

*roxanna*

DO 4 LUV

AUNT GEORGIA LEE

*oh*  
DANYA LEE  
FORLIVING

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## *introduction*

Hello, sweet dahlings! It's me again, your Aunt Georgia Lee, ready to tell you the second story in the *My Day One* series.

In this musical masquerade, Roxanna, the new queen of R&B, has set the world on fire with her soulful music that touches the hearts of young and old fans. Although only 25 years old, Roxanna has a voice and spirit of a much older woman. The challenges she's already endured in her young life are responsible for the mature spirit and lyrics in her songs.

Gifted at a young age with a beautiful voice and natural flair for songwriting, she was destined for stardom. Whether she was truly ready to step into the spotlight was never considered by her demanding *momager*, who pushed young Roxanna at the age of five into the spotlight. Her mother's failed attempt at retaining a successful singing career of her own became a burden for Roxanna to carry.

When the co-dependent relationship with her mother and the heavy load of being the perfect performer destroys her sanity, Roxanna finds herself in rehab and trying to put the pieces back together. As if an answer from God is

## INTRODUCTION

presented to her in the voice of an angel by the name of Naomi Right, her counselor in rehab, Roxanna finds unconditional love.

But is the love that Roxanna and Naomi share enough to heal both of their broken spirits? Find out as their story unfolds in Book Two of the *My Day One* series.

Happy Reading!

**Content Warning:** This book contains sensitive content, including memories of sexual abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse, and child abuse. While these experiences are integral to the story, they are not depicted with graphic detail. Additionally, the book portrays struggles with mental illness, attempted suicide, and substance abuse involving drugs and alcohol. ***Reader discretion is strongly advised.***

*My Day One Roxanna: Do 4 Luv* is not for the faint of heart, but for those ready to journey through the tumultuous trials of its characters as they navigate their depths of pain, resilience, and ultimately, self-discovery and healing. We promise to handle your trust and emotions with care as Roxanna's powerful story unfolds, honoring the complexity and humanity of her path.

## *acknowledgments*

As I write these acknowledgments, on the cusp of a new year—2025, a year of infinite possibilities—I am filled with both hope and fear. Hope for the promise of what lies ahead, and fear as I continue to age and inch closer to the time when my journey on this Earth will end. This duality reflects the joys and pains of life itself, a tapestry of experiences that have shaped me into the person I am today.

I approach these acknowledgements reluctantly, carrying the immense weight of this book. It has consumed my mind, body, and spirit like no other project before. Writing *Roxanna* has been a deeply emotional journey, one that has often left me in tears, with a tightened stomach, and clenched teeth as I navigated the memories and feelings that inspired this story.

This book took longer to begin than I planned, delayed not by external pressures but by my own perfectionism and overachieving nature. For once, no amount of self-motivation could force me to sit at my desk and confront a story so close to home. *Roxanna* has forced me to mourn the losses and regrets tied to my own co-dependent, rollercoaster relationship with my "momager."

Though the specifics of our struggles differ, the intensity of that dark time in my life mirrors Roxanna's. Writing her story was both a burden and a blessing, peeling back layers of my own experiences with grief, mental health, and co-dependency. As Erykah Badu says, "I'm sensitive about

my shit,” but I believe in the power of storytelling to connect us, to heal us, and to inspire change.

Mental health challenges touch us all, more now than ever. The pandemic laid bare the struggles many of us hide beneath smiles, laughter, anger, or silence—beneath the skin. And often, the catalyst for our pain is something we hold dear. While the saying “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger” is comforting to some, I’ve often questioned its truth. These experiences haven’t just strengthened me; they’ve also forced me to bury parts of myself, parts that once danced joyfully without care.

At 55, I am rediscovering those buried pieces. This awakening is thanks to the beautiful souls who have shown me unconditional love. I want to express my deepest gratitude to them.

First, to my mother: I now understand that you did the very best you could with what you had. You taught me kindness and strength, even as you navigated your own vulnerabilities. You were the strongest person I’ve ever known, even in your moments of weakness.

To my grandmother, though not by blood: You were a divine gift, teaching me that I am worthy of love—God’s love, the love of others, and the love of self. You showed me the power of a smile and the healing spirit of Gospel music.

