

A NOVEL IN
THREE PARTS

WHITE LINES 3
LOVE/FATE

TRACY BROWN

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St. Martin's Griffin
New York



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Table of Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright Notice

Note from Author

Acknowledgments

Chapter 28 Fallen Angels

Chapter 29 To Have Loved and Lost...

Chapter 30 Leftovers

Chapter 31 Consequences

Chapter 32 High Price to Pay

Chapter 33 Double Crossed

Chapter 34 A Change in Plans

Chapter 35 Since I Lost my Baby

Chapter 36 A Voice in the Dark

After the Pain

Chapter 37 Forgiveness

Chapter 38 Second Chances

Chapter 39 Burying the Past

Chapter 40 Trouble Sleeping

Chapter 41 Unfinished Business

Epilogue: Lovers and Friends

About the Author

More from Tracy Brown

Copyright

A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR ABOUT WHITE LINES

I grew up in the eighties and nineties, decades when the crack epidemic destroyed families and communities. I witnessed the epidemic up close and personally, and I watched people fall prey to drug addiction. I've grieved with friends who lost loved ones to AIDS and other drug-related illnesses. At seventeen, I went to the first of several funerals for my peers, all gunned down in drug wars being waged in the streets where we lived. I watched helplessly as even more of my peers were hauled off to prison for crimes related to the game. The drug trade touched each of us in my generation profoundly. It affected our lives, our politics, the movies that we watched and the music that we listened to. And it destroyed our community piece by piece.

In telling the story in *White Lines*, I want to shed light on every aspect of the drug game to show that no one *ever* wins in this game. There are only losers. The hustlers, the drug addicts, the family members, the friends. Everybody loses in the game. We lose loved ones to addiction, young men and women to tragic early deaths, and we lose years of our lives to incarceration. We lose. In every possible way. Many times the game is glamorized in the entertainment industry. Movies glorify the game, as do music, magazines, and even books. In *White Lines*, my objective is not to glamorize the lifestyle, but instead to call your attention to the pain that the game inevitably causes those who are bold enough to play it.

This story is dedicated to the children of the drug game. To the lost little boys and little girls dealing with the pain of watching a loved one slip away a day at a time. To the

husbands and wives forced to pick up the pieces for a spouse who can't kick their habit. To the dealers, the pushers, the hustlers who supply the needs of these victims without realizing the destruction of families and communities taking place at their very own hands.

This story is dedicated to love, which conquers all and costs nothing. May it help heal all our wounds, past and present.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you, God, for both the sun and the rain. Without the rain, the sunny days would be taken for granted. So thank you for the lessons and the joy in all things good and bad.

My children, you make every sleepless night, every stressful deadline, and every early morning flight worthwhile. I love you. You are my inspiration.

And, to the love of my life, you inspire me every single day. Thank you for all the ways you contributed to this story and for all the ways you've opened yourself up to me without fear. Your insight helped me to breathe life into these characters, and your honesty made me fall deeper in love with you than I ever imagined possible. Even though I have a way with words, your love leaves me speechless. It feels like my life was lived in black and white until you came and filled it with color. Each day together we write a new chapter of our love story—each one more beautiful than the last. I pray that our story never ends.

FALLEN ANGELS

Born went to his mother's house after finding Jada high. That was his home away from home, and the one place where he knew he could be himself completely. He felt so many emotions at once, and at the forefront of all of those was rage. He was so angry that he walked right past his mother, as she stood washing dishes in the kitchen, and into his old bedroom, where he locked the door and turned his radio up.

The room still looked the same as when he'd been a young man living in his mother's house. There was always one guest or another—cousins, uncles, and sometimes Born's own friends—who found it necessary to stay at his mother's house from time to time. She was always willing to help out a friend in need, and this was one of the many reasons people loved Ingrid Graham. She knocked on his bedroom door twice, and called Marquis by name. But when he ignored her, she walked back into the kitchen and allowed him to have time to himself. She knew her son. She didn't have to see his face to tell that something was wrong. Marquis would never walk into his mother's house without giving her a hug or a kiss or saying something slick. Ingrid resumed washing the dishes, and sang along to the Al Green song playing from her portable radio on the counter. She knew that when he calmed down enough to talk, he would come to her.

Born paced his room angrily. He was sick to his stomach, and felt like he might actually throw up. Jada was smoking again. He laughed at himself. How stupid and how blind he

must have been not to notice! She was stealing from him. Born shook his head in amazement. He shook his head, because he had known all along. And that realization is what enraged him. Born punched the closet door in frustration, and didn't give any attention to his throbbing knuckles afterward. A large hole remained in the spot he had punched, and Born covered his face with his hands in exasperation. He was devastated.

Jada, his sweet baby girl. How could she do it? How long had she been doing it? Why did she do it? Why didn't he confront her sooner? The truth was, Born had noticed a change in Jada's behavior long ago. He had seen her moods change quickly. She would be sweet and sultry one moment, and then sad and withdrawn the next. In his head, he had wondered all along if she had gone back to cocaine. But his heart wouldn't let him believe she would hurt him like that, that she would throw away all that they had just so that she could suck on a glass dick. He couldn't believe that he had played the fool.

And *Jamari* knew. That meant that *Wizz* knew, too. In addition to all the emotions he was feeling, he was also terribly embarrassed. He wondered if everybody knew but him. He felt so stupid. They were probably laughing at what a fool he was, Born thought. He wiped the sweat from his forehead as he stood there, still wearing his jacket, and fuming. He just wanted the earth to swallow him up. He reached into his pocket, and pulled out a ten-dollar crack rock. He looked at it in the light of his familiar bedroom. Countless times he had bagged this shit up, sold it, gone out of town to move it, gone uptown to get it, and made a living in the trade of it. He thought about his father, then about Jada. This rock, this little pebble-sized piece of cocaine, had ruined the relationship he had with two people he had truly loved. It had taken his father's life, directly or indirectly. And now, Jada was in its crossfire. He felt a tear fall, and quickly wiped it away. He had to man up, now. It wasn't time for him to crumble. Born felt in his heart like the game was trying to beat him.

He had always felt as though his father had had the game *half right*. He could have been a big deal, his pops. Leo Graham was the man, and everybody either feared him or loved him. He wasn't what one would call a likable guy. He was a menace. But those he loved he took care of, and he had the game *almost* figured out. He thought he could beat it, thought he could conquer the golden rule of Hustling 101: You can't get high on the shit you're pushing. Leo thought he could handle it, and he was dead wrong. This rock Born held in his hand had beaten his father. Jada had thought she could play with fire without getting burned as well. She was stupid and weak, in Born's eyes at that moment. And to add insult to injury, she had stolen from him. He had given her an all-access pass to his life, his home, and his heart. He had allowed himself to trust her, and to believe in her. And she had repaid him by getting high and stealing from the one person who had ever loved her without boundaries. He still loved her, but he couldn't get past this, so it was time to let her go.

Born opened the door, and walked into the kitchen, looking for his mother. She wasn't there. He found her in the living room with her feet up, still listening to Al Green. She was reading a copy of *Essence* magazine while "I'm Still in Love with You" drifted from the radio's speakers. He loved coming home to the place where he'd spent his childhood. Ingrid still lived in the same apartment that she'd moved into when she came to New York from Georgia in the sixties. When she'd moved into Arlington Terrace, it was a high-rise development, where only the successful middle-class lived. It was a privilege to live there then. But as time went by and hardworking tenants had moved out, crime became commonplace. The exclusivity the development once boasted of was gone. And Arlington became as hood as any given project in Staten Island. But Ingrid had stayed through it all. She'd watched the neighborhood go from good to bad, and then from bad to worse. But she wasn't going anywhere.

His mother's presence gave him a comfort he couldn't explain. Few people in her apartment complex knew that his

mother—one of the community’s elders—was as well versed in the streets as she was. None of them knew that Ingrid had more money hidden in her humble apartment than some folks had in their life savings. Ingrid had money tucked in her kitchen, in her mattress, in a strongbox in her closet, and in a bevy of other places. But she also had money in the bank, a retirement plan, and insurance. She was a hustler, his moms, a smart woman who had watched and learned a lot over the years. And she was down for her son no matter what.

Born sat down in the chair that his father used to love. It was a black recliner that no one really sat in because it was old and worn. But Born sat there every time he came by. It had been his father’s chair. The king’s throne. He sat there now, with the crack vial in his hand, and looked at his mother. He laid it in the center of the coffee table, and Ingrid looked at her son as if he had lost his mind.

“What the hell is wrong with you, Marquis?” She looked over the rim of her glasses at him, like a schoolteacher would. “Why’d you bring that shit in my house?”

He looked at his mother, feeling completely hopeless. He wanted her to explain this shit to him. He needed her to tell him why this was happening to him. Why him? His voice cracked as he spoke. “What is it about that,” he nodded toward the crack on the table, “that makes people hurt the ones they love?” His eyes were really searching hers for the answer.

Ingrid looked at her son, knowing that something serious had happened. She had heard his fist knock a hole in the closet, and she wondered what would prompt him to come into her house this enraged. And what was all this talk about crack?

Ingrid put her magazine down, and kept looking over the rim of her glasses at her son, her arms folded across her buxom chest. “What’s on your mind, Marquis? What’s the matter with you tonight?” She looked at his helpless expression, and was sincerely worried. Her son was a warrior. Never had she seen Marquis look this sick about a situation, not even at his own father’s funeral. “Is this about Leo?”

Born shrugged his shoulders. “Is it? I don’t know. It might be. It might be all about him in some strange way. It’s like he’s here all over again, and I feel let down all over again.”

His mother looked confused. “What are you talking about, boy?”

“Ma!” Born didn’t know why he was yelling at his mother. He checked himself, and lowered his voice. “I gotta understand why this shit keeps fuckin’ up my life.”

His mother nodded, trying to help him out. “Well, first of all, stop cursing so much in here.” She lit up a cigarette, and blew the smoke out. “Now start at the beginning. What happened tonight?”

Born looked at his mother, and she smiled softly, encouraging him to tell the story. This wasn’t easy for him. Ingrid had only met Jada once, and she had seen the love in her son’s *eyes* instantly. She could tell by the way he looked at Jada, and by how playful he was with her, that he was smitten. As long as Jada was OK with Marquis, she was okay with Ingrid. But now he had no idea how his mother would react to this news. “Jada’s smoking that.” He motioned toward the coffee table.

Ingrid looked at the crack on the table, and then she looked at her son. She shook her head, as if that would make what he’d just said untrue. No. This couldn’t be happening, she prayed. Now she understood his anguish. First his father, and now his girlfriend. She shook her head in pity. Shock registered on her face. “Oh, my God, Marquis.”

Born was so upset. “I found out tonight, but I think I kinda knew all along. I didn’t want to believe it. But tonight I set a trap, and she walked right into it. She was stealing from me, and getting high behind my back. I can’t believe it. But then, at the same time, I wonder how I didn’t see it all along. I can’t be with her no more, Ma. But my heart is broke, and I wanna just... hurt somebody. Word! I don’t know what I’m supposed to do now. But I can’t imagine me being with her another second. She’s weak, and she’s useless ...”

