

Yvonne steered onto the off-ramp and, five minutes later, rolled up in front of the home of Juice Hughes-Newton. Yvonne and Juice had met when they were both students at Washington State University. Yvonne smiled, thinking back on those times and about the random chance events that shape everyone's lives.

Like almost any two people who ever met, she and Juice could so easily not have. Yvonne, an outstanding high school student, had been admitted to the more prestigious University of Washington, located barely ten miles away from the home she'd grown up in. But she'd chosen instead to move 280 miles away, to the desolate eastern side of the state, precisely because it was so far away. Juice was a year older and not even from Washington, but had ended up at WSU, as a transfer student, after something (to this day Yvonne didn't really understand what) had gone horribly wrong for her at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo.

They'd met on the first day of the term, in a psychology class that Yvonne had been enrolled in by mistake and transferred out of that same week. But they'd learned that they resided just one floor apart in the same dorm. The following day they'd bumped into each other on the stairs, Juice had invited Yvonne to a small party in a third girl's room, Yvonne had reluctantly accepted, and the two had quickly become close friends—so close, in fact, that after graduation, Yvonne had essentially followed Juice to Southern California.

That was a *long* time ago, Yvonne thought as she stepped out of the car and noticed, without surprise, that it was ten degrees hotter here than back home on Wexler Avenue. Juice lived in Tarzana, a district in the San Fernando Valley (or just the Valley, for short). Although situated immediately north of the city of L.A. (and technically part of it), the Valley offered a distinct, hazy atmosphere, in the literal sense but also figuratively—a jumbled-up hybrid of urban and suburban. Some swollen-headed, bland academic types had coined the term “supersuburban” for such an environment, but no normal person ever used it.

Yvonne started up the red brick path toward Juice's front door. The ranch-style house, not intended as anything special by its original builder back in the 1950s, had been heavily renovated several times, including a couple of extensions and the addition of an in-ground swimming pool. It was also extremely well maintained, inside and out, by a large coterie of specialists, including hired help but also including Juice's ex-husband, Paul Newton, and their children, Henry and Lateesha. Queen Juice ran a tight ship. Yvonne

couldn't recall ever seeing a crooked blade of grass, a speck of dust on a piece of furniture, a tiny crack in a wood, glass, or tile surface, or any other imperfection here at this mini-palace. For privacy, a perfectly manicured hedge, twelve feet tall and four feet thick, surrounded the property on three sides; in the front, due to city ordinance, a three-foot-high wall had to suffice.

Yvonne reached the heavy, dark wood door, opened it (Juice never locked the house and expected all visitors to let themselves in), went through into the foyer and continued toward the family room and kitchen area, from which the sound of a T.V. was emanating. She glanced at various family photos as she passed them. Every wall in the house, as well as most tables and shelves, contained at least one, typically four or five. Even though Paul had moved out eight years ago, when Lateesha was a toddler, he still appeared in many of the displayed photos. This was not because Juice still loved him.

Yvonne found her old friend exactly as expected: cross-legged on the sofa, cradling a bag of potato chips, wearing a purple tracksuit, dividing her attention equally between the little phone screen in her hand, with its perpetual notifications, and the big one in front of her, currently offering an entertainment news program doing a segment about a recent episode of a celebrity talk show in which they'd discussed highlights from a celebrity reality show.

"Hi, Juice."

"Hey, girl," Juice replied without looking at Yvonne. "Make yourself comfortable. Grab a drink from the kitchen. You know where they are, right?"

"I'm fine, thanks," said Yvonne, taking a seat next to Juice. "So, what's on our agenda? Shopping? Late lunch somewhere?"

"Umm," Juice replied vaguely, distracted by the larger of her two screens.

"What was that place you said you wanted to try?" Yvonne asked. "The new Indian, in Canoga Park?"

Juice looked over at her. "Huh? Oh yeah, on Sherman Way, down the street from Paul's apartment. I think it's called Bombay Bombast. Looks pretty nice."

"Well... are you hungry?"

"Um, yeah," said Juice, now looking down at her phone. "But, I don't know..." She popped a chip into her mouth and crunched away on it for a few seconds, then swallowed and looked up at Yvonne again.

"I'm just not really feeling it right now. Maybe we should order in. What do you think?"

Yvonne shrugged. "Yeah, sure, I guess."