To my fur babies, past and present: You have been living embodiments of unconditional love, devotion, and forgiveness. To those in Doggie Heaven—Onyx Lee, Kashmir Lee, Phat Lee, and Rocky Lee—I miss you more than words can say. To Bear Lee and RuRu Lee, you continue to bring light into my life.

For those familiar with my work—whether under Aunt Georgia Lee or my other pen names—you’ll recognize the “Mama Issues” woven into my stories. This book represents

the last time I'll dive so deeply into the complex, bitter-sweet gift of the mother-daughter relationship. Going forward, I'm embracing more joy in my storytelling. While my books will still explore real emotions and challenges, I am ready to balance the pain with laughter, love, and hope.

Finally, to you, my readers: Thank you for buying this book, reading this book, and being part of my literary family. No matter who we are, where we come from, or what we believe, *love is love*. Thank you for allowing me to create stories written from the heart with you in mind.

Here's to a future filled with joy, healing, and stories that touch the soul.

**Peace, Fam!**





*This book is dedicated to the voices of women who are often silenced—by society, by loved ones, by the weight of a world that expects them to cradle all life in their arms and nurture it from their very being, while enduring unimaginable pain in return. You are seen. You are heard. You are honored in this story and in every story that Onyx Lee Publishing has written and will continue to write—from hearts that hope to bring healing, even in the smallest of doses.*

*You matter. You are worthy of love. You are not alone.*



## *quotation*

“Some things never change. Some people always stay the same. Hurt you to say you’re the one to blame. You’ve done enough damage, time to walk away from the types of games we play, ‘cause girl, you play all day. But no more lies today, this one habit I will break. I’m breaking bad habits. I swear you’re the worse at it. I walk away but I come right back at it. You don’t even know you’re my bad habit.” - **Roxanna, *Bad Habits***



## *bad habits*

ROXANNA LISTENED to the vibrant sounds of Chaka Khan's classic *Ain't Nobody*, drowning out the other kind of music the 15-year-old dreaded hearing, the kind that often filled her small bedroom with misery and mourning that no child her age should know. Chaka and the rhythmic beat of the drums and guitar in her band attempted to soothe Roxanna with a private concert, making her head bob and her body sway to the declaration of how love can move us in a way so soothing that it can heal a broken heart and make us long for the day when that type of love would come our way.

Roxanna often dreamed of the day that special love would bring her unimaginable joy, making her painful formative years worth it by replacing them with undeniable pleasure. She wrote her own songs about that type of love, but none could compare to the energy of a Chaka Khan, Whitney Houston, Rachele Ferrell, or Miriam Roxanna Rouse. The latter, her mother, was a superstar in Roxanna's eyes, just as great as the powerful voices she admired in the

other vocalists, though her mother had only dreamed of the star power these other divas had achieved.

Roxanna turned up the volume on her iPhone and pushed the earbuds firmly into her ears. The music spilling from her mother's mouth was competing with Chaka Khan's powerful voice, and Miriam's lyrics weren't the kind she wanted to sing along with, no matter how much of a fan she was of her mother. Roxanna's special playlist dedicated to Chaka Khan moved on to *Through the Fire*, and Chaka's lament over a lover afraid to give their heart was bittersweet to Roxanna. She knew, even now, that a love that strong—a love she desired—was worth any struggle. Roxanna too would walk through the fire for that love.

But at the sound of glass crashing against the thin walls of the two-bedroom apartment in Vine City, Roxanna's body jerked with fear rather than fantasy. The struggle outside her door was more real than any romantic dream could ever be. The bodies tussling against the furniture, the tears and cries for mercy, the slap that reverberated throughout her supposed safe space—it was all so powerful that Roxanna could feel the sting herself. She imagined the vibrant redness of her mother's café-au-lait skin as the evidence of brutality marked her beautiful face with another trophy from the monster determined to silence her mother at all costs.

Her body trembled, her mind throbbed, her tears flowed, and her inner voice screamed for her to speak up, to protect her mother at all costs. And though Roxanna knew she'd be punished by the same mother she wanted to protect, she jumped into action. She yanked the earbuds from her ears, threw the iPhone down, propelled her hundred-pound body off the twin bed, and stomped out of

her bedroom into the living room. Without hesitation, she jumped into the ring to tag in for her mother, who was more worse for wear than she'd imagined.