“Now, wait a minute, Marquis,” Ingrid scolded. “You can’t be so quick to say who’s weak and who’s useless. You have to look at it both ways. If you think a crackhead is weak or useless, then you’re saying that your father was weak and useless, and I’m not gonna let you sit in here and talk bad about your father.”

Born let her have her say, because he hadn’t meant to upset her. He didn’t want to argue about what Leo was or wasn’t. He wasn’t there for that. He was there because he needed help with his shattered heart, which he held in fragments in his hands.

Ingrid continued. “You gotta get the cold out your own eye, before you go and tell somebody else they got some shit in theirs.” Born started to protest her using the four-letter word, when she had just told him to stop cursing. But Ingrid cut him off. “I’m grown! I can curse as much as I want.”

Born wanted to remind her that he was grown too, but he held his tongue. He shook his head in frustration, and let her have her say.

Ingrid continued. “Anyway, you’re out here *selling* that mess, Marquis. You can’t judge people for being weak and useless if you make your living off of those same people. That makes you a hypocrite. It makes you guilty of taking advantage of people who are weak and useless for your own personal gain. Think about it, Marquis. You felt so sad when your father died. You feel sad right now, knowing that Jada is using the same poison. But you’re out there selling that poison to folks night and day. You’re making sure somebody else’s child, somebody else’s husband, somebody else’s friend remains weak and useless.”

Born couldn’t take it anymore. “You never complained before, Ma!” He was trying to be as delicate as possible. But it was getting hard to hear this lecture from the very person who had helped him spend so much of his drug money. “I know what you’re saying is true, but—”

“I’m not sitting here and saying that I’m not guilty of my own sins. I know I didn’t exactly demand that you stop doing what you were doing. That’s something I regret to this day. But that’s my point. All of us have sins. We all have our weaknesses. Don’t judge people so harshly for theirs, because you’ll be judged just as harshly for your own.”

He nodded his head. He knew she was right. He had always seen his own ability to play the game as proof that he had it all figured out. He wasn’t strung out on anything. In fact, Born had never used any drugs other than a little weed every now and then, a drink or two on occasion. He was on the right side of the game, as far as he was concerned. He was getting money, making moves. And he didn’t look at it like he was preying on anybody’s weakness. The money was out there. If he didn’t go out and get it, someone else would. He saw no reason to feel guilty, when the crackheads made a choice to get high. That was his problem with Jada, with his father. They had both made a decision to get high, and they couldn’t find the strength to stop getting high. Not even for his sake. Not even for the love he felt toward them.

“How long has she been using?” Ingrid asked. Born described Jada’s history with drug abuse briefly to his mother, sparing her the grittiest details, about her selling her body. Ingrid sat back when he was done, and stared at him. Born wondered if his mother thought he was a fool. He guessed that Ingrid thought he had been dumb to get involved with a former addict in the first place. But she didn’t think that at all. Ingrid was thinking about how she had also ignored the signs of Leo’s drug use, how she had tried to block it out. She listened to Born tell her how he had thought Jada was really through with drugs when he met her. Ingrid remembered feeling that Leo could also be strong enough to let go, only to be let down again and again when he went right back to crack.

She thought back to when she had first realized that Leo was smoking. Finally, after several minutes of silence, she spoke. “Your father started using cocaine when you were little,” she said. “Maybe eight or nine years old. I heard the

rumors, saw the signs and all that shit. But I didn't want to know." Ingrid paused. "I knew that Leo was gettin' high. Him and his crew would come in here and get higher than the sky just about every night. I knew about that. I didn't fuss about it, because I knew that was part of Leo's package. He was maintaining. He had it under control. Leo was who he was, either love him or leave him. And I loved him." She sighed, and looked at her son, who was sitting and soaking up her every word, her body language, and all. Listening to her, he wondered how she had been able to love her husband despite his addiction. He knew he wouldn't be able to love Jada despite hers.

She looked at him. "Leo was a good man. He had good intentions. He loved you, Marquis. He really did. When he was doing good, we had the best of everything. His habit was something he seemed to have control of in the beginning. But when he started struggling, I could feel it. I felt like he wasn't telling me something. Something changed between us. Then the money started slowing up." Ingrid puffed her cigarette. "I always worked. Leo was into so many different hustles that we had to account for some legitimate money—some legal sources of income. So I always had a job. Plus, I always knew it was important to have my own. Even Leo stressed that to me. He always encouraged me to work, to have my rainy day money ready. And I listened. I kept me a job." Ingrid grinned, slightly. "I had to start hiding money, so that Leo wouldn't know what I had. He didn't steal from me. But if he knew there was money laying around, he would definitely want to smoke it up. And if I refused to give him the money, we would fight all night. So I hid it. I kept my own stash that he knew nothing about. Nobody knew about it. It wasn't much—just a couple of hundred dollars. But it was something for a rainy day that he didn't know about. That was always something I maintained." Ingrid thought to herself that this was yet another lesson that Leo had taught her. Life with Leo was one big lesson; he taught her how to drive, how to navigate the hood, and how to be his better half. He had also, unknowingly,

taught her how to hide assets, and how to conceal money. He had been quite a teacher.

“Leo had a bad heart. He was getting a disability check on the first of every month, and he would always give me half of it up front. But then he was disappearing for a few days, until he smoked up the other half. All along, his disability check was steady, but for as long as I knew Leo, he was always coming through with extras, money always trickled in. But soon that stopped. That’s when I had to pick up the pieces. I tried to keep you occupied so you wouldn’t notice. But you started asking questions, and it got harder to hide. That let me know right away that something was causing him to lose his grip. He had never been so sloppy. I didn’t admit it to myself at first, Marquis. At first, I convinced myself that it was another woman. I told myself that Leo was shacking up with some other bitch, that he was spending his money on someone else. But that wasn’t it. Soon, I had to admit to myself that it was more than that. Leo got arrested for buying crack from an undercover when you were small. He did about eighteen months for that. I made excuses, told you he was down south with his family ‘cause his uncle was sick. Just all kinds of lies.”

Ingrid shook her head, wishing she had known how inevitable it was for Leo’s promise to stay clean to come crashing down. “Leo came home, and went right back to his old ways. People saw him around the other buildings, looking a mess, spaced out. He wouldn’t do his dirt in our building, because it would get right back to me. So he went to the other buildings to get his shit. I knew about it. I just kept on going. Just kept trying to keep it all together. For you.”

Born listened to his mother. “How did you handle it?”

Ingrid shook her head, dismayed. “I didn’t handle it at all. I ignored it. When Leo did come around, I would pretend I didn’t know. I would act like everything was okay.” Born watched his mother pause, appearing to fight back tears. “I was so impressed by your father, Marquis. He taught me so much. I learned more from him than from anybody else in my

lifetime. He showed me how to read people, how to see through bullshit. I felt like he was the smartest man I had ever met, like he was invincible. I knew him so well that I could complete his sentences. I loved him. I watched him. So when he started slipping, I saw it right away. He thought he had his addiction under control, kept telling me it was alright. It was no big deal. And I wanted to believe that. I wanted to believe that he would pull himself together and get right back on track. He was still making money. But he was smoking it now. After a while, Leo was no longer respected like he used to be. But by then, I didn't have the heart to put him out, or to leave him. It got to the point where I really didn't care anymore. I was past all that." She stopped talking. Thoughts ran through her mind about how she would have done things differently if she could have. How she wished that she could have those days back once more, so that she could pull her husband back from the clutches of his addiction. Deep inside Ingrid wished she could have reached Leo before it was too late.

Born remembered his father being strung out. He remembered the point in time when Leo began to lose the respect of all the folks who once had bowed to him.

"We never really talked about all this before," Ingrid continued. "I guess it was so much a part of our life that we didn't address it at the time." She looked at her son, thought about the twists and turns his life had undergone after being exposed to all the activities within the four walls they called home. She wanted to help him deal with the devastating news he'd just found out about the woman he loved.

"You need to talk to her, Marquis. You need to find her some help—"

"Nah, Ma. She has to go! I can't be with her for one more night. I don't want to see her, I don't want her in my house—"

"You can't put the child out in the street!"

"Why not? She knew! She knew about Pop and how I felt about him using it. She swore she wouldn't use that shit again. Yo, she *stole* from me. She stood there and watched me beat a

nigga's ass for stealing, when she knew all along it was her that stole from me!"

Ingrid shook her head, knowing there's no low too low for a crack addict.

Born shook his head, and stared at the floor. "I can't trust her. I got niggas laughing at me." Born sat and shook his head, in internal agony. He sat like that for a long while, and Ingrid searched for the right words to comfort him.

She sighed, bringing Born out of his reverie, and back to their conversation. "Ma, I'm so mad at her that if I see her, I might hurt her."

Ingrid nodded. She understood. But she also understood something else that her son seemed to be missing. "I know you're angry with Jada," Ingrid said. "But I think a big part of what you're feeling right now is anger toward your father that you never let go of." After she said it, her words hung in the air, resounding with truth.

Born shrugged his shoulders, as if to dismiss what she was saying. But as silence enveloped them, he thought about it, and realized that there might be some logic in Ingrid's statement. He looked at her, and he realized she was right. Born had never been good at talking about his emotions. Even now, with his own mother and the eyes of the world averted, he got choked up at the thought of discussing what he had kept bottled up for so long. Looking at his mother's calm eyes and warm expression, he was comforted. And he said, "I got a lot of questions for him, Ma. You know what I'm saying?"

Ingrid nodded, and Born pressed on. "I just been thinking about him a lot. Thinking about how he died, and all that. I miss him." Born looked away from his mother. "But I'm still a little mad at him, too." Having said that, he felt like a weight was lifted off of him for the first time. He wondered what it would feel like to unburden everything. "Word. I think a big part of me feels like he let us down. He gave up too easy. Gangstas don't go out like that."

Ingrid understood this. She knew that Born had been carrying around more pain and resentment than he should. Knowing that he was a proud young man, who liked to believe that he had everything under control, she had allowed him to try and shoulder that burden for as long as he was able. Now, she realized, he was ready to let her help him. She smiled, happy he was letting her do that. “Tell me what you haven’t been saying,” she said. “You gotta let this go, once and for all.”

Born looked at his mother for a long time, unsure where to begin. Her round brown face was as familiar to him as his own voice. She had always been the yin to his father’s yang, the other half of the whole. And now, just as it had always been, all they had was each other.

