

OFF BALANCE



PAULA
CHASE



WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK

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MEET THE CREW— SOUTHSIDE'S REALEST

- Chyna Thomas (@ChynaTee)
- Jamaal Henderson (@Maal_MaalHenderson)
- Pierre “Pee” Fontaine (@PierreRealBaller)
- Nyla Jenkins (@NylaLuvsGirls)
- Jacques Henderson (@JaqEmUp)
- Bronson “Bronny” Washington (@BronnysBack)

P6 POWER PANTHERS GYMNASTICS TEAM

- Alicia “Leesh” Swanson (@LeeshDaBeast) Product of two local celebrities, will flex on 'em without hesitation, champion level gymnast
- Selena Torres (@SelenaNevahQuits) Afro-Latina cutie who takes no stuff, bestie of Leesh since birth
- Gina Yang (@GinaBeamMeUp) Beam champion looking to carve a new path using the Heights as a stepping stone
- Melanie Cawthorne (@MellyMelanie) Champion on the floor, insecure off. Desperate to prove herself to Leesh, happy to be the triplet for Leesh and Selena's duo

THE HEIGHTS STAR BALLERS

- LaKendrick “Bear” Tomlinson (@KenBear32) Big man with a big personality, proud to be from the northwest side of Diamond Falls, rolls deep with his boys from Milly Tech, loyal to the game
- “Rich Boy” Paul Benton
- Dirk McKenzie
- Travis “Boo-Man” Nelson
- Lincoln Gillis

THE A-DULTS

- Whitney “Momma Whit” Thomas—Chyna’s mom
- Tamara/Aunt Tam—Whitney’s younger sister
- Terrell “The Black Swan” Swanson—Alicia’s father
- Rodecia Taylor—Alicia’s mother
- Jazmine Torres—Selena’s mother
- Dr. Timothy Walker—Founder of The Heights School of Technology, Sports & Arts

FEATURING

- Hot Lipz—Anonymous accountholder on Chatter

OLD CHATTER



@HotLipz

Icy City Influencer. Knower of all. Unofficial home of all the city's bossip. Lover of Even Numbers.

This is all just speculation and innuendo 'cuz my lawyers said so. 🗨️

Diamond Falls, MD

Following 158 Followers 12K

Well, what have we learned so far, #LipMob? I mean, besides that playing gets you hurt . . . on and off the court. I'll say this much—there's still LOTS of tea to spill, so don't go getting full on me yet. I promised a fun ride and I'm just getting started. Buckle up!

Here's a little taste to hold you over . . .

@Maal_MaalHenderson might want to start politicking the Captains' Council to save himself from expulsion. One of his two ride or dies may not be riding anymore.

If you thought Swanny's side child was the only skeleton in the Swanson closet, you got another think coming 'cause the apple don't fall far from the cheating tree.

Blurts 🗨️ 15 Boosts 📈 102 Beats 🎵 50 🎧 126

CHATTER

@NylaLuvsGirls How you gonna send condolences in one post then talk shit about somebody Chyna close to in the next? 🗨️

@HotLipz Getting mad at the messenger is missing the point. Pay closer attention, lil Sis. 🗨️

@LeeshDaBeast I can't wait until somebody sues you!

#SlanderAssBitch

@HotLipz LOL You mean #LibelAssBitch. But also, it ain't either one if it's true. Name one thing I've printed that's false. I'll wait.

@BlackisBeautiful It might be time for y'all to stop playing with this chick. Seem like she got receipts for days.

@SouthsidesFinest That part!!!!

@MasterofDstruckshun Damn what @BlackSwan do to this woman? Momma out for his ass and his kin!

PROLOGUE

JANUARY:
FIFTY DAYS 'TIL DIAMOND CUP

LEESH

Never trust an influencer bitch.

Seven months ago, Hot Lipz was sending me and my team all kind of love and good luck. It was all Black Girl Magic this and Good luck Power Panthers Gymnastics that.

