Twin finished up his mini lock-up bid at the school for disorderly boys; he was due to move in with the wifey and Mr. Super Saturday: that 0 to 120 blast from my past. After roughing up one too many guys for stepping to him-trying to test him, my mother did what she knew to do best: save *her*self the trouble; send it or ignore it away.

That left breaking in the new apartment for just my mom and me. We had been there for quite a few months-since around the time I had first met Santana. The way the apartment was situated, it was perfect for me and Santana: the back door was at the back end of the small kitchenette we had-which was right by my bedroom. My mother would say that it wasn't big enough to cuss a cat in, so she'd cook and take her plate into her bedroom or the living room. The living room, my mom's bedroom and the bathroom were all in the front: perfect and convenient for her. Outside of the fact that in order to get to the kitchen, my mom had to come through my room; all else was perfect. Once she was done cooking or preparing a meal-I didn't have to see her anymore.

So when Santana would come over afterschool, he could easily slip out the back door once we heard my mom come through the front door. The only downside to having Santana do that though, was Mrs. Cochran: the little old lady across the hall from us. Her back door was opposite and faced our back door and she didn't missed anything or anybody coming in or out of it.

It was obvious that our back door was freshly broken in from being painted shut. That joker was hard to open. It was so tight around the hinges-built for looks and a mere apartment amenity listing rather than for opening and closing. Sometimes when Ms. Cochran would be in her kitchen, she would peek out her back door whenever she would hear me tugging at it-each and every time-as though it was her first time hearing it and she was alarmed.

Santana and me would twist our lips and roll our eyes in our heads while trying to balance out his back door getaway and my mother's front door entrance with Mrs. Cochran's watchful eyes. We got crafty in those few minutes of time; tugging at the door to let her see me sit the trash out, then wait a few minutes to let Santana squeeze out of it. Our alarm would wake us up at 5:45pm and by 5:55pm Santana would be dressed and gone out the backdoor. My mom would be walking in the front door at 6:05pm. By that time, Santana was always good and around the corner and on his way home-never having to run into her.

It worked like magic for months, until that day my mom got in the house a little sooner than that 6:05pm time. There we were, cuddled up and napping. Me: "Goldilocks." Him: my "Papi Love Bear. The sound of someone tugging keys and juggling bags-startled me. My bedroom door was cracked open a little bit, so I got up and peeked through. I could see my mom's lunch bag in clear view.

"Santana, get dressed! It's my mother! She's coming inside the door!" I screamed.

In an instant, I grabbed my sweats and t-shirt that I would normally slip into afterschool.

He was busy turning in circles trying to find every article of clothing that I was tossing to him-one by one-while I was forcing him into the kitchenette and trying to get him out of that dreaded back door without Mrs. Cochran hearing and peeking out. We had zero stall time-this time.

In a matter of seconds, I had Santana standing on the back porch with his underwear and socks on, catching cotton, while Mrs. Cochran opened her lace curtains and looked out-but not to her surprise as wasn't mine. I expected her, and from my peripheral vision, it looked like she expected us too because she merely looked and walked away. I always avoided looking right at her because I knew that the moment our eyes met (in this daily thing that had gone on most of the five days a week for months now) she would have used that as leverage and permission to reprimand me about it or feel obligated to tell my mom. I wanted to be the one to deliver this situation to her-first.

So I kept right on tending to Santana, not wanting him to know that Mrs. Cochran had seen his naked ass-that would have only slowed him down.

I could hear my mom yelling my name-she was right there in the bathroom. The small, clear, stained-glass bathroom window was, too, *right* there on the back porch-right *next* to Mrs. Cochran's-both facing Santana out on that back porch, and at anytime, if either one of them wanted to raise their window up, look out on that back porch and simply say: "boo!;" "Boo" would have simply been busted.

"Ssshhh," I placed my finger over my mouth, looking at Santana with my lips folded tightly.

By this time, he was completely dressed but demanded a kiss goodbye while I was trying to step into the house and shut that back door enough so the hinges would meet, but not all the way. I needed him off that porch:

"Leave!" I whisper-laughed; pointing out into the air, needing him to follow the direction of it.

He kept making silly faces and making me laugh because he could see my mom's silhouette in the little bathroom window-but she couldn't see him.