He began to talk to his mother—about everything. He told her how hurt he’d been watching his father kill himself with drugs. He talked about the pain he was feeling after finding out that Jada had succumbed to the same weakness. They talked for hours that afternoon. Hours that would normally have been spent going about the daily routine of life were instead spent putting a salve on old wounds that had been left on their own for too long. But perhaps most surprising to Born was the fact that he found himself getting a little choked up when some memories came flooding back. Seeing her son still too tough to cry broke her heart into a thousand pieces. When Leo died, Born had never shed a tear—not at the funeral, or in the days and months following it. He had found it impossible to cry for his dad. And even now, he didn’t want to cry. But Ingrid and her son talked some more. They reminisced about the old times—both good and bad. And sitting there in his father’s chair, talking to his favorite girl, Born cried for Leo Graham at last. And he faced the fact that, despite all the many roles he played in the lives of so many people, in reality, at his core Born was still just a scared little boy who missed his father.

Ingrid watched Born, understanding just what he was feeling. And she wished there was some way she could take all

his pain away. She saw that her son's heart was broken, and knew he was finished with Jada. When they finished talking, and pulled themselves together, she tried to say something more in Jada's defense, but Born wouldn't hear it. He felt like he had been made to look like a clown, and he didn't like it. He wouldn't stand for it. Ingrid wasn't defending Jada's actions. But she knew that Born loved her. And she knew that Jada needed help. But looking at Born, she realized that he also needed help. Her heart broke for him, and she sighed. "What can I do to help you, Marquis?"

Born looked at his mother, and felt a little twinge of hope at last. She listened as he told her what he had in mind.

After talking with Ingrid for a little while longer, he left her house, knowing that he wasn't going home. He didn't want to see Jada. Not now, that's for sure. Born walked through the apartment complex, headed for his truck, parked in the lot. He felt like a whole ton had been lifted from his shoulders since his conversation with his mother. He missed Leo Graham, missed the man that he was before the drugs got ahold of him.

He climbed into his ride and sat back, the keys still in his hand and not in the ignition. He sat like that for a long time, once again thinking of his father and the days he'd smoked his life away. He started his car, and drove off down Richmond Terrace. His father's voice was as clear as a bell in his ears: "*Do what you can, young man,*" Leo used to always tell his son. It was a phrase that Born had never been able to forget, something his father always used to tell him. But he felt that Leo had never done all that he could have to be the father that Born had needed, the father that he still needed now. Born was sick of feeling the disappointment, sick of holding in his anger. Without thinking about it, he drove toward the expressway, and headed for the cemetery where Leo had been interred years prior. It was time for him to have a conversation with his father.

He pulled up outside of Frederick Douglass cemetery, and parked his car. The weather was unusually warm for a late March afternoon. The sky was clear, and a warm breeze blew,

gently. He felt the sun on his face, and enjoyed it as he walked through the winding pathways of the cemetery toward Leo's final resting place. He looked around at some of the names on the other tombstones. He quickly calculated some of the ages. A woman, thirty-nine years old. A man, sixty-four. Another woman, fifty-two. A young boy, seventeen. Born wondered how many of these people had been drug addicts. How many of their families had suffered the way his had?

He approached Leo's grave slowly, staring at his father's name etched for eternity in cold stone. Coming here was always emotional for him. When he stood before his father's grave, he was never Born anymore. He was Marquis Graham, a young man at his father's side, wanting to grow up and be just like him. Whenever he came here, he was a child once more, standing in front of his parent, with so many unanswered questions.

He walked closer and stood there, directly in front of where his father lay. He read the inscription bearing the name Leonard Albert Graham and the words *Free at last*. How fitting, Born thought. He hoped his father was indeed free.

He closed his eyes and pictured his dad's face. He could see it clearly still. His dark hair and mustache. His smiling eyes and his keen nose. Born squatted and looked at the words again. Damn, he missed him. "Hey, Pop." He looked around and made sure no one was within earshot. "It's been a while since I came out here to talk to you. That's 'cause it's always so hard when I come to see you." Born looked away briefly, and continued.

"But I got some things to say. I'm feeling a kinda way about how you left us. I'm not talking about when you died, either. You left us long before that. I'm talking about that cocaine, you know what I'm sayin'? That's what made you leave. I gotta tell you I'm mad at you for that, man."

Born paused, and thought about how Leo went from riches to rags, and how he had left Born's mother to pick up the pieces. "You bailed out on us. You left us, and you knew how

much we depended on you. You used to be *that nigga*; the one who everybody respected. That dude with the fly cars and all the money. The man that all the ladies fell in love with. The one that never took a loss, never got took. The infamous Leo Graham. That's who you were. But that cocaine got the best of you, Pop. That shit made you different. It changed you. And that ain't how it was supposed to be. You were supposed to be an old man right now talking to your son about how to survive. How to deal with having his heart broken. Nigga, you was supposed to be here giving me advice, helping me figure out what to do next. But you *airit* here. You quit, Pop." Born had tears falling down his face, but he no longer looked around to see if anyone saw him. He didn't care.

"You quit. I told you that at your funeral. I meant that shit, too. Gangstas don't go out like that, man. They don't quit. You was supposed to fight that shit! You was supposed to beat that shit. But it beat you. And what about your wife? What about me?" Born wiped his eyes then, and bit his lower lip. "What about me?" Born cursed his father for what Leo had instilled in him. Leo had given him the blueprint for being a hustler, for being on top of his game. But he had not taught Born how to be a man. He had never taught him how to deal with a broken heart, the loss of a best friend, or the sting of humiliation. All he'd taught him was the game. But now Leo was nowhere around to guide Born out of it. And more than anything, that was what Born wanted at that moment. He wanted out. He wanted to let go of all the pain, the paranoia, the drama, the disappointment. But he had no idea how to do that.

He took a deep breath. Then another. He shook his head, overwhelmed by the flood of emotions. "I never got over that shit, Pop. I never really forgave you for leaving me all alone when I was too young to stand on my own. Ma needed you. She needed you more than you thought she did. She couldn't show me how to be a man. That was your job. But you was so far gone that you couldn't even see what was going on. I remember being a young shorty in the hood, and I was so glad that you were my dad. Everybody knew you. Everybody loved

you. And you were *my* dad. That shit made me so proud. And then I remember years later seeing you and feeling embarrassed that you were my father.”

Born’s face was twisted into a grimace at the memory. “I remember being ashamed of you.” He remembered feeling so let down. That feeling had never completely gone away. “But I *always* loved you, Pop. I always loved you. When I was a little boy, and you were the man, I loved you. And even when you was just another fiend standing on the corner, I loved you. I love you now, still, Pop.”

A light rain had suddenly begun to fall, and Born didn’t care. He took it as a sign that maybe his father could hear him somehow. Maybe he was shedding tears from heaven. The entire day had been sunny and warm, without a cloud in the sky. And suddenly it had begun to rain, just as he was telling his father about his pain, and about his anger toward him. Born wondered if Leo was trying to tell his son that he was sorry, sending the rain as some sort of apology. Born remained there beside his father’s grave, the raindrops feeling like they were washing away his pain. He reached forward, and touched the tombstone. His fingertips brushed across the letters in his father’s name. Born kissed his fingers, and touched the tombstone once more. He cried for his father, and for the loss of his own childhood, and for the loss of a woman he loved more than she’d ever know—all of these things Born had lost to a drug he had never even used. He stood up, brushed off his jeans, and put his fitted cap back on his head. Born stuck his hands in the pocket of his jeans, and stared down at his father’s grave, with the rain falling harder now. “But you still quit.” He said it, and turned and walked back to his car. He felt better now that he had finally said the things to his father that he had been waiting to say.

Born thought then about how Jada had also quit on him. He thought of her as he climbed inside his Denali and checked his *eyes*, red from crying, in the rearview mirror. Turning the key in the ignition, he drove away and headed home.

TO HAVE LOVED AND LOST...

Born took the long way home. He stopped off and picked up fast food and sat right there in his car and ate it. He finally went home at around ten o'clock that night, hoping that Jada had sense enough to be gone. He had seen it all with his own two eyes, and there was nothing more to discuss. He hoped now that she would have the decency to spare them both any additional confrontations by leaving. She had to know the relationship was over. There was no way Born would continue to be in a relationship with a crackhead. If she knew him at all, she had to know that much.

Throughout their relationship, Born had considered Jada more than a lover. She was his *friend*. There had never been secrets between them, and he had given her his heart. Now he felt like such a fool for ever trusting anyone with something so vital to his survival. Their relationship had sustained him. From the beginning there had been a raw honesty between them, and that was what he loved about it. That's what made their relationship so refreshing. It was sincere; their love was real. Or so he had thought. But knowing that Jada had been getting high all along, that she had stolen from him, and had made a fool out of him, that was a deal breaker. All the trust he'd developed for her, all the love—it made him feel stupid. It made him determined never to love again. Born wanted to take his love away from Jada. If only his heart would listen to his mind.

He walked in, and the house was dark and quiet. Jada was sitting on the couch in the dark, waiting for his return. She wasn't high anymore. Even in the dark, he could tell by the way her body slumped discreetly in the corner of the sofa that she was upset. Her body was tense. He saw her, and he stopped walking, stood still, and stared at her. She waited for him to say something, and when he didn't, she cleared her throat. "Born, I need to talk to you." Her voice was barely above a whisper, and he could see tears on her face in the dark. He shook his head, and took off his jacket.

"Get out." Born said it calmly, with no emotion, and waited for her response.

"I'm not leaving here until you talk to me. Born—" Jada began.

Born walked directly toward her, his pace swift and determined. Jada jumped in defense, wondering if he would hit her for the first time in their relationship. He snatched her car keys off the coffee table then he grabbed her and dragged her, kicking and screaming, toward the door. She held on to the sofa, and tried to anchor herself. "Wait a minute! Born! Please!"

Born wasn't trying to hear a word she said. He silently pried her fingers off the sofa, and dragged her body across the room.

Jada sobbed, "I'm sorry, baby! *I'm sorry!*" She repeated the phrase over and over, but her cries fell upon deaf ears. "*Please!* I'm so sorry!" He dragged her to the door, and opened it. "Just let me talk to you, Born. Please! Let me tell you what happened." Jada clung to the door's frame, and tried to resist his force as he pulled her toward the open air. He was silent, but his lack of words spoke volumes to her.

"Marquis, *Please!* Let me tell you what happened!" Jada screamed, and clung to Born, calling him by the name his mama had given him in hopes that he would see how desperate she was. "I love you! *I'm sorry!* My *God*, Born, please! I just did it once!"

Hearing this, Born became enraged, because he knew she was lying. He grabbed her by the throat, silencing her immediately. Jada's voice got caught in her throat, and she looked terrified, as he squeezed her fragile neck. He knew that by now the neighbors were watching, but he didn't give a damn. The only thing that saved her was the thought of facing his mama after beating Jada's ass. "I don't want to hurt you, Jada." His voice cracked as he said it, because he heard the truth in those words. He didn't want to hurt her, even after all the pain she'd caused him. But God knew he would whoop her ass if she stood in his face and lied to him one more time. It made him wonder how many other times she'd lied. His eyes filled with tears, and Jada noticed it.

