

“Slawson. You have a visitor.”

The gates to the prison cell slid open and a man condemned stepped forward. Elijah Slawson was a shade of the man he used to be. Ten years on death row had taken him from paranoid, to resigned, to resolute, eager for death. He had nothing left. The justice system had the sword of Damocles overhead, poised to descend upon him at any moment. He was not used to visitors at all, for the last ten years he had had only one visitor, his mother, whose ill health eventually put an end to the visits early in his time here and who died shortly after his failed parole hearing. Nobody came to see him after that.

Time inched along in this place, the seconds bled into each other, as did the minutes and hours. The names of the days were useless in this place, his loss of time only intensified his anguish and stretched his will over a razor's edge. The visit was a break from the crushing weight of the penitentiary. Like a caged bird, he was glad to be free for more than the mandatory hour of sunlight.

He walked the long corridor toward the visiting hall. Life, as it did anywhere, went on in prison, though it was a perverted form of life. The smell of the drug Spice and tobacco stung his nostrils and the voices of imprisoned men reverberated against iron gates, paved floors and concrete walls. New inmates sobbed for their parents. Lifers muttered to themselves, daring anyone to look them in the eyes for too long so they could extend their stay and their body count. Cigarettes were traded for petty cash and the sounds of barter mixed with the banging and the thumping, the despondent cries and the insane laughter. This, by any stretch of the imagination, was hell on earth and it still wanted nothing to do with Elijah. He passed the door of no return, aptly named ‘The Killing Room’ by inmates. He felt nothing.

Elijah went from the largest wing in the prison to the visitors’ hall, which like many other days was subdued. The guards stood on the balcony and at the entrance to the hall waving detectors at those who filed in, like a grim procession to visit those condemned. He saw her sat at a table, on her own. Not particularly looking at anything, her head buried in her chest.

“Right there,” the guard said as he undid his manacles and walked him over. The young lady heard the approach and looked up. Her name was Felicia Prioux. She was plain, a long face and roundish chin that lacked strength. But her eyes bore an intense questing look, one that seemed to weigh everything in terms of complete black and white and judged harshly, like an old captain throwing dead weight overboard in a storm. Elijah sat down and cleared his throat. She looked at him with those eyes. They both said nothing for a while as they weighed each other up.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hey,” she replied.

“You’re just as pretty as you were in those pictures you sent.”

“Thanks, I have a photography friend who does them all for me. It’s kind of fun actually.”

“Yeah? Tell me about it.”

“I would love to, but that really isn't why I'm here. Maybe the next time I visit?”

“‘The next time’? I really must have made an impression, this is the first time you've been here. Go on let's keep it light, tell me about the photographs.”

“No, no that’s not the reason I came in here today. I really wanted to help with your case.”

“My case? Forget about that. It’s over. Signed, sealed, delivered, I’m theirs.”

“But, there were so many inconsistencies! Witness intimidation, evidence of collusion between the DA’s office and the judge! The one at the appeals court has been put on record saying he only used your case to advance his career...”

“It, it really doesn’t matter about any of that.”

“But Elijah, I have it on good authority that you did not commit these murders.”

“I said, I don’t want to talk about that.”

“But you’re innoce—”

“I DON’T WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT!” Elijah exploded. Silence fell like a guillotine. The guard who had escorted him in stepped forward menacingly, glanced at the woman, then stepped back when he realised she was in no immediate danger. Another outburst like that would end Elijah’s visit, possibly the last he would receive ever again.

The silence lifted and in the safety of the chatter, the woman resumed the conversation.

“Elijah. Ten years is a long time. I can totally understand--”

“Understand is a bit of a strong word don’t you think? You ever been on death row for ten years?”

“All I am trying to do is to help you. I want to understand why you don’t want to fight this.”

He did not respond.

“All the letters we’ve exchanged,” she said “You seemed like such a strong man, confident in your convictions, funny, charming, everything. We both know you’re innocent of the charges.”