The two fighters—Roxanna's mother and the man she dreaded to claim as her father, Walter—froze in their stances as if some magic had been cast upon them. Their eyes, both shocked by Roxanna's appearance, warned her there would be consequences for her boldness.

"Roxanna, get back in your room. This is grown folks' business," Walter commanded with a familiar bass in his voice that warned anyone who dared approach him that he'd bury them under the power of his 200-pound, former defensive linebacker body.

But Roxanna neither flinched nor retreated. "No."

Her first words were tentative but audible. Both adults appeared even more perplexed by the child's false bravery. They could see her trembling limbs, the quiver in her lips, and the faint tears threatening to spill down her thin, paisley pajamas.

"R-Roxie, go on now," her mother pleaded, her brown eyes cloudy with tears and whatever poison she'd indulged in that evening. "You heard your daddy. Go back to bed and put on your music. You gotta practice for that talent show at school. R-remember?"

For a moment, Roxanna considered her mother's weak plea. She was well aware of the consequences if she disobeyed; once her mother sobered up, the butt whooping wouldn't be pretty. But nothing her mother could do to her would be as brutal as what Walter would do to Miriam, if she didn't step in.

"You heard your mama, little girl. Get back in that room!"

“I s-said no! You’re hurting her. Let her go, *bitch!*”

Walter Primus must have been more shocked by Roxanna’s language than her bravery, because as she waited for him to put a hand on her as harshly as he always did her mother, he did the unexpected. He removed his large paw from her mother’s delicate skin and stepped tentatively closer to Roxanna.

“Roxanna! Please, go back to bed. D-don’t make me whoop your ass right now!” Miriam screamed, though her voice sounded more like a plea.

“Nah, nah,” Walter said, his sneer widening. “Let’s see what this little girl’s made of. She’s doing a lot of talking—a lil buck that can’t cash a check, even if she tried. But ain’t nothing a little practice won’t fix.”

He approached Roxanna and placed his strong, unrelenting hand on her back. Roxanna recoiled at his touch, but Walter merely laughed.

“Yeah, she’s got a little fight in her,” he said, smirking. “But I can tame that. In fact, she might be just what we need to replace your weak ass tonight.”

Miriam rushed over, throwing herself between them, and pleaded with Walter to not do what she didn’t even want to imagine a man like him, would do to her child. But his reveal was even something more unexpected than she had imagined. “No! Walter, please, baby. She’s just being hardheaded, and nothing a good spanking from me won’t take care of. Please, Walter—I can handle her.”

Walter’s piercing laughter mocked the weak state of his common-law wife, “Bitch, please. You couldn’t handle a microphone right now, let alone this spitfire. We got bills to pay, and I promised Mr. Robertson, I was going to bring my best star to the club tonight. And here you are over here



tweaked out on some shit! How many times have I told you, not to party before business is taken care of!”

Miriam tried to stroke Walter’s arm, to console him, to appease his need to punish her, just as long as he didn’t do nothing to Roxanna. “Walter, please, let me fix this. I just need 15 minutes to get myself together. I can do it. I promise, baby—I got this. I won’t mess things up.”

“Bitch! You ain’t got shit! But Rox, over here—she can do it. We’ll just replace your ass with this young sweetness. The crowd will eat it up, and so will Mr. Robertson. You’re not about to mess up this record deal, bitch! I need the money! *We* need the money!”

“W-what? Walter, you know damn well Roxie can’t sing like you need her to. She’s 15, and she’s not no star power like me. I can get that contract. I c-can do it.”

Roxanna didn’t know what to do next or even what to think. One moment she was preparing to tackle Goliath, and the next, she was trying to grasp what her pimp of a sperm donor was offering to trade her for instead of her mama! But one thing she did know for sure: Walter wouldn’t stop hurting her mother tonight, no matter how hard Roxanna tried to save her, unless she could turn his attention to something else.

“Mama, I can do it,” Roxanna said, her voice trembling. “I’ve been practicing with you. I know the songs you want to sing. I can do it—I promise, Mama.”