I checked Chatter so much that if I typed the letter “C” in my phone’s search the app’s big mouth logo came up automatically. Getting name-checked on the account was intoxicating.

As my mother loves to say—it was all flowers and roses. Now, it’s just thorns and sticker briars.

I struggle to process the early morning storm swirling on Chatter from my phone, barely hearing Daddy as he advises, “That’s just noise, Leesha Boo.”

“She’s been right before, though,” I say, relishing the involuntary shudder of his shoulders. His eyes travel to the mirror and he glances at Chyna, in the back seat, the literal flesh and blood reminder of Hot Lipz’s eerie ability to know more than she has a right to.

Chyna’s not paying us any mind. She never does on the ride in to school. Just snugs her buds in and listens to music that depresses me. It’s irritating but I call on Jamaal’s advice—

Stop making everything about you, Leesh. Her mom is dead, her auntie ghosting her, and she’s the most famous hood twin in the whole city.

He forgets I'm the other twin in that scenario. But he's not wrong. The universe took a major dump on Chyna. And it seems like the depressing-ass music helps her win gymnastics meets, so who am I to judge?

I already know she doesn't care about the Hot Lipz post. When I shoved the phone under her nose this morning, she just did her Chyna thing—raised an eyebrow and dismissed me with, "Have you ever considered finding a hobby that doesn't involve doomscrolling?"

That's how irritatingly practical this chick is.

I have fifteen years' experience being the daughter of somebody famous. She's only had two months. But already she sounds more like Daddy than me.

His famous line is *rumors are powerless when they're not true*.

He never talks about when they are.

Maybe because Chyna is living proof of what happens when they are.

Maybe because when they are your marriage ends up on the struggle train, at least in private.

Maybe because then you have to acknowledge how damned powerful they are when they're true.

I can't say all that if he's not going to. It sits between us as the city glides by my window.

We're all quiet as Daddy drops us off to school. His attempt at giving us bonding time.

He's supposed to be on air, but every morning he lets Slamma take over for a new segment while he scoops us up. Neither me or Chyna love it. I used to ride into school with Selena, Chyna used to ride with Pierre, Nyla, and Jamaal. Now we're stuck in our misery.

Diamond Falls in the winter is gray. The high-rises look like

rigid achy joints under the overcast sky that's threatening snow flurries. Commuters walking grip at the top of their coats, choosing to periodically begrudge the nipping cold rather than button up all the way and deny it access.

Daddy steers the car through light downtown traffic. I miss our morning drives alone to school. Even if Chyna isn't listening on purpose, I know she catches wisps of our conversation. To do what with, I don't know yet.

I read the Chatter blurt to him.

It's so cute how the Swanson "Twins" are eating gymnasts up right now. The family that tumbles together stays together, I guess. But behind every good rise there's a fall. Or so I hear. Rumor or gossip? You tell me, #LipMob.

"Like it or not, gossip keeps followers talking, baby girl. It's when they stop that you gotta worry," Daddy says.

And he knows.

I'm a big deal in my circle. Daddy is famous.

He's the Black Swan on 90.5 Da City. Listeners know his deep, maple syrup voice and his story. He's just as famous for turning down Winston Prep Academy's basketball scholarship as he is for being the a.m. drive-time "Voice of the City."

He didn't abandon the southside and the city still loves him for it because in Diamond Falls, the school you chose said everything about you.

As much as he still reps for his alma mater, W.E.B. "Dub" High School, he's a proud Power Panther convert. On the board of trustees and everything.

Usually, I like when he shares advice with me like our celebrity is on the same plane.

Today the Hot Lipz post has me too twisted.

"So Hot Lipz talking trash about me is a good thing?" I ask, grimacing.

Daddy chuckles. “I didn’t say that exactly. You’re . . .” He mirror checks Chyna again. And I look, too. She’s geared up in a purple puff jacket, a white panther snarling from the tiny logo above her breast, and tear-away track pants. We’re twinning. It’s not irony. Everyone on campus will be decked out in school colors for today’s basketball game against Dub.