"I love your daughter!" he pointed at me while whispering and giggling; then pointed over at the little bathroom window with my mom on the other side of it.

I raised my hand as if to strike him. He reached to kiss me again, treaded lightly down the steps, and around to the front of the building.

When he left, I pushed the door up on the hinges and yelled out to finally answer my mom. The alarm clock was sounding off and served as my theme music for this hell of an impromptu performance that we managed to pull off. I yelled out to my mom: "I'm taking the trash out Ma-I'm coming!"

Sigh.

I was sweating bullets-happy that this scene was over.

Cut.

## 11

## M THE LION'S DEN

I decided that it was time to get that last part of our perfect little wide open relationship [that everyone knew about-including Mrs. Cochran] out in the open. My peers at school, his family and friends, and my friends already knew that Santana and I was a serious item.

I was becoming self-conscious.

I had always prided myself on being mature and brave. Where my mother was concerned, part of me felt enslaved to all the freedoms and responsibilities I had been entrusted with for so long. I was the little lady of the house since I can remember. She secretly had me keeping an eye on the pastures: babysitting Twin and my older brothers over the years-despite the fact that I was the baby. I would hate for her to find out from someone else's mouth, that for almost a year now-I've had a serious boyfriend that I've been going steady with. I sure as hell didn't want her to find out from my belly steadily growing. Despite the fact that Santana and I were using condoms, we would occasionally get careless and resort to the rhythm method too. So with that, I was eager to throw it all in the bag: tell her that I was going steady, tell her how long it had been going on, tell her I lost my virginity, tell her how long I had been sexually active, and then tell her to march me up to the clinic to get some birth control pills before something happened that would change my life altogether.

I was becoming self conscious.

As I was thinking, I began to wonder if Ms. Ananda (who lived beneath Mrs. Cochran) knew too.

I wondered because she had two middle school-aged kids. I began to wonder if either one of them had ever run into Santana in the back of the building, or see him leave down the front steps any time at all-all these months

Ms. Ananda and me were pretty close (instantly) from the moment we moved in. She was a few years younger than my mom, but was youthful and fun. We talked about everything. I just never told her about me having a steady boyfriend. As I thought deeper, I knew that if she knew I was sneaking around, she would have laughed and told me that her kids told her. I was over thinking and getting carried away with my being subconscious.

When we would talk about it, Santana's would say he thought it was pretty "gangster" that although Mrs. Cochran knew about us for a while, she never said anything to me about it, nor did she snitch on me. She very well could have, many-a-days, because she and my mom would talk in the small hallway area at the front door in between both of our front doors-sometimes for hours. That old lady kept her mouth shut for many months and seasons! I think I was growing all too comfortable with it after some time, yet, I didn't want Mrs. Cochran to have a slip of the tongue one day. Every now and again in the evening hours, she would occasionally pour herself a lil' something to drink. She could talk you to sleep then awake all over again. I didn't want that to happen on some random evening, after all this time, and have my mom find out that she was the last to know. And to add insult to injury, find out by anyone else but me.

I was becoming self-conscious.

Santana and my relationship and ability to date openly was too easy and smooth-sailing for too long for my mother not to know.

But not know-no more.

Without any hesitation or fear, before my mom could get comfortable and undressed, I cut to the chase.

I walked to the bathroom door, knocked on it with the back of my knuckles and simply said to her from the other side of it: "Ma, I think I'm ready to go steady."

There was a long awkward moment of silence. My mother had way too much mouth to sit quiet for too long. I knew something was going to echo

from behind that door in due time. I could feel her wanting to say: "You must be out there on the other side of that door with a pork-chop suit on!" but instead, with bass and a grunt in her voice, she roared like a lion from a den:

"Angie. Wait until I get the hell out the bathroom before throwing some shit like that at me!"

I didn't reply. I honored the moment of silence by standing there with my hands folded behind my back. My lips were folded tight; ready for this battle that was about to occur when she came from behind that door. Outside of what I had just dumped in her lap, she had no idea what my mind had been going through. I fancied myself as being so mature, that it was beginning to annoy me that I was sneaking around like some thimble-toed kid. I was getting so annoyed with the fact that although I wasn't sixteen, I was "age-sixteen" threshold-worthy (in spite of all the "age-sixteen" threshold types of things I had been doing).