"Baby, please. I love you—"

His adrenaline coursing through his veins, he picked her up like she was as light as a feather. He held her hands together so that she couldn't hold on to anything else, and he carried her out to her car. He tossed her across the hood of the car with all his might, sending her skidding across the Acura and smack onto the street on the driver's side. Jada lay on the ground, rolling around and crying loudly. Several neighbors came outside to see what was going on, while Jada sobbed uncontrollably in a heap on the ground.

Born turned and went back inside the house, locking the doors and each of the windows. He went upstairs, and lay awake for the rest of the night, listening to the noise Jada made as she tried desperately to get back inside the house. He heard her yelling, banging on the door, and trying to open the windows downstairs, to no avail. He wondered if the neighbors might call the cops. But they didn't. At close to 1:00 A.M., he finally heard her car pull off, and he closed his eyes and cried in the dark. It was over.

Born sat in the darkness, thinking about Jada, and about all the signs he had missed. He remembered the conversation that he'd had with Dorian about Jada. Dorian had turned to Born and looked at him seriously. *'You better watch her, Born. You know we spend a lot of time away from home, and they get*

bored. They start looking for all kinds of ways to have fun. You know what I'm saying? Just make sure you always know what kind of fun she's having. Make sure she's keeping her nose clean." But Born hadn't understood what he'd meant. Looking back now, Born understood completely. He had missed the signs. Jada had lost weight during their relationship. Not to the point of looking sickly, but enough for him to notice a change in her body. She would be restless and irritable one minute, and happy-go-lucky the next. Her voice would be hoarse all the time. He had shrugged these things off, made up excuses in his mind for them. She couldn't be using cocaine again, he'd told himself. The truth was, he couldn't bring himself to admit that Jada might do that to them—to him. Born felt like an idiot.

The next morning, Jada arrived bright and early. She had spent the whole night getting high in her car. She had parked at a construction site where new town houses were being built, and got high until she had no more drugs. All of her money was in her Gucci bag on her dresser. She hadn't expected Born to toss her out with nothing. When the sun came up, she was penniless, hungry, and still in trouble with the man she loved. She pulled up in front of the house at close to ten in the morning, and parked awkwardly at the curb. She was prepared for a showdown today. She knew that the last thing Born wanted was for one of the neighbors to call the cops. She was prepared to use this fact to her advantage.

She walked up to the large oak doors, and began banging loudly. *"Open the door, Marquis! Come on!"* Jada kicked and pounded on the door with her fists. She was torn up inside, reduced to tears in the early morning hours.

She heard the lock turn, saw the doorknob twist. As the door slowly creaked open, Jada perked up, opened her mouth, her eyes streaming with tears, prepared to beg Born's forgiveness, and plead with him to hear her out. But she saw a woman's face emerge from behind the door, and Born's mother stood there, looking at the pitiful young thing before her.

Ingrid shook her head as she looked at Jada's uncombed hair, her makeup dripping down her tear-stained face. She felt sorry for the young lady, yet she had to respect how her son felt about the situation. "Hello," she said. "Jada, Marquis ain't home. I came over so you could get your stuff. I want to talk to you, anyway."

She wasn't so much asking Jada as she was telling her what was about to take place. Ingrid stepped aside, and motioned for Jada to come inside. She did, walking slowly into the house that was her home, wishing more than anything that Born was there to talk to her. Jada knew that she looked terrible, and could only imagine what Miss Ingrid must've been thinking as she walked in. She was looking and smelling like yesterday.

Ingrid ushered Jada into the living room, and sat across from her on the couch. Jada looked around at all the things she had purchased for this home—their home—all the trinkets and furniture, the curtains she'd placed throughout to enhance the decor. She wondered how Born could be so heartless as to throw her out of it now. How could he take away everything he gave her without giving her a chance to explain?

Ingrid read the turmoil on Jada's pitiful face. She looked at the young woman she usually saw dressed in the best, looking like a top model. The creature before her looked frail and weak and lost. She shook her head, knowing that drug addiction was no joke.

Jada knew how much Born loved his mother. She knew how close they were, and that he had probably told Ingrid everything. She decided to try to level with Ingrid.

"I want to tell you that I really love your son. I love him so much." She started crying, realizing that she had blown her one chance at love. "I'm so sorry." Catching her breath, she continued. "I'm not an addict anymore. I was using something years ago. Then I did it again, but not like before. I'm not addicted now. I can stop. I just was doing it once in a while when I was bored. I was at home alone a lot and ... I'm not

addicted, though.” In her mind, Jada rationalized that she was doing alright as long as she was snorting with Sunny. It was when she’d gone back to crack that things had fallen apart. At least, that’s what she told herself. “I wasn’t stealing from Marquis. I didn’t take from him.” She was lying, and couldn’t even look at Ingrid. The pain of what she knew was true made her cry so hard that she could hardly breathe.

Ingrid handed her a tissue and told her, “Pull yourself together, now.” She shook her head again, knowing that Jada was in denial. “Girl, let me tell you something. Can’t nobody help you get over what you dealing with but God.” Ingrid cut right to the chase. “I don’t claim to be the most religious person,” she said. “I ain’t gon’ sit here and tell you no lies about me being a saint. But I’ve seen a lot of things. And I’ve seen how it is to be hooked on them drugs. Seen the shit up close and personal, sweetheart. So don’t think I’m just sitting here lecturing you for the hell of it. I know firsthand how it takes over. That crack can eat you alive, if you let it. The choice is yours. It’s up to you now. If you want to keep using, you can do that. But you *are* addicted, Jada. And you’re killing yourself. Just know that. You’re throwing away what a lot of people would love to have. My son loves you. He don’t want to say that, because he’s hurtin’ right now. You know what I’m saying? But he loves you. You hurt Marquis. You always hurt more than just yourself when you use drugs. You hurt everyone who loves you. But you know that. You went to rehab, you know what they tell you.” Jada hung her head in shame, but Ingrid pressed on. “You gotta make up your mind that something is more important than that crack. And if you want to clean yourself up, you have to give it all you got. You gotta mean it.” Ingrid looked at Jada, and could tell that she wasn’t ready to make the necessary change. She could see in her eyes that the young woman was still in denial about how serious her problem was. Ingrid touched Jada’s dirty hands, her nails broken from pounding on the door and prying at the windows the night before. “If you want to turn your life around, you can do it. You gotta ask God for His help. That’s the only way.”

Jada was so sorry that she'd ever slipped. Sorrier that she'd been caught. Ingrid sighed deeply. "Well, unfortunately, I have to be honest with you here. Whether you want to change or not, Marquis is finished with it. He's not budging. I done talked to him, and told him to hear you out—

"Did you tell him that I'm sorry?" Jada ignored the snot falling from her nose. Ingrid handed her another tissue. Jada took it, wiped her nose, and cried. She spoke in a low, feeble voice. "You can't tell him that I'm sorry. Only I can tell him that. Why can't you get him to talk to me, Miss Ingrid? He listens to you. He respects you so much. Maybe you can get him to hear me out. I just want to tell him that I'm sorry. I'll fix myself up. I'll do it."

Ingrid looked blankly at Jada, feeling sorry for her pain, but knowing that her son was adamant that the relationship was over. She put her sympathetic feelings aside, and said what her son had asked her to say. "I need you to pack up all the stuff you want to take with you, and I'll help you if you need it. But Marquis don't want you here when he gets back. He left town for a few days to get his head together, and he wants me to make sure you're gone before he gets back."

Jada looked at the older woman, feeling like she was turning a deaf ear to her pleas. "I love your son, Miss Ingrid—"

"I believe you, baby. But he wants you to get your stuff up out of here today. I'm just the messenger. Don't make this hard on yourself." Ingrid's tone was flat. She seemed unfeeling, and perhaps a little cruel in her delivery. But inside she felt pity for the young lady. She knew that Jada was a decent person who happened to have one hell of a monkey on her back. Ingrid had watched her own husband fight the same battle, and she knew that when they fell back into using, it was usually with a vengeance. She could sense that Jada was out there pretty far, by her lack of concern for her appearance. The Jada she knew of would never have been caught outside looking like this, regardless of the situation. Ingrid was embarrassed for her. But she believed that Jada genuinely loved her son. Born, however, was still haunted by the pain of having lost his father to

cocaine addiction. He had zero tolerance for someone who allowed themselves to be weakened by narcotics. Ingrid had tried to point out to Marquis that Jada and Leo were two very separate and different people. But Born shut down whenever the topic of staying with Jada was mentioned. He was not hearing anything she said.

Jada closed her *eyes*, as if she wanted to open them and find that this was all a dream. But it was very real. Accepting this, she stood up slowly, and looked around. What should she take with her? Where would she go? How much should she take? She felt a sudden surge of rage that Born hadn't had the balls to come and face her himself. What kind of man sends his mama to do his dirty work? Jada briefly entertained the thought of spazzing and going toe-to-toe with Miss Ingrid. Shit! This was *her* home, this was her life that Born was taking away. But looking at his mother, Jada knew she didn't want to challenge her. Miss Ingrid probably had a little peashooter in her pocket, and would probably not hesitate to bust a cap in her ass, Jada thought. Besides, Born's mother wasn't the one she was mad at. Ingrid wasn't being mean. She was only doing what her son had asked her to do. But still, her presence signaled that this was serious, that it was final. Jada let go of a sob, wrapping her mind around the fact that it was over. He was kicking her out.

She longed for her friend Sunny. Sunny would know what to do. She would tell her where to go. But she still hadn't heard from Sunny much since she'd gone underground with her baby and her family, after Dorian's murder. She longed for her friend, and was saddened by the realization that once again she had nowhere to go, no one to turn to. She felt sick about it. She thought about her sister. Where was Ava now? It had been over a year since she had last spoken to her. The last time she'd spoken to Ava was the day she'd left her house after discovering Jada getting high. Jada didn't have the heart to call her sister and give her the benefit of saying, "I told you so." Her mother. She was her only option. But Jada didn't want to give Edna the satisfaction of seeing her as broken and beaten

by life as she was. She went upstairs, and looked in the hall closet and pulled out her luggage. She also pulled some money out of Born's jacket pocket—a few hundred-dollar bills. She went to her spacious walk-in closet and began the process of packing all the things she wanted to bring with her. She zipped her two furs into garment bags, packed her dresses, shoes, jeans, T-shirts, and purses. Soon she had three large Samsonite suitcases filled to capacity, along with her large Coach tote bag, filled with her jewelry, underwear, and a little cash she had stashed for herself. She had \$720 and the possessions she lugged downstairs in suitcases. She and Miss Ingrid loaded up Jada's Acura, and she half expected to find out that Born wanted his car back. But he didn't strip her of that as well, and Jada was relieved for that.

When the car was loaded up, Jada looked at Ingrid. She knew that she smelled bad. She knew that she looked and felt even worse. But regardless of her haggard appearance, she had to tell the truth about her feelings for this woman's son. It might be her last chance to get a message to Born. She looked into his mother's eyes and made a final plea. "I am so sorry for messing up," she said. "I fell. But Born can help me stand up on my feet again. He can help me get right again."