Pink and purple iridescent swirl in the pearl nose ring on her dark brown face. Her hair is two poofy afro-balls. I see Daddy in her, but I also see the face of her mom. My throat tightens and I clear it. Daddy thinks I’m hinting at him to finish. He smiles, corrects himself effortlessly. “You and Chyna are the faces of this team. Y’all need people talking about you, even if half of it isn’t true.”

I don’t argue. Pointing out the obvious—that Chatter has no cut cards, no middle ground—will only prolong the lecture.

You have two choices to react to a Chatter blurt: Heart it to agree or hit the shocked face emoji. I can’t say shock is disagreeing, but it’s at least—bitch, what?

Chatter posters will debate the sun being yellow if they think there’s a chance one of their wack-ass blurts might trend. Whether people know me or not, know gymnastics or not, they weigh in, desperate to have somebody validate their two cents.

There are only ten shocked face emojis checked. I scroll to see if any of them are my best friend Selena, but the messages move too fast.

People don’t have nothing better to do than give this bitch credibility.

The responses rack up, making the posts I want to see a game of hide-and-seek. I tell myself I don’t care even as I swipe the screen to lock them back into place.

Bear, one of the basketball players and maybe Chyna’s boo thing, jumps on my side:

How come people always rooting for somebody's downfall? Y'all are 🙄

The rest of the Panther basketball players pile on, helping him.

Some just argue because they can:

Would you even namecheck her if her father wasn't @Black-Swan? Stop #ChasingClout

I reward it with a like, then consider taking it back.

Never feed trolls. Never acknowledge rumors. The Book of Daddy, Chapter One, Verse One.

I can't let her win, though, because it's way more haters heart-ing Hot Lipz's stupid-ass post. The hearts tick up, like everybody I ever competed with is crowded around a single phone taking their turn stabbing the screen's Like button.

I sink into my puffy jacket, burrowing up to my chin. The seat warmers toast my butt and still I'm freezing. I tell myself it's the cold January morning, but I know better.

I click the heat up to 85 and that gets Daddy's attention.

"You trying to burn me to a crisp, Leesha Boo?"

He turns down his morning show, cocks his head, my cue to let him in. And I want to.

I want him to know that I have a secret that could destroy our family.

I want to warn him that a war is brewing. But I got myself into this and I need to get myself out. I turn the radio back up and do what Swansons do best, hustle.

"Slamma is holding your spot down lovely," I say.

His lips purse, then turn up in a smile. "Real talk. A little too good."

We listen to the show, critiquing and joking about how animated Daddy's producer and close friend is without Daddy there as the voice of reason. He's chill about it, but deep down he's

worried. He better be. There's always somebody waiting to take your place. You gotta be ready to defend the top spot with everything you got.

Conquer or be vanquished. Period.

NEW CHATTER

**FEBRUARY:
TWENTY-TWO DAYS 'TIL
DIAMOND CUP**

TRANSCRIPT OF THE *EVENING GEMS* SHOW WITH RODECIA TAYLOR

[CAMERA SPOTLIGHTS RODECIA SITTING POISED, HANDS FOLDED ON HER LAP, LEGS CROSSED AT THE ANKLE, IN A ROUNDED OFF-WHITE CHAIR. HER FACE IS TILTED UP SLIGHTLY, CATCHING THE LIGHT. THE SALMON-COLORED LOVE SEAT RESERVED FOR GUESTS IS EMPTY]

JAZMINE TORRES, PRODUCER:

Okay, Deesh, we're live in three, two . . .

[POINTS AT RODECIA]

RODECIA

[SUBTLE BUT SHARP HEAD SNAP AND LOOKS DIRECTLY INTO CAMERA]:

When I began *Evening Gems*, four years ago, I promised the city of Diamond Falls and myself that the show would focus on what makes our city great with an emphasis on the Black community's contributions. It's an intentional mission and one that I'm honored to continue.

