

The Mayor of Crenshaw

by

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CHAPTER 1

PART ONE: THE ROOM

The bass wasn't loud enough to shake the walls.

It didn't need to be.

It was the kind of sound that told you something was happening inside before you ever opened the door.

The studio sat tucked into a quiet pocket of Los Angeles—too clean to feel dangerous, too private to feel casual.

Inside, everyone was pretending to be relaxed.

Nobody was.

Dominic Hayes stood near the back wall, half in shadow, arms folded like he'd been there longer than he had. Not isolated—just positioned.

That was the difference.

In the middle of the room, **TJ Michaels** was supposed to be recording.

New energy. New name people were starting to repeat in small conversations. The kind of artist that hadn't fully arrived yet—but had already started to change how people looked at him.

The track had stopped.

Nobody told it to stop.

It just... did.

And when it did, the room didn't reset. It *tightened*.

A voice cut through first.

"I'm just sayin'—don't play me like I'm not supposed to be here."

The words didn't land loud.

They landed *heavy*.

Heads turned, slowly.

Across from TJ, near the console, stood a man who didn't need to introduce himself in rooms like this.

Philadelphia Slim.

He wasn't flashy. That was never his thing.

Slim carried himself like somebody who'd already decided what respect looked like—and expected everyone else to catch up.

He didn't move closer.

Didn't raise his voice.

That was the problem.

"I don't like misunderstandings," Slim said calmly. "And I definitely don't like disrespect."

That word hung there.

Disrespect.

It always changed the temperature of a room.

TJ stepped forward slightly. Not backing down, but not fully in either.

"I ain't disrespect you," TJ said. "You just taking it wrong."

Slim shook his head once.

"I don't take nothing wrong."

Silence spread.

Not empty silence—*loaded* silence.

People in the room started doing what people always do in rooms like this:

- Some looked down
- Some looked away
- Some started choosing sides without saying a word

Nobody stepped in.

Not yet.

That's when Dominic moved.

Not fast.

Not dramatic.

Just... forward.

Like he already knew where he needed to be.

He stepped into the space between them without breaking the energy—just redirecting it.

“Yo,” Dominic said, calm. “We good?”

It wasn't a question that needed an answer.

But it demanded one anyway.

TJ glanced at him—recognition there. Familiarity. Trust.

Slim looked at Dominic longer.

That mattered.

Dominic noticed.

He always noticed.

He nodded once, like he was already solving something nobody else had fully understood yet.

“Come here,” he said to TJ.

TJ hesitated—but only for a second.

Then he stepped aside with him.

Dominic lowered his voice.

“This ain't that moment,” he said. “You too early in your run to turn a room into something it don't need to be.”

TJ's jaw tightened. Pride fighting understanding.

Dominic didn't rush him.

Just held the space.

"I got you," Dominic added. "Just let me handle it."

A beat.

TJ nodded once and stepped back.

Now it was Slim.

Dominic turned slightly, meeting him evenly.

No posture change.

No intimidation attempt.

Just presence.

"Ain't nobody trying to play you," Dominic said. "Not in here."

Slim studied him.

Not the words—the man saying them.

Dominic continued, steady.

"You know how this go. Too many people, too many egos, nobody really hearing what was actually said."

A pause.

Then, softer—

"But I see you."

That line shifted something.

Not agreement.

Not peace.

But acknowledgment.

Slim gave a small nod. Barely there.

Enough.

Dominic held his gaze for half a second longer, then stepped back out of the middle.

“Run it back,” he said toward the booth.

No authority in his voice.

But the engineer already moved.

The track came back in.

Energy didn't explode again.

It *settled*.

Conversation restarted in pockets. The room exhaled without realizing it had been holding its breath.

Dominic returned to the wall like nothing had happened.

Same spot.

Same posture.

Same calm.

But the room wasn't the same anymore.

Because now people had seen it.

Not just that he moved in it.

But that when he did—

things changed.

And somewhere in the room, quietly enough that it didn't interrupt anything...

someone said it under their breath.

“...that's the Mayor right there.”

Dominic didn't react.

Didn't acknowledge it.

Didn't need to.

He already heard it.

And that was enough.

PART TWO: 2 A.M. PRESSURE

The city didn't feel like it was asleep.

It just felt like it was **waiting between moments**.

2:07 a.m.

Dominic Hayes stepped out of the studio first, hands in his pockets like nothing important had just happened inside. Like rooms didn't shift when he walked through them.

TJ Michaels followed a few steps behind him.

Still thinking.

Still replaying.

"You good?" Dominic asked without looking back.

TJ shrugged. "Yeah... I think so."