Miriam looked at her daughter in shock. Mixed emotions of admiration and jealousy covered her battered face. So many thoughts ran through her mind as she contemplated what her man and her daughter were proposing. She saw that glint of heat in Walter’s piercing black eyes—the same look he’d given her 15 years ago when

she was Roxanna's age. She also saw the confusion in Roxanna's youthful brown eyes, but the excitement was there too, lighting up her innocent expression.

"No, Roxie. You ain't ready for this kind of professional arena. You can barely hit your high notes properly. It takes years to hone this kind of craft—and real talent."

Walter's amusement could probably be heard throughout the entire apartment complex as he roared with laughter. His hand found its way along Roxanna's back again, staking his claim over the property he wasn't about to let go without a fight—one no one doubted he'd win.

"You ain't got no say in this, woman," he snarled. "You lost that when you decided to get fucked up. I'm gonna take care of this. Roxanna is going on tonight at The Starlight open mic, and you can do your part by getting your shit together while I get my baby girl ready."

"No!" Miriam screamed, her insides boiling with anger and dread at the thought of how Walter planned on pre-gaming with her child.

"What the fuck did you say!" Walter growled.

Miriam did her best to plaster a smile on her face and shrink into the meek demeanor she had perfected for men like Walter—men who enjoyed overpowering and possessing her, treating her like property to use and abuse at their will. She moved closer to him slowly, then ran her hand across his free hand before bending down to kiss the oversized Super Bowl championship ring that crowned it.

"No baby, I just meant, I can get both of us ready. You just sit down and take it easy. I can even fix you a drink, if you want. I promise, I won't be long. I'll get Roxanna ready. I promise. I won't mess things up, this time. You won't be sorry."

"Fifteen minutes, Miriam," he said, but the harshness in

his tone softened just enough. “That’s all you get. And don’t fuck this up, or you’ll both pay.”

Walter’s hand fell away from Roxanna, and he turned to drop himself onto the couch with a heavy thud. Miriam grabbed Roxanna’s hand, tugging her back toward the bedroom with trembling urgency.

Inside, she shut the door behind them and leaned against it, her breaths coming fast and shallow. Tears spilled freely down her face as she looked at Roxanna, her eyes heavy with shame and even deeper—regret.

“Mama...” Roxanna whispered, her voice barely audible.

Miriam cupped Roxanna’s face with trembling hands. Her touch was soft, her fingers brushing away the tears that mirrored her own.

“Baby,” she said, her voice breaking. “Don’t worry. I’ll figure something out. I’ll get us out of this mess. You just stay strong for me, okay?” She kissed Roxanna’s forehead, her tears wetting her daughter’s skin. “You’re my everything, Roxie. My everything.”

\* \* \*

Roxanna had only seen *The Starlight* in YouTube broadcasts, where famous musicians slummed it for a night, playing intimate sets before their larger concerts or award events in Atlanta. The club was an exclusive spot, dimly lit with neon accents that pulsed to the rhythm of the music. The space was intimate yet electric, alive with the energy of beautiful people dressed in sexy, bold nightclub attire, each piece styled in quintessential Hip Hop Atlanta fashion. Men and women dripped in oversized gold chains, diamond watches, and thick bracelets, their bodies adorned in jewelry that reeked of drug money and recording deals.

As Roxanna walked past a mirrored wall, Walter's strong arm wrapped tightly around her tiny waist like a bodyguard ready to fend off any potential predator. She caught her reflection, and for a moment, she almost didn't recognize herself. The fresh, youthful child she once was—like the faces from her mother's old *Teen* magazines—was buried under layers of heavy makeup, slinky attire, and sparkling fake jewelry. A long auburn wig snaked down her exposed back, almost highlighting the curve of her plump backside.

She tried to free herself from the predator pretending to be her protector, but Walter's unrelenting hand moved with liberty from her waist to her ass, giving her the kind of "fatherly love" no daughter would ever want. Her mother occasionally appeared by her side, attempting to pull her away from his grip, but Walter was determined to let everyone in the room know that Roxanna was his property—no one else's.