Make no mistake, being intentional about joy does not absolve me of my duty to use my platform to call out issues

that are tantamount to poison coursing through the city's veins. The field burning at Winston Preparatory Academy was disturbing. Those responsible falsely accusing young Black men for the act was not only dangerous but criminal.

[CAMERA PULLS IN FOR A TIGHT SHOT FRAMING ONLY RODECIA]

[RODECIA'S VOICE GOES SOFTER, GENTLE]

I'm frustrated and angry.

There are those of you who will say I should remain unbiased as a member of the press. But I am also a mother to a student who used to attend Winston Prep. I wonder, had she been audacious and thoughtless enough to pull such a costly "prank," would the board of trustees be as forgiving as I believe they will be to the young men involved?

It's been ten months since the field burning and those responsible have still not faced consequences. Will they ever?

When those young men accused Black children of an act of vandalism, they knew what was at stake. They knew the potential for violence. But did they understand how this could have resulted in even deeper divisions among the communities in Diamond Falls?

Do they care?

And if they do, is it only because now their false statements didn't work?

True remorse requires one to sit in their wrongdoing. And I appeal to the parents and Winston Board when I say: Are you prepared to do the work required to help the students of the school unlearn years of privilege that allowed young men from your community to so blithely put Black lives in danger?

As you consider the consequences for those involved, remember that performative punishment will speak loudly about the value you place on being a partner in the city's well-being.

I'd like to call on what I'm sure is our shared goal of making Diamond Falls a safe space for all.

WSHN has given me permission to conduct a citywide listening session with our high school students from the schools impacted by this incident. I invite the principals of Winston Prep, the Heights, W.E.B. Du Bois High, and Banneker High to join me in a talk to renew, restore, and restart our connections as Diamondians.

Please visit wshn.com/listen for more information.

Thank you, loyal viewers, for your support, and good night.

THE NEW NORMAL

**FEBRUARY:
TWENTY-TWO DAYS 'TIL
DIAMOND CUP**

LEESH

Life comes at you fast.

That's why the slow moments are so delicious.

Jamaal's hand runs down the line of my stomach and lands on my hip. He's wondering if I'm awake. I breathe shallow so he thinks I'm not. When his hand slips away, I roll over and look out the window of his bedroom.

Chyna's dark row house stares back at me, questioning:

What do you want?

Five months ago, the answer was: win everything and take no prisoners.

One hundred fifty days and six hours ago the only thing I cared about was kissing the Diamond Cup and telling the haters they could do the same thing to my ass, 'cause I'm the best gymnast, period.

Now? All I want is for Chyna to go back into that empty ugly brick row house instead of living in a bedroom next to mine in a high-rise six miles away.

Parents fuck up. I get it. Why do we gotta pay, though?

Because if you found out you had a fifteen-year-old daughter, quick, tell me what would you do?

Dealer's choice:

Toss them some child support?

Run from paying it?

My father does neither one. No, Terrell “the Black Swan” Swanson plants the new seed right in the middle of an already established garden.

It’s next-level good dude and so unnecessary.

My arms break out in goose bumps either from Jamaal’s breath on the back of my neck or because the lie I’ve been telling myself isn’t hitting how it was over a hundred days ago.

Chyna don’t wanna be living with us any more than me and my mother want her there. She’s trapped. And if I could help her escape, I would. But her house is empty because nobody’s there.

Her mother’s dead. Her Aunt Tam may as well be. No one’s heard from her in weeks. If Chyna has, she’s not telling anybody. Even Jamaal.

His breathing beside me is steady and calm like he don’t have a care in the world. Which the lie detector detected, that’s a lie. But I need the lie, right now, and I let the steady hiss of his breath slow my thoughts.

Why shouldn’t Chyna have her secrets? Everybody else damned sure did. Jamaal has his anxiety. And I’m . . .

My body shudders.

