teens and early twenties, Tami enjoyed a taste of fame as a member of an all-girl R&B trio. They performed for Boyz II Men, BET, *Showtime at the Apollo*, and had a one-hit wonder on the radio. Those were the good old days! Tami's adult years would lead her to the classroom, where she worked as an educator for thirteen years before pursuing her childhood dream of becoming an author. For more information on Tami and her books, visit [tamiwrites.com](http://tamiwrites.com).

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