Roxanna did her best to keep her composure, forcing herself to believe that her compliance would save her mother from something far worse. Yet, the price she was paying in that moment felt heavier than anything she feared might happen to her mother. Just as tears threatened to spill, ruining her makeup and false lashes, her Uncle Darcy stepped in.

Well, not really her uncle. Darcy—known to most as "The Hammer"—wasn't blood, but ever since Roxanna could walk, her mother's friend had been her guardian angel. Most folks in the neighborhood wouldn't dare call him a saint. Darcy and his crew were known as enforcers of their own kind of law in downtown Atlanta, and nobody challenged them. But to Roxanna, he was her savior.

The moment she saw his broad frame move in front of

her and pull her out of Walter's grasp into his protective embrace, Roxanna could have cried for joy.

"Wassup, Rocky Boo! How my little homie doing?"

Darcy's grill-covered smile sparkled in the dim light, warming her heart. Normally, Roxanna would have burst into giggles at the sound of his greeting—he always sounded like a character from a bad '90s hip-hop movie—but tonight, his corny tone was music to her ears.

He released her gently, then squeezed her shoulder and gave her a serious once-over. "Yo mama tells me you 'bout to hit the stage, little lady. I'm gonna be right up front and center. Me and the boys gotchu, you hear me?"

Darcy's gaze shifted to Walter, his hazy eyes locking with the man who had controlled her every step all night. Roxanna caught a whiff of the familiar medicinal scent her mother often carried, but hazy or not, Darcy's intent was clear. Walter's eyes flashed with fear, while relief washed over her mother's battered face. Slowly but surely, Roxanna's confidence grew. She knew she could deliver what she had promised them both: she would win the favor of Allan Robertson of Big City Records.

"Thanks, Uncle Darcy. I'mma do my best."

"Aye, Rocky Boo, cut the 'Uncle Darcy' for tonight, okay? The Hammer is here to make sure you do more than your best—that you get what you and your mama need. But you can't be going around calling me my government name. You hear me?"

Roxanna couldn't stifle her giggles. For the first time that day, she felt light, free, and safe. "Yes, Hammer. Sorry—you're right. I'm gonna kill it!"

"That's my niece," Darcy said, grinning. "Now show 'em what you working with, kinfolk."

\* \* \*

When the emcee for the night introduced Roxanna, the room filled with loud applause and cheers, none louder than the booming voices of Hammer and his crew. The smile on Roxanna's face brightened, but the look of concern in her mother's fearful brown eyes and the unwanted stroke of Walter's relentless paw on her back made her stomach queasy. She silently recited Isaiah 41:10, the verse her Sunday school teacher had taught them to remember in times of trouble:

*"So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."*

The verse played on a loop in her mind as she slipped out of Walter's devilish grip and slowly walked toward the stage. The energy in the crowd was electric, they were hyped up on a mix of stimulants. Whether they were hyped for her or just hyped for anything didn't matter—she had a job to do.

Her mother's voice cut through the noise. "Roxanna! Take the mic! Don't let me down, Roxanna. Do it!"

Roxanna glanced at Miriam's pleading eyes, seeing the fear of what might happen if she failed this test—from Walter, or perhaps even from God. In that moment, Walter felt more like her god than the Holy Spirit, holding all the power over her and her mother. With a shaky hand, she took the microphone.

The emcee, Smooth Dude, a local radio announcer from V-169, signaled the DJ to cue the song her mother had chosen. It wasn't one of Miriam's originals but a soulful piece by a Neo Soul artist whose music her mother admired. Miriam had exposed Roxanna to an eclectic mix of

music—gospel, jazz, blues, R&B, classical—but Jill Scott’s *He Loves Me* held a special resonance.

As Roxanna began to sing, the lyrics came alive in her. The song spoke of a love so deep, so consuming, that it moved her to her core. She poured her emotions into the performance, channeling the patient yearning, blind love, and deep ache her mother had taught her to convey.

The crowd responded immediately. Their bodies swayed, their faces lit with emotion, and when Roxanna led the chorus, they answered back in a perfect **call and response**. The communal rhythm pulsed through the intimate venue, connecting them all in the moment. The energy from the crowd surged through Roxanna, lifting her higher with every line.