I snuggle against Jamaal and he sinks against me, both of us trying to warm up parts of ourselves that the sun can’t touch. Chyna hates us together. And, trust, I’ve stayed with a dude for less. But, I’m not with Jamaal to get to her. No matter what she thinks.

Me and Jamaal are a lot alike. He doesn’t just match my grind, he feeds it. I can tell him anything.

Almost anything, my mind whispers.

I groan and Jamaal takes it as an invitation to snuggle harder. We melt into each other, our athletic bodies hard and soft at the same time. It feels good, but all I can think about is her.

Her home with my parents. Me, here with her best friend.
Sisters. Hood Twins.

Heavy on the twins. Same birthday and everything.

Remembering the scene at the hospital when secrets from the past hacked a huge Chyna-sized hole into my life sets my body on fire. I pull away from Jamaal, leaving room between us like the distance can stop the memory from reaching me. Still it slithers in, coiling into my brain, squeezing.

You ever think something can be the worst thing that ever happens to you, then the world plays in your face by proving that it definitely can get worse? I thought Daddy was cheating. As messed up as cheating is, it can be fixed. That's what I thought, a hundred and fifty days ago.

The memory forces itself on me. It's not going to be denied. Not tonight. Not with me staring at Chyna's empty house. I close my eyes and relive it.

THEN . . .

I needed somebody with me and I voluntold Jamaal to tag along to the hospital, where Daddy claimed he was visiting a sick friend. All I kept thinking was how every other month there's a new rumor about him having a baby out there. Mommy always said not to listen. He's the Black Swan, #1 Radio Personality of 90.5 Da City, and Diamond Fall's favorite son. People want a piece of him. Rumors are part of the game.

Our driver was pretending not to listen to Jamaal begging me.

"Leesh, wait. Call your mother or something. Don't just roll up on somebody you don't know," he said, as the rideshare car screeched to a stop at Bay Medical's front doors. My feet moved

fast, like when I'm ready to break into a gymnastics combination. Maal is over six feet tall and was struggling to keep up with me. Only a few visitors, the really faithful, were still around.

I stopped at the information desk. The old woman behind the desk was polite but slow as shit. And when she asked who we wanted to see, I was dumbstruck for a second because I didn't know. But then the lady on the phone had said Room 360. So I repeated it.

"Leesh, let me call *my* mother at least," he said, panic rising. "Shit, I don't care whose mother we call, as long as we call somebody's."

"For what?" I asked, barely listening as my feet followed the signs to the elevator. I was starting to regret bringing him. I should have called my best friend, Selena. Sel would always ride. Period.

When the elevator closed, Jamaal kept up his pleading.

"So that somebody knows what's happening. Maybe she can help us."

I frowned at him. "Help us do what?" I didn't even know what I was going to do when I saw this woman.

"Leesh, you not gonna fight a grown woman. You heard her," he said, his voice shrill.

I snapped.

"If you scared, then go back downstairs."

And he had the nerve to say, "Ain't nobody scared."

Boy, yes you are, I thought. But I didn't bother saying it. His words were starting to get to me. I didn't have Plan A or B. I didn't even know if Daddy was here for real. Then we got near the nurses' station.

The nurse closest to the door looked up, saw we had our visitor badges, and went back to tapping on her computer. Two

other nurses behind her were so busy yapping, they didn't even look up. One of them was a short Black woman with a head full of purple-colored bundles.

"Should I ask for his autograph? Is that unprofessional?" she asked the other one, voice vibrating with excitement. And that's when I knew Daddy was definitely there. He had that effect on people in the city, especially when he opened his mouth to say hello and that booming radio voice of his blessed your ears.

The other nurse laughed, checking her. "Unprofessional as shit."

The air got caught in my throat. I knew Jamaal heard it because he gave me one last look like—*you sure you want to do this?* And I wish he had asked me because I swear I would have finally turned around. I would have listened. But he didn't.