Ingrid shook her head. "You gotta help *yourself*, Jada. You gotta get right for yourself."

Jada stared at her, speechless. Then she sighed. "I love Marquis. I never meant to hurt him. He's my everything. I don't have nobody else." She looked at Ingrid, and saw the pity that she tried to hide from her. "I know I have to leave. And I know he doesn't want me to come back. But just tell him that I love him. Tell him to forgive me." Jada resisted the urge to cry, and to hug Miss Ingrid, and she climbed into her car instead. Ingrid stood there for a few seconds, feeling the young woman's pain, and hoping that she found the strength to get clean and stay that way. Jada pulled off slowly, looking back at the house she used to think was etched directly from the canvas of her dreams. Ingrid walked back inside, and

closed the door on a love affair between two people who almost had it all.

Jada's life had taken a sudden plunge, and she was destroyed. She had no place to turn, and nowhere else to go. So she went to the one place that still welcomed her. Back to the streets.

Jada slept in her car for the next several days, and even drove to her old friend Shante's place, looking for somewhere to stay until she got back on her feet. Shante allowed Jada to stay with her for a little while, after Jada enticed her with three hundred dollars toward that month's rent. Jada slept on Shante's futon, and during the day she went out, looking for a job, a place to stay—something. Three months went by this way, and all the time Jada drove past the house she had shared with Born, hoping to see him. She never did. She called his cell phone, called his house phone. Every number had been changed to an unlisted one. She drove past his drug spots, but was too embarrassed to go upstairs to see if he was there. She didn't know if Chuck had survived his beating, and she sure didn't want to face him if he knew that she was the real thief who had caused him to be fucked up. Jada got high every day, copping from her old dealer, Lucas, in West Brighton, whenever she got the chance.

She saw Mr. Charlie a couple of times during her trips to score some drugs in his building. But Jada didn't speak to him. She hated him for contributing to her misery. She hated everything that had contributed to the addiction she now realized that she had. Jada would sleep late some mornings, and on other mornings she would lay on the futon and pretend to be asleep, listening to Shante talk shit about Jada to her other friends.

“Yeah, girl. She's gettin' high again. I know! Lil Miss High and Mighty ain't so mighty no more, but she still high.” Shante laughed out loud at her own joke. She listened as the person on the other end of the phone said something. “He left her. He put her out, and that's why she's staying with me. Girl, he kicked her to the curb. She said he had his mama come and

help her pack her shit up. Now tell me *that* shit ain't gangsta. No more glitz and glamour for her. Now, it's back to where she started. That's why they say, don't forget where you came from. When he had her in all those jewels and furs, she wasn't coming to check on Shante. You know? It don't matter to me, as long as she keeps putting money in my hand. When his money runs out, I don't know where she think she gon' stay. I feel sorry for her."

Jada lay there with tears in her eyes. She knew that Shante didn't really feel sorry for her. But Jada sure felt sorry for herself. She got up and went out to escape—to get high once again. Soon her money was low, and Shante was fed up. So Jada packed her belongings, and went back to sleeping in her car.

After close to a week of living in her Acura, Jada finally admitted to herself that she had to sell some of her things. She went to a pawnshop and sold all the jewelry Born had bought for her piece by piece. Her jewelry netted her six thousand in cash, and Jada cried her eyes out in the pawnshop parking lot. All her jewelry—the diamond bracelets, rings, and earrings, her Rolex watch, and all the Tiffany pieces, every single thing had once held such special meaning for her. And now they were gone. She sold her two beloved fur coats by placing an ad in Staten Island's local newspaper, and got five thousand dollars total for two furs that had cost seven thousand and ten thousand dollars respectively. She felt like dying. Her entire relationship with Born had been a waste. She had nothing to show for it but a car she could hardly afford to gas up, and a broken heart.

She rented a one-bedroom apartment on Lafayette Avenue and used some of the money to set up house. She got some cheap furniture, and she laughed to herself at the irony that this apartment full of low-budget furniture was equal in price to that of the sofa alone in the living room she had shared with Born. This was a big step down, and Jada hated herself for blowing her chance at happiness with a man like him. Whenever she wasn't high, Jada spent her time crying and

regretting her actions. She wished more than anything that she could turn back the hands of time. She had no job, but she had a little money. And most of that money was spent on staying high enough not to think about Born.

She missed him terribly. She remembered all the places they'd been together, all the conversations they'd had. Jada missed his voice, his face, his smile. She couldn't believe that he really didn't want her anymore. She thought that Born couldn't possibly get over her, or over their love, that easily. She thought he must be as miserable without her as she was without him. But then she saw him.

She was at the mall in Staten Island, looking for a pair of shoes to match an outfit she had. She was sick of sitting at home, crying and sad about her mistakes. Tonight there was going to be a local "player's ball," and she was going so that she could let off some steam. She hadn't been out since her days with Born, and she needed to unwind. She went and got her hair done and got her nails done, and she felt better than she had in months. She walked into Aldo and was looking at a pair of *sexy* sandals when she heard his laugh.

Jada looked up, and Born was walking into the store with a light-skinned black woman who looked to be in her early twenties. She was very pretty, and had an enviable bone structure. Her face was flawless, and her outfit was Christian Lacroix. Her hair was cut into a chin-length Chinese bob with bangs, and she was beautiful. Jada's ego told her that the woman looked like a younger and better version of herself. Was Born replacing her with a carbon copy? Jada was green with envy. She stood there, holding the shoe in her shaking hands, and stared at Born. He didn't see Jada at first. He was too engrossed in whatever joke he and his new friend were laughing at. He had his hand on the small of the woman's back, and Jada couldn't help remembering when he had held her just that way. Born, still laughing, turned his head forward as they entered, and that's when their eyes met.

Jada stared at him, and he at her. She put the shoe down and stepped closer to him to say something. But before she could

take another step, Born quickly grabbed the girl by the wrist and led her out of the store.

“Wait a minute, Born,” the woman protested. “I want to get the shoes I saw yesterday.” She pulled her hand away and stood in the store’s entranceway.

Born stood outside, and the look on his face was serious. “Not now, Anisa. We’ll come back and get them.” He took her by the hand, and they walked off into the mall.

Jada stood there, feeling like a fool. She looked around, embarrassed that Born had run from her that way, and hoping that no one had noticed. She put her head down, and walked out of the store in the opposite direction of Born and his friend.

Anisa, Jada thought to herself. *Her name is Anisa*. She thought about the pretty girl with the pretty name who had taken her place in Born’s life. She wondered if she had also taken her place in his heart.

Jada sat at the bar alone, wallowing in self-pity. She watched Born, who was all the way across the room with Chance and Smitty, laughing at something. In her mind, they might as well have been laughing at her. She sipped her Hennessy and glared at Anisa, standing by Born’s side in the position that Jada had only recently vacated. She felt hatred toward the pretty young woman Born paraded around now as if she were Jada’s replacement—her understudy. Jada wasn’t even sure if Born knew she was at the club that night, since he had so far spent all evening in the company of his childhood pals and that bitch Anisa. They were tucked cozily at a corner table, surrounded by partygoers.

Jada was trying to summon the courage to approach Born. She thought that surely he wouldn’t cause a scene in a crowded nightclub, when all she wanted to do was talk to him. She drained her glass, and was going to slide off the barstool and take the chance of walking over to Born. But before she could set her empty glass back down, a familiar face appeared at her side.

“Perfect timing, I guess,” Jamari said. Without asking her, he summoned the bartender and ordered Jada another of whatever she was drinking. Jada didn’t argue, figuring this might be even better than approaching Born. If he spotted her talking to another man, he might feel a twinge of the same jealousy she had felt all night long, watching him with Anisa. Maybe, if she was lucky, Born would even come over there.

Jada still didn’t realize that the animosity between Born and Jamari ran deep. She knew him only as a man who she had run into all the time when she was in Park Hill stealing from Born. Jamari sat on the empty stool beside her, and ordered a glass of Hennessy straight. Jada smiled to herself, knowing that this was Born’s favorite drink as well. She was clueless about Jamari’s childhood friendship with Born, and ignorant to the fact that he had once idolized Born. She didn’t know that Jamari had crossed Born, and that the two of them hardly spoke to one another.

She sipped her drink when it arrived, and thanked Jamari for it. He smiled, and said, “You’re welcome.” Jada realized that he was really handsome. In all the times she’d seen him when she was stealing from Born, she had never really looked at Jamari. She had enjoyed his flirtatious conversations, but had never taken the time to see how good-looking he was. Jamari was tall and thin, with light brown skin and encompassing eyes. He had a smile that never seemed to quite reach his *eyes*. Jada noticed that his lips would spread into a smile. His perfect teeth would be visible. But somehow, the smile never reflected in his *eyes*. They still seemed sad, maybe even blank and cold. Jada got lost in them as Jamari spoke.

“Now, why are you all alone over here, while that muthafucka’s all the way over there?” He shook his head. “Why would a nigga stand over there all night with some skinny, average-looking broad like her, when your fine ass is over here tossing back glasses of yak?”

Jada smiled, happy that Jamari had cracked on the bitch monopolizing Born’s attention. She laughed, and shook her head. This was her fourth drink, and she was feeling it. She

spoke a little slower than usual, as she said, “Me and Born broke up. I guess he moved on.”

Jamari already knew that their relationship was over. Born had made sure he was seen all over Shaolin with all kinds of women, but most often with the pretty young thang he was currently dancing with. Jamari knew that Born was only trying to save face because his ex-wifey was a crackhead. By parading the new dime pieces in his life around town, he was making it known that he was still the man. Anisa and Born danced to Aaliyah’s “If Your Girl Only Knew,” while they sipped on Moét. There were four bottles on the table with Born and his crew, so Jada assumed they must be balling, as usual. She was so envious, so beside herself with jealousy. Jamari noticed the green-eyed monster taking residence within her. “He’s a fool,” Jamari said, nodding in Born’s direction. “Some dudes don’t miss a good thing till it’s gone.”

Jada shrugged her shoulders, and took another swig. “I think you’re right. But it don’t really look like he’s missing me too much right about now.” Jada looked forlorn. “But that’s okay, because I came to have a good time by myself.”

Jamari listened to what she said, but could tell by the look on her face that she felt very differently. She sounded very unconvincing. He watched her gaze continuously fall on Born and his new girlfriend, while he made small talk with her. He could tell that she was sick with regret. She caught Jamari staring at her, and she turned and met his gaze.

“I think I’m gonna go,” she said. She finished her drink, and set her glass back down. “Thanks for the drink.” She smiled at Jamari, and patted him softly on his bicep as she stood from the stool.

“Don’t leave yet. Don’t let that nigga stop you from having a good time.”

Jada smiled. “It’s not that—”

“Then prove it.” Jamari stood up, towering over her. “Dance with me.”