By the time the song ended, the venue erupted in applause, cheers, and a standing ovation, with cries for an encore.

For the first time, Roxanna felt alive—truly alive. The crowd’s love electrified her, like a balm for the wounds she carried. But when she turned to her mother, expecting a reflection of her own joy, she found none. Miriam’s expertly made-up face, hiding the bruises Walter had left, looked even more miserable than it had before.

The audience demanded more, and Roxanna obliged, performing four more songs. Each one felt like a lifetime of joy condensed into a moment. By the time the emcee escorted her offstage to make way for the next act, Roxanna’s dreamlike high faded into a sinking reality.

Walter was waiting. His hand clamped onto her arm, dragging her through the crowd toward the VIP lounge where Allan Robertson sat. Her mother hurried behind, trying to match Walter’s long strides as Roxanna stumbled along like a rag doll.

The VIP lounge was plush but suffocating. Allan Robertson sat at the head of the table, his short, stocky frame dressed in a custom suit that couldn't quite contain his bulk. His garish jewelry glinted in the dim light, and his sweaty face was constantly tended by the two stunning young women flanking him.

Miriam recognized the type immediately. She had seen men like Allan her entire life. When she was younger than Roxanna, she and her mother cleaned houses for nouveau riche families. These families flaunted their wealth, but Miriam's mama always warned her about their insecurities: *"These types are only confident around people like us, people with nothing. But they're always scared the Mayflower rich will abandon them and leave them to live among the drug dealers and the musicians they look down on."*

Now, as Allan's beady eyes lingered on Roxanna, Miriam's stomach churned. She could see it clearly—the same desperate need to prove his importance, the same hunger to possess anything that made him feel powerful. And she knew: Allan Robertson would want to make Roxanna just another one of the trophies seated at his table.

*But not over her dead body!*

"So, this is the star you promised me, Walter," Allan said, his gaze raking over Roxanna in a way that made her skin crawl.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Robertson," Walter gushed. "I'm sure you could tell from her set that she's worth the investment."

"Oh, she's worth it, alright," Allan replied, his grin widening as he took a long, leering look at Roxanna.

Walter laughed nervously, trying to hide the jealousy creeping into his voice. "Right, right. So, I was thinking this might be a good time to sign that contract. I've got some ideas about—"



Walter's words were cut short by a crushing grip on his shoulder. The pain shot through him, nearly bringing him to his knees.

"Aye, Walter," came Hammer's deep voice, calm but laced with menace. "We need to talk. Out back. Now."

Walter winced, the old shoulder injury flaring under Hammer's iron grip. "W-what? Darcy, come on, man. I'm in the middle of—"

"What did I tell you about calling me that?" Hammer's tone was low and deliberate.

Walter glanced at Allan for help, but the record executive looked more amused than concerned. Hammer turned to Miriam and Roxanna, offering his niece a reassuring smile. "Rocky Boo, you did good tonight, girl. Real good." His gaze hardened as he returned to Walter. "Now, Walter. Let's go."

Walter tried to protest but knew better than to argue. Hammer's grip tightened, silencing any resistance. "Okay, okay," he relented, turning to Allan. "Mr. Robertson, forgive me. I'll be back in a minute. Um, please, get to know Roxanna while I'm gone. Her mother will take care of things."

Allan's grin widened as he waved Walter off dismissively. "Take your time, Walter. I'll entertain the ladies in style."

\* \* \*

If Allan Robertson thought Miriam Roxanna Rouse was going to be meek and mild as she might have appeared, or an ass-kisser like Walter, he was quickly rectified of that notion.

"Come on, ladies, take a seat. Help yourselves to some

refreshments. If you don't see what you like on the table, I can get it for you—anything and everything you want," Allan promised, his tone oozing with false charm.

But Roxanna didn't move. She stood still, waiting for her mother's cue, sensing that things weren't going to go the way Allan imagined. She tried to temper the hope rising in her chest, wondering if her mother had somehow drawn strength from Hammer's presence. Yet Roxanna had witnessed too many times when her Uncle Hammer had tried to save Miriam from Walter, only for her mother to remain addicted to their toxic brand of love.