So I pushed the door open to Room 360 like I was catching them in the act. But hospital doors are heavy and I almost hit my chin moving faster than the door opened.

I thought I was going to see my father standing next to some woman with a baby in her arms. I really did. The third floor's not even maternity and still my brain was convinced that's what I was going to see. Instead, there was this woman standing in the middle of the room, already facing the door, hands on her hips, thick eyelashes batting furiously, waiting. I already knew, she was the woman I had been talking to on the phone. The one I thought was messing with my father. The one who told me to bring my "little ass" on down to the hospital. It was Chyna's Aunt Tam.

Chyna was on one side of the bed. The door opening didn't bother her. She only looked up to see who it was when everyone else did.

Daddy was on the other side of the bed. His face was long.

He was staring down into the bed at this figure that barely took up any space. It was Chyna's mother.

I'd only ever seen her twice, the last time at the donor reception several weeks before. And God she was so tiny in that bed. She didn't look like the same person who Jamaal and Pierre had escorted around the gallery at school.

I didn't recognize the sound that came out of my mouth. It was a squeal like a puppy that had been tapped on the nose for being naughty. Hurt and confusion at the thing causing it pain. I didn't understand what I was seeing. Before I could process it, all six feet of Jamaal slumped into a pile on the floor and everyone ran over to help, even Chyna.

I watched Daddy, Chyna's aunt, and Chyna hover over him. Her mother was lying in a bed . . . dying. I knew this more than I knew anything else. And still she took a few breaths, turned her head toward our chaos, and, looking genuinely worried for Jamaal, asked, "Are you okay, sweetheart?"

I wanted to scream at how gentle she spoke. I needed the rage back. I wanted the heat that Chyna's aunt had for me on the phone when she coaxed me to come here and confront whatever this was. Why would she want me to bring smoke while her sister was . . .

Dying.

And why did it matter to Daddy that Chyna's mother was dying? He never once acted as if he knew Chyna's mother.

Chyna's mother's question got Chyna moving. She went back over to the bed and started messing around with a cup of water for her. Her mom's hand reached. Chyna took it, sat on the bed, then lay down next to her. Chyna's Aunt Tam took her place on the other side of the bed, stroking her sister's arm.

The scream in the back of my throat rose again.

What am I doing here?

Why are you here? I wanted to yell at Daddy. But Chyna's mother was too at peace for me to wreck the energy. This wasn't about me. I mean, it was, but not enough for me to demand answers.

Chyna cuddled against her mother, like she was trying to warm her. Her mother stroked her back and my stomach shriv-eled. If I could feel Chyna's mother slipping away, she definitely could. It wasn't right that we were all in there. But we were. Me, Daddy, and Jamaal gawking.

Chyna's mother looked at us, still rubbing Chyna's back. Her eyes landed on Daddy. They stayed there. I didn't know what was happening, but Daddy nodded. And I couldn't stay quiet.

"Daddy, what's going on?" I asked. I said it so low I didn't think he heard me until he answered.

"We need to talk, Leesha Boo."

And it all crashed in on me. The rumors were true. Daddy had a "baby" out there. It was Chyna.

Chyna Thomas was my sister.

Everything about my life before I walked into that hospital room died in that flash of knowledge that nobody had confirmed but that I felt with my soul. I didn't realize I was moaning. It was the sound people swear a ghost makes when it's haunting you. Deep, full of sorrow and regrets. Mine and maybe Daddy's.

The tears gushed, full-on ugly crying. I think Chyna was crying too. I could see her body shaking softly. Part of me wanted to join her. We were both going through this moment. But my feet were rooted into the floor. Daddy put his arms around me, and his cologne, the smell that was so uniquely him that I never thought anyone else in the world used the scent, made my stomach churn. I swallowed, refusing to be sick. But I was.

Nothing has been the same since.

NOW . . .