There was a reggae mix playing, and couples littered the dance floor. Jamari led Jada to the center of the floor, and started dancing with her. He put his hands around her waist, and pulled her close. She prayed that Born was watching her, and that he came over and interrupted. She was so desperately longing for this to happen that she grinded on Jamari, turning her back to him so that her ass rubbed up against his body. She wanted him to enjoy the dance, so that Born would notice her.

Born did notice her. Anisa went to the bathroom, and Smitty took the opportunity to point Born in Jada's direction on the dance floor. Born stood there, watching the love of his life dance with the man he despised. He wondered if Jada knew who the nigga was, if she knew their history. What was on her mind? He was tempted to go over there and say something, but he knew that if Anisa came back and saw him fighting over Jada, she would have been mad. It was bad enough that Born had already called Anisa by Jada's name on two occasions. He didn't need to further piss her off by arguing over Jada in the middle of a party in New York's smallest borough.

Born stared at the two of them as they danced, feeling like Jamari was playing a dangerous game with him. Born had let his treachery slide the first time, and he hadn't slaughtered Jamari like he should have. This time, he knew that Jamari was only using Jada as a way to get under Born's skin. So he ignored them, and continued to enjoy the evening as if Jada was nowhere in sight. Born was so angry with himself for letting Jamari live, for letting him continue to antagonize him. He thought about something Dorian had said to him years earlier, when Born had first told him about how Jamari had deceived him: *"If you let that nigga get away with it, he's gonna cross you again."* As Born watched his nemesis dance with Jada, he sipped his champagne, and Jamari looked in Born's direction and smiled. Born smiled right back.

Born felt that his reputation was being challenged. Jamari was calling him out. Born took that dance as a sign that war was imminent. He looked at Jamari, thinking of something his father used to tell him. It was sage advice that Born intended

to take to heart from this day forward. “Strike first, and strike hard,” Leo used to say. Born smiled, hearing his old dad’s voice in his head. He intended to follow his advice to the fullest.

LEFTOVERS

Born knew that Anisa had gotten him by default. She was just someone he started to date when he was on the rebound. When he met Anisa, she was a breath of fresh air for him. She wasn't from where he was from. That meant that no matter where he brought her within New York City, she was unknown to the niggas on the scene. No one could say that they'd had her or that they knew about her past. She was from Long Island, and they met while he was out there doing business. He went to a barbecue at an acquaintance's house, and she was one of the guests. She was so stunningly attractive that he had hardly been able to concentrate on anyone else. He got her number before he left, called her the next day, and they began a relationship that blossomed into what it was today. But he knew he would never love her the way he had loved Jada.

Anisa was a very demure and soft-spoken young woman. She listened to Born tell her all about Jada, and about the way she had broken his heart. She seemed sympathetic and understanding, giving him reassurance that he had done nothing to deserve what Jada had done to him. Anisa didn't use any drugs, didn't smoke cigarettes, and rarely drank. She was a safe bet, he figured, and her willingness to listen to his tale of woe was a plus for him. Anisa became like his amateur therapist. She listened to him as he told her about how losing Jada to drugs had almost made him want to give up on women. But Anisa was determined to prevent that from happening. She did everything right. She was quiet when he was in an introspective mood, and she was tons of fun when Born

needed to let off some steam. He found himself wanting her company more and more, and she became his good friend with benefits.

Born would never love a woman again. He wouldn't allow himself to fall for any woman the way he had for Jada. That was too dangerous. He was afraid to have his heart broken. Even though Anisa was at times the ideal woman, he kept her at a safe distance, and never let her get too close. Anisa stubbornly played her position, hoping that somehow she could break down his resistance.

But after a while Anisa got sick of hearing about the other woman. One day in particular, Anisa had just given him two explosive orgasms, back-to-back. They had been going strong for close to five months, and she was pulling out all the stops to make sure that her position was secure. Thug lovin' was what she'd done to him. Anisa had tied Born's wrists up in a bandana, and sucked him off intensely. He had splashed off in her mouth, and she had devoured it all, untying his hands and smiling, satisfied, when she was done. They lay together afterward, with Anisa's soft hands stroking his dick. He felt himself growing in her delicate hands, and she grinned at him, naughtily. Before he knew what happened, Anisa had him in her mouth again, and he was rock hard.

He beckoned her closer. "Get on that."

Anisa happily complied, climbing on top of him and putting him inside her. He watched her wind her hips, enveloping him inside her warmest place. He held her hips as she grinded, and it wasn't long before she got him to climax a second time—and this time she joined him in that ecstasy.

Afterward, Anisa had laid her head on Born's chest, with her leg wrapped across his. He was on his back with his hands behind his head, and he seemed completely relaxed. They lay together in silence for a while before he looked at her, and said, "Yo, I can't believe the bitch is fuckin' with Jamari." He shook his head in disbelief, as he thought about seeing Jada with Jamari, and hearing more and more that they were being

seen together. “The nigga is a bum. All he do is run behind Wizz all day, trying to be somebody for a change. Jamari and Wizz think they doing something, but them niggas ain’t making no money. Them niggas ain’t seein’ no real paper out there. I shut the hill down, and them mutha-fuckas is nibbling on the crumbs that fell from my plate. Jada’s just one of my crumbs.”

Anisa stared at him, seeming to listen attentively. But in her mind, she was thinking, *No, this nigga is not laying here talking about another woman when he just finished having sex with me.* She wondered if he had been thinking of Jada while they were having sex. She was fed up.

“You’re sick without her. It’s so obvious.” Anisa had said it calmly, and sat up in bed. She seemed like she wasn’t mad, but she knew that his love for Jada was still haunting him, and she began searching for her clothes.

“Nah.” Born had denied it. “I ain’t sick without nobody.”

Anisa looked at him, her lips scrunched up in disbelief. “Well, then stop talking about the bitch, then. I’m getting kinda sick of hearing about her. Especially since I’m the one who just made you cum like that.”

Born smiled, and told himself that he probably was talking about Jada more than he should. He made a mental note to curb his mention of Jada’s name in Anisa’s presence from that day forward. Maybe he was slipping.

He didn’t talk about Jada much after that, but she still dominated his thoughts. Jada had no clue as to how deeply he had felt for her. Truth was, Born was brokenhearted. His mama told him that you never get over your first love. Instead, he replaced her with Anisa. She was not Jada, but she was also not a crackhead.

Born had held out hope that Jada wasn’t really dealing with Jamari like that. But the more he heard the rumors, the more he felt like Jada had been a complete waste of his time. He knew that he had taught her better than that. Born saw clearly

from the beginning that Jamari was only trying to provoke him. He wondered how long it would take before the two of them bumped heads at last.

31
CONSEQUENCES

September 1998

Born sat in Slim the barber's chair at the barbershop on Bay Street. He had just sat down, and his cape was secured around his neck. Slim was called that for a very obvious reason. At six-foot-four and 170 pounds, he was a thin young man who ran his own shop, keeping his eyes open and his mouth shut. He cut Born's hair to perfection every time, and for this reason he counted him as one of his regulars. He worked alongside Barnes and Kevin, two other barbers with decent followings of their own. On this day there were three other patrons in the shop besides Born. Two were young men in their twenties, as Born was. He recognized one of them as Breeze, from the Stapleton projects, while an unknown young man in a red Hilfiger shirt sat in Kevin's chair getting his hair cut. The other customer was an older man in his fifties. Slim began the process of cutting Born's hair into the perfect fade. The mood was calm, it being a cool September morning. The radio played in the background, and the topic changed from local gossip to current events. Soon Slim was putting the finishing touches on Born's mustache and goatee. The older man left the shop, and the subject was hip-hop's East Coast-West Coast beef.

“All I'm saying is, the shit done got out of hand. It ain't about music no more. And once it stopped being about music, I lost interest.” Slim said as he maneuvered his clippers

skillfully across Born's dome. "What do you think, Born?" he asked.

Born pondered the question as he looked at the reflection in the mirror on the wall opposite him. He could see the street through the mirror, and he watched as cars pulled up, and people came and went. As usual, Born was on point. Although, to those who looked at him it may have appeared that he was simply having a conversation in a relaxed atmosphere, Born was in fact watching the arrival of his enemy. Looking in the mirror he could see Jamari and Wizz approaching the shop as they climbed out of Jamari's car.

Born sighed, wondering if it was coincidence, or if it was just his own rotten luck that he kept running into this dude. He answered the question that had been posed to him, as Jamari and Wizz entered the barbershop. He wasn't facing the doorway, and Slim's chair was in the back. But still, Born's presence was obvious. "Sometimes beef starts out because niggas wanna test you," Born explained. "And then niggas do or say something that crosses the line. Once that happens, you got a problem, because a man has to always defend his honor. Unless he's a coward, and he has no honor. But a real man is gonna step up and call a nigga out. And when that happens, you got beef."

Jamari and Wizz listened, still thinking that Born didn't know they were there. "Wassup, everybody?" Jamari said, expecting Born to look up in surprise at the sound of his voice. But Born didn't move, nor did he respond, as the other patrons greeted Jamari and Wizz.

The guy in the red shirt, who was getting his hair cut by Kevin, spoke once again on the topic of the rap war. "Niggas is dying, you know what I'm sayin'? Once bodies start droppin', I think it qualifies as beef."

Jamari nodded in agreement, although he was coming in on the tail end of the conversation. He sat in one of the folding chairs, and said, "Beef ain't always bodies droppin' and bullets flyin'. Some beef simmers slowly." His tone was

suggestive, and Born met his gaze in the mirror's reflection. Born knew there was a hidden message in what Jamari had said. Jamari grinned at Born. "Yo, what up, my nigga. I ain't even see you sitting there," Jamari lied. "How's everything, man?"

Born ignored the greeting and the question and stared at Jamari through the mirror. By now, all conversation had ceased, and this exchange was the focus of everyone present. Only the music drifting from the stereo's speakers filled the void of silence.

But Jamari was determined to spark a conversation with his old friend. "Yo, did you ever make back that money you lost with Chuck?" Jamari was grinning, antagonistically. He had heard about how Born had beaten Chuck within an inch of his life when Jada had been the one stealing from him all along. "You know he's working with me and Wizz, now?"

Born didn't flinch. He stared back into Jamari's cold eyes, as Slim removed the cape from Born's neck. "Nah, I didn't know that," he replied. Born wanted to kill Jamari at that very moment, but there were too many witnesses present. "He's working for you and Wizz now. What's that supposed to be, like a step up or somethin'? You and Wizz ain't gettin' no money. It's like I always told my nigga Chuck, if you hang around with nine broke niggas, you're bound to be the tenth one. He'll see what I meant."

Jamari stared at Born like he wanted to say something. But he uttered not a word. Wizz stood up, and glared at Born. "Yo, what the fuck is on your mind, Born? You walk around here like you're Superman, or some shit. You ain't no fuckin' body! You can bleed just like everybody else."