"Make it snappy now, I haven't got all evening," I may as well had said to her-but instead, I broke the moment of silence by replying: "Alright then. I'll be in my room."

I went into my room and pulled the door just wide enough for her to peep her head in to call me when she was ready. It must've taken her a long time to peep in, because I had fallen asleep and woke up a couple hours later to find her nowhere to be found. Looking at how I had my door cracked-it looked as though she never even came into my room, or stuck her head in the door-which means she didn't even go to the kitchen either. "Where could she be?" I wondered.

A short while later, while I was in the kitchen, I heard a peck at the back door. I pulled the curtain back, it was Ms. Ananda standing there with a very nosey look on her face-looking as if she was about to laugh. I

wrestled the heavily painted amenity open: "What? What's so funny?" I asked-even before she could get anything out of her mouth.

"Girlllll, what are you up here doing. You know what's going on don't you?" she said, sounding like she was one of my nosey peers-fresh from a huddle of gossip.

"No. What?" I probed. I wasn't offering any information. I always had a "won't ask/don't tell" policy.

Ms. Ananda asked: "Girl, you got yourself a little boyfriend and didn't even *tell* me! Why not?" she finished-gasping and sounding concerned at that point.

I laughed: "No, I was going to tell you, I've just been so busy!"

She replied: "But Angie, you've been down to the house and you never said a thing!"

I laughed and coyly replied: "I'm sorry, don't kill me Ms. Ananda." She smacked me on the side of my head.

"But girl, your mother is over there talking to Mrs. Cochran, right now," spilled Ms. Ananda.

She stretched her eyes open wide as mine.

"At first she was down at my house-telling me that you asked her if you could go steady with some lil' BOY! I think she wanted to know if you had ever said anything to me about it-but you didn't even tell me!" she laughed, then turned her voice down an octave:

"After that, she went upstairs here to Mrs. Cochran's house and called me from over there. Turns out, Mrs. Cochran told her that she had seen this lil' rock head boyfriend of yours already! A *long* time ago! Oooh Angie! You sneaky lil' hussy you!" said Ms. Ananda.

I covered my mouth and laughed out loud then asked:

"What! She told her...like that?"

Ms. Ananda continued:

"Girl please! Mrs. Cochran told your mama like: 'You need to go' on and let that gal' see that boy because if you don't and you force her to

sneak around and see him, you are asking for bigger problems that you will NOT be able to handle!' She is over there up in your mother's shit!"

She then asked quietly:

"I don't want to be evasive and all-you know-since you kept everything from me. But I thought I was your girl," said Ms. Ananda, sounding sarcastic and slighted.

She continued:

"Angie, I'm right downstairs if you need to talk. Don't ever keep stuff like that away from me, as much stuff that you share with me. That kinda hurt me that I didn't even *know*," confessed Ms. Ananda.

I stood there in awe about all of this; pissed at my mother for her cowardice after all this time that I was letting my conscious get the best of me-fighting hard to be the first to talk to, and tell her. I took the initiate to open up dialogue about it and just like her: she ran. And she ran off and got the news from somebody else-anyway. She loved to ignore away important situations. As much mouth as my mom had, it baffled me how she went about (not) handling this like an adult, but instead, handled it as if she was some silly little girl with a gossiping mouth, taking hay to everyone else but the horse.

It had been quite some time since I had seen her-no, as a matter of fact, I hadn't seen her face since the day before, because we spoke from on the opposite sides of the door, when she came home from work.

Just to know that she wouldn't even face me, over my merely asking her for permission [to do something that I had already been doing for some time already-anyways] annoyed me even more.

At this point, I was merely being courteous to her by inviting her in on a secret that everyone else [in school, his world, my world and in the very building she lived and paid rent in] knew.

Into the night, Ms. Ananda, Mrs. Cochran and my mom met over Mrs.

Cochran's house. My mother simply refused to come back inside the house to even fix herself something to eat-because my bedroom was right by the kitchen.

I lay in bed preparing to turn it in for the night, with the bedroom door still cracked open enough for my mom to peek her head through it. Instead of her, Ms. Ananda appeared, peeking through it. She pecked on the door: "Angie, may I come in for a second. I have something I want to tell you," she whispered in to me. "Sure Ms. Ananda, what's up?" I replied.