It doesn't matter that four months have passed since that night. Tears, hot and fat, roll down my face and onto the pillow. I take a deep breath to keep my body from shaking. I don't want to wake up Jamaal. It's coming up on the anniversary of his brother's death and even though losing the life I used to have ain't the same as losing your brother, some days it feels like we're the walking wounded getting each other through. The trauma bonding is getting old.

I focus on what's ahead.

The bag. The bag. Always about the bag.

The mission is to get the Heights School of Technology, Sports & Arts a state gymnastics and basketball championship in our first year. Losing isn't an option. Period.

I understand the assignment. And so does Jamaal, especially since his suspension, from the basketball team for lying about being cleared medically, ended. He had entered the season hungry and angry. Now, I needed to match that energy.

Twenty-two days until the gymnastics Diamond Cup championship. And forty until the basketball Silver Cup States game.

I know that our grinds are what really keep me and Jamaal together. And I'm good with that. If hustle had twins, it would be the two of us.

Thinking about gymnastics renews my spirit.

No, thinking about winning is what does it.

I squish myself against Jamaal, inviting him to wake up and help me release the new energy and tension running through my body. He's starting to respond when my phone buzzes. There's five stacked plastic crates next to his bed. Each is packed with two pairs of kicks. My phone peeks out of one of the pairs. He

always acts like putting my phone inside of his barely worn shoes is going to ruin them.

“Bruh, don’t put your phone in there,” he’d said, and kept moving it to the top of the crate. And I kept moving it back into the sneaker. He was really ready to get upset about it until I distracted him by pushing him onto the bed and kissing him.

Sneaker heads are wild.

The chortle is stuck in my throat as I see Selena’s message.

Hey. I know you trying to go
on a Hot Lipz diet but . . .
check the latest post 🙄

I take my annoyance out on the phone tapping out a message so hard the bed shivers under me:

IDGAF what that heaux
saying

Another message rolls in quick. I think it’s Sel trying to talk me into going onto Chatter to see what Hot Lipz, an anonymous account, saying about me now. This bitch has a true obsession with me. And I can’t lie, at first, she was getting to me. She knew about Chyna being Daddy’s daughter. She knew about Jamaal’s medical condition. How?

Seriously how?

I’m gonna find out who she is. But what she not gonna do is keep having me out on social media looking like a fool. I stopped taking the bait. Sel knows that. I don’t know why she . . .

I rear back from the new message. It’s not from Selena.

Fuck.

Time to give me what you owe me.

I jump at Jamaal's voice in my ear. His chin on my shoulder. "Who blowing you up?"

I shut the phone down and slide it back into the shoe.

"Nobody," I say softly, then put force in my voice. "It's Sel. Hot Lipz on her best shit, I guess."

He groans. "What now?"

I swallow to moisten my dry mouth. I shrug my shoulder, more to get him off me than in answer. But he takes it as my answer and sits up.

"Want me to look?" he asks.

"If you want," I say. I rip the sheets off me and throw my clothes on. "I'm gonna get ready to head home."

"I thought you were staying?" he asks, and the hurt in his voice only makes me madder. We had done all the proper lying to hook this up. His mom was away with her boyfriend, Junior Junior. We had an entire night of playing house planned. But I can't stay now even with him low-key begging. "Don't your parents think you staying over Selena's?"

It gets on my nerves when Jamaal doesn't stand up. To me. To Chyna. He just thinks everybody supposed to do right by him. That ain't even how the world works.

I lash out.

"Yes, Jamaal, they do. So?" I slip on a pair of fur-lined clogs. They immediately set my feet on fire, matching the heat in my face.

"So, you just gonna walk in the house like you didn't tell them you were spending the night at her spot?" he asks.

The anger in his voice dies right when I need it most.

Jamaal's the type of honest dude that tells you what's on his mind because he figure it'll prevent confrontation. He once told me that he hates when I talk to him like he's a student. So I lean into that, stoking the fire.

"I can change my mind if I want. If you mad 'cause I'm leaving, say it. Stop worrying about what my parents gonna say." I shake my head at him like he's a child I can't get to understand my lecture.