That "I think so" said more than the "yeah."

Dominic nodded anyway.

"Come on. I'm hungry."

No explanation. No debate.

Just direction.

TAL'S DINER — FLORENCE

The diner sat under harsh white light like it refused to participate in nighttime.

Tal's didn't change for anybody.

Not celebrities. Not regulars. Not people who just came from situations they couldn't explain to others.

Inside, it was simple:

- One cook behind the counter
- A waitress who already knew most orders
- A few late-night ghosts in booths pretending they weren't tired

Dominic slid into a booth like it belonged to him.

Because in some way, it did.

TJ sat across from him, still carrying the studio in his posture.

Dominic didn't rush the silence.

He just looked over the menu for half a second, then closed it.

"Smothered pork chops," he said. "Eggs. Hash browns."

The waitress nodded.

"Same?" she asked TJ.

TJ hesitated. Then nodded.

"Yeah."

She walked off.

The booth settled.

Different kind of quiet now.

Not tense.

Just... unfiltered.

TJ leaned back. "That situation earlier could've went left."

Dominic gave a small shrug. "It didn't."

TJ watched him for a second.

"You always move like that?"

Dominic finally looked up.

“Like what?”

“Like you already know what people about to do.”

Dominic didn't answer right away.

He leaned back slightly, eyes drifting for a second like he was choosing what version of himself to give away.

“I just pay attention,” he said.

TJ shook his head slightly. “Nah. It's more than that.”

Dominic gave a faint half-smile.

“Most people react,” he said. “I don't like reacting.”

TJ leaned forward now.

“So what you do instead?”

Dominic tapped the table once, slow.

“I adjust the room.”

That line landed.

Not loud.

But precise.

The waitress returned with drinks. Set them down. Left.

The diner noise filled the space again—forks, coffee cups, low conversations from strangers who would never know this moment mattered.

TJ stared into his cup.

“You been doing music a long time?”

Dominic exhaled lightly through his nose.

“Been around it,” he said.

“That ain't what I asked.”

Dominic looked at him for a second... then nodded like he respected the persistence.

"Yeah," he said. "Long enough to see what it really is."

TJ waited.

Dominic continued.

"Everybody thinks it's about talent," he said. "Or being the loudest one in the room."

A pause.

"It's not."

TJ listened now instead of speaking.

Dominic leaned forward slightly.

"It's timing," he said. "It's access. It's who hears you first... and where they hear you."

TJ nodded slowly. "So that's why you moved like that earlier?"

Dominic didn't answer directly.

Instead—

"You don't know who's who yet," he said. "That's not a bad thing. That's just where you at."

TJ frowned slightly. "What you mean?"

Dominic looked at him now—fully.

"I mean you got something that can travel," he said. "But it don't matter if it stays in the wrong rooms too long."

TJ's expression shifted. "You talking about my record?"

Dominic shrugged like it wasn't a big deal.

"I'm talking about your first one."

That hit differently.

TJ sat up a little.

“You think I got one?”

Dominic didn't smile.

He never really did when it mattered.

“I know you do,” he said.

A beat.

TJ shook his head slightly like he was trying to process it.

“Then what?” he asked. “I just drop it and hope it move?”

Dominic leaned back again, calm returning.

“No,” he said. “You don't hope nothing.”

TJ waited.

Dominic continued.

“You let it go through the right ears first.”

TJ frowned. “What does that even mean?”

Dominic looked down at the table for a second, then back up.

“It means I'll let somebody hear it.”

Silence.

TJ stared at him.

“Who?”

Dominic picked up his water, took a sip like this was the most normal conversation in the world.

“An executive,” he said. “Then I'll get a DJ to spin it at the right time, right room.”

TJ blinked. “Why would they do that?”

Dominic finally gave a small shrug.

“Because I’ll ask.”

That was it.

No speech.

No explanation.

Just certainty.

TJ leaned back slowly, processing.

“You really think it’ll go like that?”

Dominic looked at him again.

“I don’t think,” he said. “I move it.”

THE SHIFT

TJ didn’t say anything for a while after that.

Just sat there.

Thinking differently now.

Not just about the song.

But about everything around it.

The room earlier.

Philadelphia Slim.

Dominic standing in the middle of it like it was normal.

The way things didn’t explode when he was there.

They *resolved*.

TJ finally broke the silence.

“...you always been like this?”

Dominic shook his head once.

“No,” he said.

A pause.

“Learned it.”

The food arrived then.

Hot. Heavy. Real.

Dominic didn't rush to eat.

Neither did TJ.

Because something had already been set in motion.

And neither of them fully understood it yet.

But they would.

Soon enough.