She pushed the door open, closed it tightly behind her and sat at the end of my bed:

"Angie your mom wants to meet your new boyfriend tomorrow," she said.

"I will talk to him about it at school tomorrow. It shouldn't be a problem getting him over here within the next two days or so," I replied.

"Where is she right now, still next door?" I asked.

"Oh, she's up front in the living room. She said she was about to go to bed in a minute," Ms. Ananda responded, relaying for my mother and trying to cover up for her inability to look me in the face as yet.

I lay there on my pillow, squinting my eyes and shaking my head back and forth about how shameful this thing had gotten. I mean, she never even came to the kitchen to eat or drink anything since she had arrived home at 5:45pm that evening. The house was set up such that if she didn't want to eat or drink anything, she didn't have to see me at all. I didn't have to see her unless I got up to use the bathroom, and that would only be if she were in her bedroom, rather than up front in the living room.

Our usual routine-anyways-during the morning, would be for my mom to have her bath then breakfast. That is the time she would be waking me up with the aroma of breakfast food cooking and the sounds of pots, pans, silverware and water running in the kitchen sink.

On days she didn't eat breakfast, the norm would be for her to bathe, get dressed and before leaving out the door for work; bang on my bedroom door to make sure I was awake to get ready to do the same.

Well, she didn't eat breakfast the next morning either, and I did not get that bang on my bedroom door to wake me up (either). I guess she felt like I would inhale the morning aroma of the fumes she was still exhaling as breakfast. The way she slammed the front door as hard as she could, I guess she figured it would be all the alarm that I needed (to wake up).

In school that day, when Santana and I met in our usual spot before classes started, I gave him the good news: I told him that my mom agreed to meet him. I purposely neglected to tell him that she was so upset, and that I hadn't even seen her face in the almost 24-hours since, and as a result of her finding out about the two of us. I just wanted to pass on the "good news" and let Santana feel good about the two of us being able to see each other freely without sneaking around, when everywhere else in both of our worlds; we were openly a couple and as far as we were concerned: "grown."

So, his meeting her was indeed going to be like him walking into a lion's den, especially without him knowing that her finding out about us didn't go over to well. As far as how she would act when she met him-I wasn't sure. I just hoped that his pretty face and eyes and charming smile would warm her up. Bless his heart, he was so excited:

"Dear Boo.

About me coming over (if I can) I'm not scared just a little nervous. I hope she does. Tell her that I'm shy and don't laugh me. Am I to tell her that I'm in love with her (my) Baby Boo! That would be hard for fear she would ask what made you fall in love how do I know its love and what does love mean? Not that I couldn't answer her. I'd be...uncomfortable. I hope she

likes me. Maybe I'll ask her if the garbage needs taking out you know, the usual "butter." Should I say yes ma'am! Or does she prefer yes and no! I would prefer yes ma'am! No ma'am! Should I call her by her last name? Should I shake her hand or just say "hi how are you doing?" I've been through this many times but this seems like the first. Maybe cause I'm wondering if she'll disapprove of me and ask you to stop seeing me. That would hurt (I'm paranoid)

Is this the right time or should we wait... I Love You.

I hope mom likes me.

Love, Bucky"

After school let out, we behaved like the "grown" responsible "adults" we thought we were. And instead of us running home acting like jack rabbits, he went home to get prepared to come over to my house, and to pretend that it was his first time ever there. Unbeknownst to him, from the outside of the lion's den looking in; he was going to be walking in [most probably with an Adidas] pork-chop suit on. He had no idea that Mrs. Cochran kinda-sorta snitched and charged her gangster to the game last night. If he knew, he would still probably give her some "cool points," because it was still be*cause* of Mrs. Cochran that my mother was forced to change her mind to allow this meeting to happen.

I just wanted it all to unfold naturally.

I cleaned up the house in preparation for "company" and eagerly anticipated my mom's 6:05pm (or early-5:45pm) arrival time home. Santana was due to arrive at 7:30pm.

When mom arrived home, I was back in my room with the door opened about halfway; because it would usually be cracked just enough for me to peek into the living room while Santana would (usually) be preparing to leave out the back door. I knew she had already found out that he had been coming over afterschool, so closing my bedroom door (completely) would

have rubbed her the wrong way, or sent her the same message that she sent me yesterday when she shut me out: "I do not feel like dealing you or this situation."