It works.

"Alright, Leesh. Whatever, bruh," he says, sucking his teeth. He scrolls his phone. The Chatter posts fly by in a blur.

I want to ask what he sees. What is that heaux Hot Lipz saying about me now? More importantly, is what she saying true again?

I stay busy calling a car to scoop me up, pretend I don't care what he's reading silently.

"My ride be here in five minutes," I say. His silence burns me. I huff. "You gonna walk me downstairs?"

Soft locs run down the middle of his head and kiss the top of his shoulder. They wiggle as he puts on a pair of baggy shorts. He keeps his back to me. I know he's mad. But I'm surprised when he says, calm, "Look, you want leave, go. But the way you doing it is giving toxic."

"I'm not being toxic," I say weakly.

"Naw, you are." He snorts. "I get it. Hot Lipz got us all fucked-up. But you can't keep letting her get you all twisted."

I want it to only be that so bad. And I open my mouth to tell him the truth. But I can't. Some things are better left hidden.

He shrugs into a T-shirt and comes over to me. I let him believe he can make things better.

He's fine as shit and it's hard to stay fake mad because he's also genuine. The concern is creased across his face. He hugs me.

"I just wish I knew who she was," I say into his stomach.

"We'll figure it out," he says.

There's no fire in his voice. I don't think he really wants to

know. But staying in the dark won't do anybody good. People like her are walking flashlights, shining in corners of your life that you trying to leave behind. High beaming on your regrets.

That's why I gotta stay up on what she's popping, keep her out of my secrets.

"What is she saying now?" I ask.

He shows me his phone.



@HotLipz

Icy City Influencer. Knower of all. Unofficial home of all the city's bossip. Lover of Even Numbers.

This is all just speculation and innuendo 'cuz my lawyers said so. 🗨️

Diamond Falls, MD

Following 420 Followers 24K

Wouldn't it be wild if none of these city rivalries were about sports? 'Cause y'all #WinstonPrepholes are talking suuuper crazy about something that's supposed to be a *checks notes* game. And at y'all big age you know when your smack talk is *rhymes with Aceist*

Time for a Q.

Will it be less easy or more hard for you all to talk shit when one of your own joins a team of mostly 🧑? B/c I hear one of y'all 🧑 legacy babies got the Winston boot and is courting what I hear Winstonites call the "Dr. Walker Plantation." And you know I tell no lies.

Talk amongst yourselves #LipMob

Blurts 🗨️ 128 Boosts 📈 583 Beats 🗨️ 700

CHATTER

@WinstonAlum62 A bunch of young people made a terrible mistake and the Winston board of trustees is handling it properly. Stop fanning flames. Everything isn't racism.

@HotLipz I fixed your post for you—Three white boys set their own field on fire and blamed three Black dudes for it. Got caught in the

lie. To avoid a riot the school drew straws and had to kick one of its own off the island.

@MellyMelanie Yikes!! So no one is going to deny that you guys call the Heights a plantation? 🙄

@EaglesSoar It was a prank gone wrong. Nothing more. Stop with the misinformation.

@MasterofDstruckshun It's wild how long it took y'all to "investigate."

@SouthsidesFinest No cap. They was waiting on people to forget.

@MasterofDstruckshun Southside never forget. Y'all tried it with the wrong ones.

@BlackisBeautiful All of this b/c y'all are threatened by what Dr. Walker is doing. Sad. Don't get to the Silver Cup because his talent will roll over y'all.

@DaDonDada Even a monkey can be taught to do tricks. But I don't see you all threatened by them.

@MasterofDstruckshun Bruh who you calling a monkey?

@NylaLuvsGirls Your momma a monkey, bitch.

@HotLipz Hey @WinstonAlum62 isn't Lil Sir @DaDonDada one of your school's lacrosse players? AKA Donald Langley? Y'all must be so proud. Remind me again how everything isn't about racism.