“You’re old enough to know that it doesn’t matter if you’re guilty or innocent Felicia. All that matters is who they want to fuck. And if they want to fuck you, they’ll fuck you.”

“So that’s how you wanna go out? Just like that? Without fighting? Where’s the justice?”

He said nothing again. The tears began to build in Felicia’s eyes. She clenched her entire body to dam them.

“I can’t believe the man I fell in love with isn’t going to fight for his rights.”

“I’ve done a lot of fighting Felicia. It just looks like I’ve been beat this time.”

She did not know what to say. Here was a man whose tenderness in a place of abject depravity knew no bounds. He was the proverbial concrete rose. Literally a thing of beauty in a cold, hard place. It seemed insane that he did not want to bloom in more fertile ground, in a home, with her. People had tried to warn her against falling in love with her pen pal, but as she dug into his past; his work as an activist and vocal critic of the administration, she was struck with admiration. As she looked at his case notes and the history of his subsequent appeals after his initial conviction, she was stunned by the injustice. And as she read letter after letter she saw into his soul and felt that the man who had done so much good work could not be guilty of the crimes he committed. A man with so much passion and love in his heart for mankind could be loved by a woman like herself.

Elijah looked forlorn under the weight of those questing, judging eyes. His resolve after more than a decade inside, his will to die, had been stronger than his will to live on the outside. An endless tide threatened to sweep over him at any moment. The instant the gavel went down and he was taken

away after his sentencing, the riptide had sucked him away and the undercurrent had pulled him in. His love for Felicia was the thing that kept him buoyant. He had fallen in love plenty of times as a young man, in the way that young men often do; a heady, blistering kind of love. But it didn't progress like that with Felicia. It was intimacy of a type he had not felt before, not the cling of bodies, but the union of souls through pen and paper. They shared interests in social justice, race politics and a passion for Albert King and Stevie Wonder's back catalogues. It was fostered during nights, when the heaviness of solitude was too much to bear and his only release were the words she had inscribed to him days earlier. He obviously missed the carnal and seeing her there in front of him inflamed his passions, his will to die wavered. She sensed it and wanted to press further. He raised a hand to stop her.

"I-I want you to go to the press," he started.

"Of course! Of course I will, but we have to get you out of here! Christ! Its death row in the worst prison in the state—"

"I mean when I'm gone Felicia. I want you to take what you learned and take it to the Times, or somewhere. Black Activist killed by the state has got to make a splash somewhere."

"What the fuck Elijah? I'm not going to let you martyr yourself for the cause!"

"It's not really your choice to make is it?"

"I think when it's someone you want to marry you get a say."

Elijah fell silent. She said it softly which made it an even greater blow. His will to die took another pounding under the intensity of those eyes and the surety of her voice. The idea was like a mirage in the desert, under the last auspices of a thirst-filled torment. It dangled in front of him, just before his eyes, just before everything is snatched away and he is tossed into the darkness. But the idea was too good to let go of.

"Felicia... you gotta know I ain't coming out of here. You gotta know that."

"We can make it work. I've got savings. I've been working on this for months. We can get a good lawyer. I'll write to the press. You can start a podcast or something, don't they have a program? We can get your story out there."

"We have no way of making anyone believe what I have to say! To everyone else, I'm just a nigga in America, guilty as charged."

"And if you die, you'll be just another dead nigga in America. We gotta lot of those don't we?"

"At least I'll know where I stand. I'll be what I am."

"What? A warrior? A hero? This isn't a battlefield Elijah and it's not no fairy story. You alk about the Killing Room in your letters, but this whole system is the killing room for black bodies. It's a butcher shop and they do this to us every day. There is no escape in death. The only escape is in what we have to offer each other."

He tried to deflect, "So you get that new Albert King? Your last letter told me that they remastered the back catalogue. I would love a copy."

"I don't wanna talk about that with you," she insisted.