So yeah, leaving it open about halfway was perfect, because when she would come home from work, my door was never left wide open-she would have definitely noticed that. It would have screamed her name right out, leaving it wide open for her to say: "Oh, you got your bedroom door wide open now that your lil' boyfriend's not sneaking out the back door today huh?" I knew her moves-I'm her child.

I was anticipating a good night and wanted it to go smooth, so I made sure that with every detail, everything was everything.

6:05pm is when she began fidgeting at the door-doing her usual: dropping her lunch bag and whatever else she had in her hand onto the living room floor until she would get done fidgeting at the door from trying to get the tough key out of the keyhole. Her bad key bought us a *lot* of stall time many-a-day.

I let her get all the way into the house and into the bathroom while I went back to the kitchen to wash dishes and give her some space. I could imagine all too well the horror and flashbacks that would have gone through her mind had I started another conversation on the opposite side of that bathroom door. She would probably hear "Psycho," horror-movie music, in her head.

When I got done washing the dishes, I knew she would be good and out of the bathroom, so I walked right through my bedroom and opened the door (wide), walked through her bedroom and then into the living room. She was sitting there watching television while going through her bag.

"Hey Ma," I said, while I kissed her on the cheek and balled my fist up and gave her a little nuggie against her forehead.

"Don't be kissing me!" she yelled, playfully.

"You still love me baby?" I asked her.

"What time is this lil' boy coming over here tonight?" she demanded to know.

"He'll be over about 7:30, Ma." I replied.

"Mmm." She mumbled and rolled her eyes, tightly.

"Lighten up-acting like an old battle axe!" I laughed. She laughed out loud. That cut the tension in the air that she got right up and walked through. She then walked through her bedroom, through the (wide-open) door of my bedroom then straight to the kitchen (that she hadn't seen-going on thirty-six hours by this time).

7:25pm came.

Santana knocked at the door like a gentleman. By this time, my mom had been resting in her bedroom.

I was in the living room watching television. I sat there and made him knock once more-having purposely ignored the first knock.

"Oh don't try to act like you don't hear that knock at the door-whore! Get up and answer it!" she said, halfway serious and halfway jokingly.

I laughed loudly and opened the door to Santana standing there looking like the fourth member of Run DMC with that Adidas pork chop suit on.

"Hey Red," he smiled, with his eyes sparkling like diamonds.

"Hey Santana," I replied, with a smile.

"Ma, Santana's here..."

I looked into the slightly opened double-doors that separated the living room from her bedroom where she lay.

"I love your daughter and she belongs to me!" whispered Santana, playing around.

"Down boy!" I laughed and pointed.

The two of us sat on the couch at a distance between us like we were two virgins who were still corny and nervous around one another.

The lioness slowly opened her bedroom doors just wide enough for her to walk through it:

"Hi. Hello," she purred, while walking towards Santana.

He stood up nervously and began walking towards her-so as to shorten

her distance to him, as a courtesy.

"Hello, Mrs. Angie's mom," he said.

"I asked Angie what I should call you and she never wrote me back to tell me-and I wanted to make sure I addressed you the way you wanted to be addressed!" sounding like the juvenile he was.

I shook my head back and forth as it rested in my hand with my elbow on the arm of the couch-chuckling to myself at Santana; standing there with that pork chop Adidas suit on like a dunce cap, still knowing nothing about the storm that had blown through this very same house over the past forty-eight hours was the same one that just blew him through the door and into the wild.

I eagerly awaited to hear what my mom was going to say to Santana, as he stood there looking like fresh meat. The awkward long pause and stare ended:

"Yeah you lil' fart! The next time you bring your tail to *this* house, you make sure you leave out the same way you came in! You hear me?"

Santana turned to me-startled. Just about as startled as I was when I looked up at him-having no idea that she would spew that out of that mouth of hers. He had no choice but to think that I told her, so he merely replied: "Yes ma'am." I lifted my hand from my head and shrugged my shoulders as if to say: "Well, the cat's out the bag now." I played along with it.

Mom continued:

"That's not gonna fly in here! You farts aren't making any feet for socks up over in *this* establishment where *she* does not pay any rent!" she pointed over at me-making it seem to Santana that I just told her *everything*-every detail.