Slim stepped between the men, as Born stood up. "Don't bring this bullshit in my shop, Wizz. Word is bond."

Born turned to leave, grabbing his hoodie on the way out. "Nah, don't worry about it, Slim. I'm leaving." He looked at Jamari and Wizz, and smiled. "Y'all niggas can't handle the truth." He had his ratchet with him, and he felt the steel press

against his rib cage. He smiled at them provocatively, hoping that they'd give him a reason to start shooting. "You can give work to Chuck and any other lil nigga out here you choose. But you're never gonna catch up to me. Y'all ain't never gonna get the respect I get, the money I get, or the love I get."

Jamari grinned now. "But it looks like I can get the girls you get, Born. Jada said to tell you 'hi.'" Jamari licked his lips, feeling so much hatred mixed with jealousy toward his former friend.

Wizz laughed, but on the inside, he was beginning to wonder if Jamari's beef with Born was more about him wanting to *be* Born. To Wizz, Jamari sounded like a deranged fan. In truth, Jamari was thirsty for Born's position, and he had been since they were young kids growing up.

Born considered murdering both of them right there. But he decided to kill 'em softly instead. "Tell her I said hello. I knew you was fiendin' to sample that. I could tell from the first time I brought her around. Congratulations. She got some good pussy, don't she?" The other customers laughed, and Born continued to smile in Jamari's face. The two other young men in the shop getting their haircuts amped up the backhanded remark. His comment illustrated how little concern he had about Jamari being with Jada. Born had already been there and done that, and he'd had her *first*. In his heart, though, Born was still sick without Jada, and he hated her for being with this lame. But he would never give Jamari the satisfaction of knowing that. "Stick to the script, muthafucka. Stop trying so hard to fit into my shoes, and walk in your own for once." Born looked at Jamari with contempt. Then he looked at Wizz. "You should watch how you talk to me," he said. "You might fuck around and piss me off."

Born opened the door, and walked out, laughing. Wizz and Jamari were both enraged, and Wizz began declaring war. "That's it, my nigga. I don't care what you say. I'ma body that muthafucka next time I see him. I'ma run up in that nigga's spots, and all that. Watch. I don't give a fuck what you say."

Wizz was talking recklessly, and the other customers exchanged glances.

Jamari was seething. He hated Born, because he was a constant reminder that there was always someone better than him. Jamari remembered how he had started getting respect only when he came around his peers wearing Born's clothes, rocking Born's jewelry. Jamari had respect for Born, but wanted that same success—wanted those same things for himself. He always got the things he wanted, eventually. But by then Born would be two steps ahead of him, and always did shit bigger and better. Jamari remembered when he started bringing pretty, light-skinned girls around the way, and he was the man for a minute. Having a light-skinned girl with long hair was a badge of honor in the hood back then. But then Born came through with Jada. And she wasn't even all that light-skinned. But she was bad as hell, and she shut all the other bitches in their circle down. Jamari got an Audi, and Born got a Benz. Jamari rented a house, and Born bought one. Jamari hated the feeling he got whenever Born was around—the feeling that he was never the best. Never quite number one, as long as Born was on the scene. Everywhere he went niggas gave him respect. But Born still treated him like a shorty, and he was a grown-ass man. The truth of Jamari's animosity toward Born had yet to surface, and he never revealed to Wizz his true motivation for hating Born as much as he did.

Not realizing that he was speaking aloud, as he peered out the shop windows at the passersby, Jamari said, "Fuck that nigga. I ain't no shorty no more. Things ain't sweet like they used to be."

Pulling his card, the old man in his fifties said, "Yeah, nigga. You talk all that shit now that the muthafucka's gone. Ten minutes ago, you was quiet as a fuckin' church mouse."

The shop was filled with laughter, as everyone fell out at Jamari's expense. Wizz shook his head, as Jamari stormed out. Their laughter filled his ears as he left, and headed for Jada's house.

Jamari arrived at Jada's house, and she could sense right away that he was upset about something. He seemed uptight. He sat down and explained to her that he'd just had an argument with Born at the barbershop. He told Jada that he had defended her, while Born spoke about her like she was a disease.

Jada's heart beat rapidly. "What did he say about me?"

Jamari seemed not to want to tell her. But she pleaded with him until he gave in, and told her his version of the day's events. "He said that you're a dirty crackhead." Jamari watched Jada's expression change, and he continued. "He started talking about how you were wild in bed, and all the sexual things he used to do with you. He was on some real disrespectful shit. He said you were his leftovers, and that he already used you up. He called you a bitch. The nigga was talking about you like you was some ho in the street, with all them niggas in the barbershop laughing at you, and shit. I defended you, though."

Jamari watched Jada wipe the tears that fell from her eyes. He knew that she still had love for Born, and knew that she was holding out hope that he would take her back one day. But Jamari saw Jada as a pawn, and he manipulated her as such. He walked over toward her and wiped her eyes. He kissed her softly on her nose, and held out his hand to her. When she reached for it, there was a vial of crack in his palm. Jada snatched her hand back as if she'd just stuck her hand in some fire. She looked at Jamari, questioningly.

"Go ahead and take it," he said. "I'm not gonna judge you. I know you smoke. My moms smoked also. So I understand. I'm not here to pass judgment. All of us have our bad habits. I got mine, and Born got his, too. He judges you, but I don't. Go ahead and take it. I got you."

Jada stared at Jamari, feeling two things. She was hurt because of Born's cruel words against her. She had thought that Born was her soul mate, and he had spoken about her as if she was a stranger to him. That hurt. She was also wondering

what kind of man Jamari was. True, she *was* smoking crack again. But Jada wasn't accustomed to a man who would just give it to her and encourage her to get high. Only Mr. Charlie had done that, and he had turned out to be a snake. Still, the pain of what Born had said about her needed numbing, and Jada took the crack from Jamari. She watched his reaction, but he simply sat there and sparked a blunt filled with weed, and smoked it. Jamari got high off of hydro, while Jada got high off of crack. Jada felt relieved that she did not have to hide, and that she could let her guard down around Jamari. As her mind swirled around in a haze, Jamari reminded her over and over to be herself. He assured her that she could be who she was around him, that he didn't want her to change like Born wanted her to.

Jada had sex with Jamari for the first time that night. He took his time, and seemed to enjoy every moment. Jada was disconnected, and to her it felt empty. There was no emotion in it at all for her, other than sadness that Born had turned on her so viciously. She disappeared inside of herself, as she had done countless times when she was a prostitute. Jada let Jamari explore her body, and she finally accepted that it was over between her and Born. She thought that she just might find happiness with Jamari, if she gave him a real chance.

After that day, every time he came to see her he had crack for her. She appreciated Jamari's openness and his acceptance. She misinterpreted it as love. Jada lost some weight, but maintained her sexy curves. She had few outward signs of her addiction, other than her dwindling bank account balance. Jamari was proud to be seen with her, and the two of them went out all the time. At first she would hope to run into Born, so that he could see how well she was doing without him. But soon she heard that Born had met an unexpected twist of fate.

HIGH PRICE TO PAY

Two days passed after Born argued with Jamari and Wizz in the barbershop. He went about his business, as usual. But he longed more than ever to talk to Dorian. He missed his boy, and was consumed with guilt. He still felt like he was the one to blame for Dorian's death, and he wished that he could go back to the fateful moment and change his actions. He never would have taken his eyes off Raquel. Never would have let her get inside the house. Born felt responsible for Sunny not having Dorian to depend on, and for their daughter not having a father. In short, he missed his friend. He wondered where Sunny was, and he wished she was around to tell Jada to leave Jamari alone. Sunny had all but disappeared after Dorian's death, and he hadn't even seen his friend's little baby girl.

Over those two days, Born thought about how life had changed so much for him. Dorian was gone, and so was Sunny and the baby. Jada was a thing of the past, and even his childhood cronies were no longer as close to him as they'd once been. He knew that, despite the civil nature of their relationship, Martin still didn't particularly like the fact that Born had done his own thing, and left the crew behind. In Martin's mind, Born had been selfish, keeping all his connections to himself, while his former crew was left struggling to keep up.

Born felt alone for the first time in his life. It really was lonely at the top. It was nice having Anisa around. But she was someone who didn't know his story. And he didn't have the

energy to share it all with her. She didn't know him the way that Jada had. The sex was good, and her conversation stimulated him. For these reasons alone, he kept her around, and she became the new lady in his life. Somehow, he still felt a longing in his heart for the life he once had. He had had it all. A great best friend and mentor, a lovely lady on his arm whom he loved with all his heart, and an enterprise no one could penetrate. And in the blink of an eye it had all gone away. All but his hustle, and that was what he focused on. His days were spent making moves and taking risks, trying to maintain his hold in the streets. He spent his evenings with Anisa, though his mind wandered to what used to be.

He awoke one morning, and left Anisa at home asleep while he went to the store. He planned to drive a few blocks to the convenience store on Victory Boulevard. But as soon as he pulled out of the driveway and onto the street, he was surrounded on all sides by dark vehicles, and cops started jumping out. He knew what was up, and he put his hands up as the cops closed in and opened his car door, removing him from the vehicle. "Don't move, Marquis!" He was amazed that they knew his government name. From that alone, he figured that they had done their homework. Either that, or they'd been tipped off. He didn't resist, didn't say a word as they read him his rights, and showed him the search warrant. They wasted no time searching both the house and his car. He said nothing, and neither did Anisa, as they led her out of the house in pajamas, and put her in the back of a squad car while they searched the house. Born heard them asking her where she was from and how she knew him. But she didn't answer their questions, and they got frustrated, and left her sitting in the back of the squad car half dressed, while they searched the house with police dogs.

Soon the cops emerged with smiles on their faces, and Born knew they had found the small amount of drugs he had stashed in the kitchen canister. His suspicions were confirmed when he heard one officer say to another, "Got him! We got him!" It was only about ten bags of white powder. Not enough to hit

him with twenty to life, but still enough to make his heart sink. Born had never been one to keep the bulk of his drugs where he rested his head. The few bags he had in his residence were nothing compared to what they could have caught him with. He wasn't too concerned, but he also didn't want to get his hopes up that things would work in his favor, when he knew it was quite possible that they might not. He watched his neighbors come out and shake their heads at him, as if they'd known all along that he was unfit for their suburban neighborhood.

He looked through the police car window as they drove him to the precinct. He spoke not a word until he arrived and was processed. Born was booked, fingerprinted, and put in a cell. He called his mother and explained the situation. She promised to be in court in the morning to see what the deal was. Born instructed her to get in contact with Grant Keys, the attorney from Dorian's crew. He asked her to explain what had happened and to see if there was anything Grant could do to help. Ingrid told Born not to worry, that she had everything under control. After talking to her Born felt a lot better. The police questioned him for hours that night. They wanted to charge him with conspiracy, but with no coconspirators that was impossible. For once, Born was glad that he had no partners, no team. The detectives who questioned him didn't seem convinced that he worked alone. They kept asking him about Brooklyn—who were his connections from Brooklyn? Instantly, he thought of Jamari and wondered if he'd stooped low enough to rat him out. How else would they know as much as they did? But thankfully, they didn't know enough. In order to prove conspiracy, they needed people to say that they worked with him. They didn't have that, and they couldn't get him to talk. Born was mute as they barraged him with questions, insults, and accusations.