"Baby, come on! You know the music is the only sound that'll drown the dudes fuckin' next door."

The crassness of it blindsided Felicia, and she scoffed, dipping her head into her arms to stifle the laughter. Elijah grinned and waited for her to finish, arms crossed and head cocked to one side.

“Felicia, I love you too. But it’s different. In here, everything is magnified. Every perceived threat is blown up to a real one and the slightest bit of outside attention I get can be—”

“Uh-uh, don’t you do that Elijah.”

She would not have it. The idea that her love for him was only a love for his struggle and his love for her was only an escape from solitude was one she would not entertain. It lowered both of them, which in their situation, on the heavier end of the scales of justice, was unacceptable.

“Alright, I apologise. The Albert King record. Go on, I won’t interrupt.”

“It’s got all the classic cuts. Plus an extended mix of I’ll Play The Blues For You.”

“Damn, I love that record! How long?”

“Seven minutes!”

“A whole seven minutes? That’ll definitely last longer than the fuckin’.”

“Not unless they go for round two.”

They fell into a lull and looked at each other again. In his eyes, he did not look defeated. It was as if his courting of death had given him a power over his jailers, a power unsullied by back room deals and the rise of ambitious legal professionals. He was untouchable. They would not take his life from him, he would lay it in their hands. He reached a hand over to Felicia’s, a hand weathered from the bleach and detergent of his pennies by the hour prison work and his decade on the dumb bells or on the bar. She took it in her own and squeezed. She was still trying to rescue him at sea and had tossed the lifelines to him before it swallowed him whole.

“You really wanna get married?” Elijah asked.

“Well, I love you don’t I? The hell else is there for people in love to do?”

He bowed his head. She was trying to save his life. A life he had scornfully thrown in the face of a corrupt criminal justice system. She was trying to take his greatest weapon and turn into a treasure that they could cherish. He did not know what to feel. He could not cry. He had buried that part of himself after his mother died. He could not laugh. It would only fan the flames of a moment that was like a fading candle in the oppressive gloom. The mirage was forming, in a piecemeal manner into something clearer than before. But to dream was to die and die again in this desert of despondency. He would have to be careful.

“We should, uh, we should focus on this first. I’m going to need someone decent. Someone who’s dealt with things like this before.”

Felicia almost leapt out of her seat, electrified. “Oh Baby, I’ve got it all figured out! I’ve been talking with some guys at our UCLA chapter, they said that they’ve dealt with so many cases on death row, getting the charges rolled back will be a struggle, but instead of doing it private they’ll support us, we just need to get some media coverage, I know the black lives matter guys will be all over this, it’s just a matter of getting your story on the internet, you know those guys are super vocal on twitter right?”

“Alright alright! I love the energy! It’s just hard for me to be there with you when I been staring at the same prison wall scratchings since the beginning of the century.”

She stopped and smiled, looking down at the floor, her hands tightly balled into fists as her mind unfurled like a mast, reeling her love, lost at sea, into her arms.

“You’ll get out of here, and we’ll get you a job. You can move in with me and once we’re on our feet we can start planning for the wedding...”

But just like that he was whisked away again. Their moment together had been brief, it was not the most ideal of meetings, decidedly not the scenario one would classify as a first date, but the feeling was there, undiminished, unquenched, ready to fight on despite the deep hole Elijah found himself in. The guard called his name as he approached, the siren sound for the end of their meeting. Elijah shrank from the sound, his usual self diminishing into the uncaring, unfeeling shell that had protected him his entire stint on death row. The sight was pitiful to Felicia, she watched the eyes of the man to whom she had just proposed, watched as his passion and fury gave way again to guarded resignation. There was no embrace, it was not allowed, just a sincere hand squeeze and a mouthed “I love you” just before he was shackled and marched beyond the hall doors to a place her body could not reach out to comfort him.

His date for execution was scheduled for the next few months after her visit.