"That won't be necessary, Mr. Robertson," Miriam said coolly, her voice steady and strong. "Roxanna and I already have special plans to celebrate after this conversation."

Allan Robertson couldn't mask the surprise—and amusement—that flickered across his face. He realized, perhaps for the first time, that he had underestimated the quiet, striking older woman who was clearly the more polished version of the young talent standing beside her. It was obvious she had endured significant abuse at the hands of that snake, Walter Primus. Still, the fight in her hadn't been extinguished, despite the expertly applied makeup covering what he suspected were visible war wounds.

"Well, celebrating, are we? Care to elaborate?" Allan asked, his interest piqued.

"Certainly, Mr. Robertson," Miriam replied with a sharp smile. "But I think you already understand the cause of our celebratory dinner. Roxanna is exactly what your record label needs right now—new blood, a fresh sound, and magnetism that can compete with the hottest R&B talent on the scene, like Keyshia Cole, Jazmine Sullivan, and Ciara. And to top it all off, Roxanna and her mother are both

songwriters. Not only can we bring you a superstar, but we can also offer songwriting talent for Roxanna's music *and* for your other artists who need some life breathed into their work."

Allan roared with laughter, though he couldn't deny the sting of her words. This lightweight had hit the nail on the head: his current lineup of young artists lacked the spark they'd once had, and the songwriters he'd relied on for years had grown stale. His label did need new life, new energy, to make his investment worthwhile. Hobby or not, Allan hated losing—especially when his billionaire neighbors were watching.

"Alright," he said, his grin widening. "You've made some strong observations. I can tell there's no point in playing games with you—unless you want to, that is. But that's a conversation for another time."

"No, it's not," Miriam shot back, her voice sharp as a knife. "I'm going to shoot from the hip, Allan. We can be good friends or very bad enemies. My daughter and I are offering you our musical talents—nothing more, nothing else. So, does that sound like something you'd still be interested in, or should we take our offer somewhere else?"

Allan's smile grew wider, but the tightness in his face betrayed his fury. He did his best to hide the rage simmering beneath the surface. This Black woman had the audacity to step to him with such boldness. She would learn, he promised himself. He'd deal with her and that worthless Walter Primus in his own time. For now, he would play the long game—until Roxanna was right where he wanted her: singing on her knees for his private audience.

"Well, Miriam," Allan said smoothly, his voice saccha-

rine, “when you put it like that, we most definitely have a deal.”

\* \* \*

The hum of voices chatting, dishes clattering, and bacon sizzling on the griddle at The Waffle House on Piedmont Avenue provided the perfect white noise for Roxanna’s wandering thoughts. The dim lighting reflected off the polished chrome and checkered tiles, casting a warm, nostalgic glow that contrasted with the chaos of her mind. She had so many questions swirling in her head about the night’s events: Did Miriam Rouse really like her performance, or was she just faking it when she spoke to the record executive to secure the money they all desperately needed? And where was Walter? Why had they left him at The Starlight and taken his car?

Did Uncle Darcy—*Hammer*—do something with Walter?

As much as she wanted her sperm donor out of her life, Roxanna didn’t want to imagine what it would take to truly get rid of him if Hammer had been involved in Walter’s absence. She was dying to know, but what if Walter was just coming to meet them, tagging along with her uncle for a ride? She didn’t want to consider that possibility either.

“Roxanna, are you going to eat that menu or order something from it to celebrate your win?” Miriam half-teased between puffs on her Black and Mild. She covered her tart words with a brief smile before hiding her red-painted lips behind her coffee cup.

“Sorry, Mama. I—I was just thinking, that’s all.”

“Hmph. What you thinking about now, Roxie? You always stirring up trouble, so what now?”

Roxanna lowered her head, trying to hide the shame that seeped through her bones. Her mother was right—Roxanna *had* caused all the confusion tonight and maybe even the end of Walter Primus. What would they do without him? What would her mother do? Where would they live?

“Roxanna, hold your head up,” Miriam said sharply, though her tone softened as she continued. “I was just teasing you. You gotta do better than showing those old sensitive ways of yours. Life ain’t easy out here, and being emotional and too sensitive will get you eaten alive by these people in this world. So, toughen up. Understand?”

