

## Brothers by Chance

The handle to the blue conversion van trembled as four hands collided with each other—fighting to pull it open.

“Bro, move, I’m the oldest!” said Kadeem, trying to best his younger brother, Prince.

“But I called shotgun!” Prince retorted. “You were riding in the front this morning, it’s my turn now.”

If one didn’t stop, they were going to kill each other—or worse, cause damage to the van.

“Both of you lil’ niggas get to da back, since y’all can’t figure da shit out.”

Kadeem shoved Prince to the back door, “See what you did!”

“You’re the one trying to hoard the front seat,” Prince responded.

They both knew where they were going: it was Friday, after school. The weekend sun was settling in as the two watched the failed, crack-infested housing divisions fade into the stately homes of the Edison District.

Prince leaned in closer to Kadeem, though their father wasn’t paying them any mind, as the bass from 80s Hip-Hop throwbacks made the windows resemble capillary waves.

“Don’t forget, Kadeem, you have to get him to sign your progress report,”

“Nigga, you do too,” Kadeem responded.

“No, I do not. I’m passing all my classes.”

“Yeah, whatever, I don’t need you all in my grill about that shit.”

“I’m just trying to help *you*, stupid.” At this, Kadeem’s face tightened, and his eyebrows arched.

“Shut the fuck up, sissy!”

“Aye,” a booming voice shouted from the front—the windows seemed to rumble from a different bass now. “Watch yo mouth. I done already told you about calling him that.”

“But he-”

“Kadeem, what I say.”

Silence.

The van stopped in front of a sizable three-family flat, yet their father didn’t shift the gear into park.

“Y’all boys keep it cool, alright, cut all that bickering out,” their father instructed, looking through the rearview mirror.

“Are you going to come back and visit us, Deddy?” Prince asked. Every weekend, the weekend seemed to last longer.

Their father sighed, “Yeah, Prince. Y’all just stay outta trouble, aight.”

Prince nodded his head as Kadeem attempted to exit the van, his side being the one facing the street. Prince grabbed Kadeem’s arm, “Come out on my side.”

“Don’t worry ‘bout me,” Kadeem responded as he flung the door open.

The trees overhead steadied their swaying as the birds fluttered away: a silver sedan swooshed by, and an eerie screeching noise followed. The speed of it all smacked Kadeem to the asphalt. They’d

never seen their father step out of the van so quickly. He immediately examined the door before conversing with the other car. He handed them a few bills before returning to the van.

“You better hope this comes out, boy,” he said to Kadeem, licking his finger and rubbing it along the crooked scrape. “Go on in the house.”

Kadeem, with his head hung low, staggered over to the sidewalk, where Prince watched with a familiar expression.

“I told you,” Prince said as he flung his large backpack over his shoulder.

Kadeem did not respond. He inched up the porch stairs, with his seemingly empty backpack skidding along the tan economy turf carpet of the porch.

“Why y’all never bring no clothes with y’all?” asked Delascie from the next-door porch. “Y’all be here the whole weekend,” he continued.

“Mothafuckah, we got clothes here,” Kadeem responded.

Delascie jumped around in a rhythm. He was practicing something he surely wouldn’t be able to keep quiet about later. “Y’all coming outside later?” he asked.

“Hell yeah, you know it,” Kadeem responded.

Prince rolled his eyes and shrugged his shoulders, “I have to practice my spelling words.”

The stench of mildew hit them as soon as they entered the bottom unit. A wrinkled woman grabbed the back of their heads and ushered them in before closing the wooden door—expelling the sunlight. Humidity separated Prince and Kadeem as they headed to their room at the back of the hallway.

“You boys have homework to do?” the woman asked.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Prince responded.

“No,” said Kadeem.

The woman, moving more swiftly than a woman her age ever should, thumped Kadeem behind his ear. “Mind your manners, boy—and don’t you even touch that door until you finish that homework.”

Kadeem retreated to their dim room. He dropped his backpack on the floor while Prince settled in at the table. He wrote out his spelling words phonetically, then recited them to himself. Nearly an hour later, he gave himself a makeshift test—just before the bouncing of a ball crept in.

“He better not have...” he said to himself. Prince perched his upper body above the back of the couch and shouted out the window to Kadeem.

“Kadeem! You better get inside and finish your homework before she catches you.”

Delascie and Kadeem were gathered with a few other boys from the block. They all played ball in the street, the feeble rim occasionally shifted by the present zephyrs.

“Dang Deem, your baby brother running you, huh,” said one of the boys—a brief fit of laughter and comedic shoulder shoving followed.

“You be a good boy and do yo homework, don’t worry ‘bout me,” said Kadeem.

“Kadeem! She is going to catch you, you better come inside.”

“Shut up, pussy,” one of the boys said—their slender finger pointed at a Prince.

Kadeem, with enough force not to question his current authority, pushed the boy in his chest. “Aye, watch your mouth, lil’ nigga. Let me handle my little brother, aight.” He turns back towards the house, “Prince, just go in there and watch her for me, aight?”

Prince shrugged his shoulder and closed the window, the heat thick—whipping past him and making itself at home in the house.

Thirty minutes went by. Prince forced himself to work on a bit of arithmetic.

“I don’t understand, if Johnny has to distribute the crayons into eight different boxes, then shouldn’t we divide-”

“Kadeem, get your ass in this house!”

A heap of hooting and laughter preceded the sight of the woman forcibly thrusting Kadeem into the house.

“You already know where to go: bend over that chair.”

Prince drops his pencil and clings to the side of the kitchen doorway. Kadeem’s face is indifferent as the soft, muted rhythm of wood clinging together consumes the space. The woman returns, her grip tightened around a light brown paint stick—the orange Home Depot logo brandished clearly on the hilt. Clash! Bare flesh meets wood: a strong wincing from Kadeem unsettles Prince. Before either can catch a breath, the woman brings her arm from behind her frame, across continents, to strike him again. Tears swell in the corner of Prince’s eyes as the wallops, and Kadeem’s exclams, fall into a rhythm. A crack shatters the ground under Prince’s feet as Kadeem lets out a gutting shout. The previously unused paint stick is quickly coated in red at the tip. The woman continues.

Later, the two sat on the edge of the bed together.

“You want me to call Deddy? The old lady next door will let me use the phone if I ask.”

“He won’t care, you’ll just get *yourself* in trouble. Don’t worry ‘bout me.”

The brothers sat, surrounded by silence—except for the bouncing of a ball and children’s laughter. Prince starts to speak, but something catches his tongue.

“And I know, *you told me so*. You ain’t gotta say it.”

“I wasn’t going to say that.”

“Then what chu was finna say?”

“Nothing,” he pauses. “Just, I love you.” He felt sticky; he quickly followed up with a shove. “You and your big biscuit head.”

They both smile, then Kadeem responds: “Whatever, Prince, I love you too, aight. I know that’s what you want to hear.”

The brothers shared a brief moment of agreement, a positive impasse. They didn’t fight over which cartoon to watch; they didn’t bicker about the shower sequence. Kadeem even tested Prince on his spelling words, which was just as good as doing his own homework. Tomorrow, the quarrels would continue; but for now, the soreness of Kadeem’s wounds could be felt by both of them—and after such brutality, only warmth and passion could follow.