She wouldn't let up:

"I'm the only grown-up in here that's got permission to be laying upbecause I'm the only one in here who's paying up!" she said firmly, but in a way so as to not scare him off too bad.

"Yes, ma'am," Santana replied, having no idea what the hell any of that meant. My mom spoke a language all her own sometimes. Something only my brothers and I could translate its meaning.

After she fired, she retired to her bedroom and grabbed the double-doors; hesitantly at first. By the middle of closing them-she looked in at us. And though not with her full blessing, pleasantly nonetheless. She backed off-leaving us alone for the evening, even without giving me instructions on what time he should leave or how close not to sit.

Though my mom was upset about what she found out, she always knew I was mature and could handle many things on my own without probe or prompt.

She remembered.

As a kid-unusually responsible; I was always busy, had a full schedule and trusted-why stop now?

She remembered.

She knew that come morning, I would begin the same responsible routine as every morning, five days a week: using her movement through the house, in the kitchen or the bang of her knuckles to my bedroom door to wake me up right before she left out to go to work-all with the surety that I was responsible enough not to lay back down the moment she closed the door to go on about her day.

She knew she trusted me.

She knew she could trust that from behind those double-doors, no feet for socks were going to be made opposite where she lay.

She trusted me, despite her angry feelings about it all. I never knew them all-we still never talked about it-remember? I could only assume and speculate.

The fact that she was the last one to know probably pissed her off more than anything.

Who knows, it could have been the fact that I gave her, what I felt, was

a reasonable exit away from her love: my [dead] dad. Yet, there I was, all booed with up my love: Santana-sitting there smiling and looking all scrumptious-moving closer to me and acting silly.

The television watched us while the radio played one of our favorite classic love songs: "Crazy for You" by Madonna. All the while, my lonely mom lay beyond doors opposite us, probably listening in on us until she fell asleep.

Still, without us ever having a conversation about Santana and me, I could tell she was never going to be more comfortable with it at sixteen than she was at fourteen and fifteen. Because from this day going forward, she showed me better that she could tell me that she never did and never will forgive me for it...

Meanwhile, in other safe pastures, what a sigh of relief this was for the both of us.

School the next day felt different for us. We met up at our usual spot. When he first saw me, his whole face smiled. He hugged and kissed me and twisted me all around; lifting me off my feet-happy-like Richard Gere and Debra Winger in the "Officer and a Gentleman." It felt like our relationship had started all over again. I was very happy too. I felt so normal, so loved and so adored.

He reached in his pocket to give me my letter:

"What's up Boo!

Man you ate my KitKat and Doublemint. I was looking forward to that. You should have made the Kool-Aid to wash down the KitKat. But I love you. I like your mother, she's real nice. I enjoyed being there with you. I felt so good. Let's go outside at lunch somewhere to be alone if you want to, but you probably want to be with your friends and I understand but it was worth a true try.

...Hold on man. I sound like a sap talking like that, fuck it, it's gone work because I'll make it bye!

I'm 'bout to move out.
I Love you
-Santana"

...and into the days following:

"Hi Boo!

How ya doing baby. You look good today (everyday) just some days you look extra special.

I'm sorry if I hurt you yesterday. I mean, you said bye first so I took it as if you didn't want to be with me so I said ok. And when you took your picture...man! That hurt, I felt bad. I felt like acting like a bitch (crying) but I didn't so I guess the tears caught up to me in my dream last night. Dam! I woke up crying and that tripped me out and I looked in the mirror and said you sap! You got it badder than I thought, (the love bug) I love you so much. I just got through taking this history and map test and I iced it. It was dead easy. Man, that kind of shit that happened yesterday we shouldn't allow to happen because that's how ice melts. I mean if shit like that keeps going on one of us (I know you're goin' to say me) will get a attitude like I don't need this no more and just walk away out of a very warm and loving relationship.

## Man!

Angie I'm getting bored, maybe I'm just talking to be talking but it seems to me as though were going through a routine, what do you think. But anyway, I love you! Oh! I hope you've been telling your mom hi! Even though I haven't but if you haven't, tell her I said hi! And not to forget to feed the fish! But Boo. You're my every...um let me see...you are my everything. I had to think about that Psyche! You're my everything and I love you.

## Love Santana

(Nikki this is Santana, Angelo is on a punishment until he learns how to control himself. But I told him about yesterday and he said)...