Roxanna straightened in her seat, rigid as a board, her teary eyes locked on her mother’s. “Yes, Mama. I’m sorry.”

“Un-uh. Stop saying you sorry all the time. Don’t apologize for breathing, Roxanna. There ain’t too many things in this life a woman needs to apologize for, but you best be sure the world, men, and even other women will *make* you feel like you’re always sorry and in need of their approval. But you don’t need it, as long as you do right by yourself. And right by yo’ Mama.”

Miriam laughed softly, taking another puff from her Black and Mild before quickly stubbing it out under a napkin, hiding the evidence before the waitress could reprimand her.

“Evening, ladies. Have you decided what you want to eat? We’ve got a special on strawberry waffles with real whipped cream and a sprinkle of coconut. Comes with a side of bacon and a fresh mixed berry compote for \$4.99,” the waitress said with practiced cheer.

Roxanna’s eyes lit up with excitement, and Miriam already knew there would be no hesitation now. Roxanna had a weakness for waffles and strawberries—dessert was

her ultimate joy. But as Miriam watched her daughter's face brighten, she silently prayed she could protect Roxanna from the men who would see her as their dessert of choice in this fucking music business.

"Well, Roxanna? What do you think?" Miriam asked.

"Yes, Mama. I want to try it, if we can—" Roxanna stopped short at the warning in her mother's eyes. She knew better than to question where the money would come from.

"Speak to the lady who asked you the question, not me," Miriam instructed.

"Yes, ma'am. Sorry." Roxanna turned to the waitress. "I'd like to try the special, please. Thank you."

"No problem, sweetie. And for you, ma'am?"

Miriam turned to Roxanna with a questioning stare before responding. "What do you think, Roxanna? Should I have the same?"

Roxanna knew her mother loved sweets and bacon but wasn't fond of fresh fruit. She scanned the menu, finding the perfect substitute. "Ma'am, my mother will have the same, except hold the fruit and add smothered hash browns, please."

The pleased expressions on both women's faces made Roxanna sit a bit taller, their encouragement made her feel 10 feet tall, not to mention her success at The Starlight.

"Good choice, Roxie. Thank you. Now, I need you to make another decision for me. Can you do that?"

Roxanna's joy faltered as she braced herself for what was coming. "Yes, Mama. What do you need?"

"I need you to decide how you want your career to go. We have a meeting tomorrow with Allan Robertson, and you're going to need a manager. Someone who puts you

first, has your best interest at heart, and won't let anyone use you."

Roxanna's heart sank. Suddenly, the sweet taste of strawberry waffles didn't seem so appealing. She feared where this conversation was heading—that her mother was preparing her to accept Walter as her manager.

"It's up to you, Roxanna, who you choose. But I'm putting my hat in the ring if you're open to it being me. What do you think?"

Roxanna's head shot up, a smile forming on her face that rivaled her excitement for the Waffle House special. "Yes, Mama! I want you to be my manager. Please!"

Miriam smiled softly, pulling the Black and Mild back out from under the napkin but quickly hiding it again as the waitress arrived with their plates.

"Here you are, ladies—two orders of the Sweetest Berry Delight special. Enjoy!"

Roxanna looked at her plate, ready to devour every bite. But before she could say grace, the question that had been gnawing at her finally spilled out.

"Mama? What about Walter? Where is he?"

Miriam locked eyes with Roxanna, her gaze steady and unflinching. "Don't you worry about Walter. He's not coming back. He's in a much better place now, and that's all you need to know. Now, take this napkin and sign your name to it. It's our official contract that I'll be your manager from this night forth. Okay?"

Without hesitation, Roxanna grabbed the napkin and a pen from the corner, and signed her name, giving her mother her first autograph. She handed the makeshift contract to her mother, banishing the thought of Walter Primus from her mind. Tonight was about celebrating—a new beginning for them both.

Miriam tucked the napkin into her purse and extended her hand to Roxanna. “Now, that’s the best deal you’ll ever make, Roxanna.”

Roxanna shook her mother’s hand, pride swelling in her chest as she glanced back at her plate. For the first time in her life, she believed they were heading toward something better. And in that moment, she silently thanked God for giving her the strength to save the day.