Finally, at two o'clock in the morning, they returned him to his cell. Born settled in for the night, refusing to worry too much. But all the while he was wondering what was going on. How had they caught up to him out of the blue like this? Had

somebody tipped them off? Over and over he replayed his argument with Jamari and Wizz in his head. He wondered if one of them had dropped dime on him, and realized that it was a very likely scenario. He wondered how Anisa was holding up under all the pressure, and wished that there was some way that he could talk to her.

With very little sleep, Born awoke the next morning to face his destiny. Hours passed before he was finally called to the courtroom, with Anisa standing nervously beside him. He looked at her and nodded reassuringly. Then he scanned the courtroom until he found his mother's face. She winked at him, and Born felt more at ease. Beside her sat Grant Keys and Born smiled, happy to see his face. The judge and D.A. went through their formalities while Born's attorney pled his case. Marc Burnett was the finest criminal attorney in the borough, and Born had chosen him to represent both him and Anisa. When all was said and done, despite the prosecutor's attempts to have bail set at ridiculous amounts, the judge asserted that such desperate measures were unnecessary. Born's bail was set at five thousand dollars, and Anisa was released on her own recognizance. Born glanced at his mother on the way out, and smiled triumphantly. Within an hour both he and Anisa were free to go.

When he was released Born eagerly greeted Grant outside the courtroom. Born told Grant that his attorney was urging him to take the five-year deal that was being offered, since the prosecution was willing to drop all charges against Anisa in exchange for Born pleading guilty. With good behavior, he could be home in three years. Grant assured him that he could do better than that. He told Born that he had a relationship with the judge who was presiding over his case.

"How do you think you got such a low bail?" he asked, smiling. "Give me a chance to go back and talk to him in his chambers, and I'll see what I can do about the deal you're being offered." Seeing the look of relief on Born's face, Grant decided not to let him get his hopes up. "Yo, Born, there's a big probability that you're gonna have to do *some* time.

Hopefully, it won't be nearly as much as Burnett said they're offering you now. But he's gotta give you some type of penalty because of the nature of the crime."

Born nodded and stuck his hands in his pocket. He looked at Grant. "Somebody ratted me out, didn't they?" he asked.

Grant nodded. "I'm told it was a confidential informant. They called in an anonymous tip from a pay phone at the Staten Island Ferry terminal."

Born shook his head, knowing that if he saw Jamari or Wizz he would kill them for snitching. Fucking cowards! Seeing the fury on Born's face, Grant put his hand on his shoulder reassuringly. "I'll get back to you about your plea offer, but don't get your hopes up too high. I'll do the best I can." Born shook his friend's hand, grateful that Dorian had exposed him to such valuable connections.

On the way home, Anisa was silent. She had greeted Ingrid stiffly, pissed that she had to meet Born's mother under these circumstances. Anisa was angry, and she was near tears after spending the night in jail. She wasn't prepared for shit like this. The lifestyle Born lived was one that she was enjoying, but prison—that was *never* supposed to be a factor, and Anisa was as mad as hell. She hadn't called her family to tell them about her arrest, since doing so would have meant disgrace for her. She had the kind of family that would have shunned Born for leaving her so vulnerable, and she didn't want that. She knew that Born was a smart man, who would always be successful. She had watched him move and could tell that he was an intelligent hustler—certainly more intelligent than his cohorts in the game. She didn't want to blow what was turning out to be a pretty good thing, by complicating things with family drama. Anisa was getting used to living the life that Born led. She was growing accustomed to the fine linen and exquisite surroundings, the jewelry, the cash, and all the luxury he surrounded himself with. The last thing she wanted to do was become a headache for him. She figured that as long as she continued to play her cards right and be as opposite of Jada as she could, eventually Born would give her everything

she wanted. She was counting on it. Born talked to his mother, and Anisa listened to their exchange.

“You should have known better than to have that shit in your house, Marquis.”

“I know. Not now, Ma. Please.” Born shook his head, and looked out of the window.

“Not now? When, then? You need to be more careful. I know that you know better than that. You’re slipping. You know you gonna have to do some time for this, right?” Ingrid took her *eyes* off the road briefly and looked at her son. “Burnett said they wanna offer you a deal. I ain’t saying to take it, but you need to be ready for that possibility. How much money did they get when they raided your house?”

Born had thought about this question, and knew that Ingrid would inevitably ask it. He already knew where this was going. “I had like seven thousand in cash, along with all the other stuff they seized.”

Ingrid shook her head. “Well, you know they only turned in seven hundred dollars in cash, along with the drugs they found.”

Born nodded that he did know that. “I expected that, though. They never turn in all of it.”

“I just don’t understand how you could be so sloppy.” Ingrid couldn’t help leveling with her son. “I know you had to expect that these clowns out here would get sick of seeing you on top. You know the streets only love you until you start doing *too* good. Then they hate you. You gotta watch your back. You should have been expecting them to come to your door eventually, and for that reason you never should have had shit in your house.”

Born looked at his mother. His eyes pleaded with her to save this conversation for later. He wasn’t in the mood for this so soon after being sprung. She grasped the meaning in his stare, and closed her mouth, driving the rest of the way in silence. As they pulled up in front of the house, Ingrid turned

to her son. “I cleaned up as best I could, but the place is still pretty messed up.” Born had expected that the police had trashed his home during their raid, and he was grateful that his mother had used her spare key to straighten up his home as much as possible. He thanked her, gave her a kiss on her soft cheek, and climbed out of the car.

Ingrid watched Anisa in the backseat, looking terribly upset that she’d been forced to spend the night in jail. She sat there, not budging as she waited for Born to open her door and help her out of the car. The expression on her face was that of someone who was suffering. Ingrid, knowing that her son would take all the weight, and that Anisa wouldn’t have to take a fall in the end, didn’t like how the young woman was portraying the role of the victim. Anisa’s lips were pouty, and she had her darkest sunglasses on her face, like she was at a funeral or something. Ingrid knew that if you want to be a hustler’s wife you need to be able to roll with the punches, and take things for better or worse. Anisa didn’t seem to have what it took to stand the test of time. Ingrid took note of this, and added this to her list of reasons for not particularly liking her son’s new girlfriend.

Born opened the car door, and Anisa stepped out and bid his mother good-bye. They walked into the house, and both went to take much needed showers. By the time Anisa emerged from hers, Born was hanging up the phone after a conversation with Grant. Born was not disappointed. Grant had made his case sound a lot less grim. He explained that due to the quantity of drugs they’d found and Born’s previous arrest record, he would have to do some time in jail. But the judge had called in a favor and the prosecution was seeking far less time than the five years Born had previously been facing. Now Born was looking at a one-and-half-year bid, which he eagerly accepted. The charges against Anisa would be dismissed. He thanked Grant for his help, called Burnett and instructed him to accept the plea deal. He could tell that Anisa was relieved to hear that she would be off the hook. Born, on the other hand,

spent the next few weeks preparing for his incarceration and passing his torch in the streets for the duration of his absence.

Now Born wished he had a crew behind him—someone he could trust to hold shit down in his absence. As much as he hated to have to do it, he went back to his old hood and got in touch with his boys from Arlington. Martin was still locked up on the attempted murder charge. So Born called on Chance and Smitty. He explained what Burnett had told him, and turned over the buildings in Arlington to them. His only condition was that they hold it down for him and welcome him back when his bid was over. The three of them spent an evening together like they had in the good old days—drinking and reminiscing, and burying all their old hatchets. He was confident when he left that his cronies would wield their power well. He put Omar in charge of Park Hill. It was an operation that was running smoothly. And since Omar was one of Dorian's old cronies, he trusted him. Also, he had the power of Dorian's notorious brothers behind him, and Born figured few would challenge that. He passed the reins to the people he trusted most, and went to embrace his fate. He pled guilty, and went in for sentencing. Anisa and his mother were both in the courtroom as he was led away to begin his bid.

During his months at the jungle in New York City known as Rikers Island, Born managed to steer clear of catching another case. He was anxious to leave Rikers, where the C.O.s let the inmates run the jail, and the gangs ran amok. Born had nothing against the gangbangers. But he saw them all as bullies. And he only respected bullies who had the heart to bully all alone—not those with a whole gang behind them. Six weeks after he was locked up at Rikers, he was transferred to Franklin Correctional Facility in upstate New York. When he got to Franklin, Born went to reception, and they reviewed his case and all the charges against him. The decision was made to put him into a drug program for six months. Born assumed this was due to the fact that all the charges against him were drug-related. He surmised that they probably wanted to show him

the type of damage he was doing by participating in the drug trade.

During his time in the program, Born was forced to take a look at himself and his role in the game. He thought about his father, who had never gotten over his love affair with the fast lane. He started to wonder if it was time for a change. But prison being what it was, he was forced to revert back to the devil within daily, and to react to his environment. He had a few words with his fellow inmates from time to time. But for the most part he managed to keep himself out of trouble. The part that was the hardest for him was the constant attempts by the correction officers to demean the prisoners. Many of them walked around like overseers on a plantation, barking orders and daring the inmates to cross their invisible lines. They looked for any excuse to toss a nigga in the box, and many of them were assholes. A couple were cool, though, and those were the ones who came in and did their jobs without becoming obsessed with power and control. Born didn't like being told when he could use the telephone, or what colors he could wear. But he managed to humble himself and roll with the punches of being incarcerated. While in the drug program, one of the administrators explained that 85 percent of those inmates who earned their GEDs got paroled. To Born that was a blueprint to get out of jail, and he was determined to be in the next 85 percent. He studied for and passed his GED, and kept his mind occupied with books and magazines.

In the beginning of his bid, Anisa had held him down. She came to visit, put money on his books, sent him books and magazines, food, and some clothes. But it wasn't long before those things began to dwindle, and Anisa seemed to disappear into thin air. He called from time to time, and she didn't answer her phone. Born wasn't completely surprised. He had half expected her to forget about him once he got locked up. He had known in his heart that she wasn't cut out to be loyal, and to make frequent visits upstate. But still Born was bothered by her absence at a time when he needed her most. He thought back on how much time and money he had spent

with her, and wondered if he'd ever find a woman who reciprocated for once. Born chalked it up as another reason women couldn't be trusted. Doing time was hard, but he saw every day he spent in jail as being one day closer to going home.

When his six months in the program were done, Born was released into the general population, and he came face-to-face with a blast from his past. Martin was also an inmate there, housed in a separate dorm, but still in close proximity to his former best friend. Since Born's departure from the crew, Martin had never stopped harboring the feeling that he had been slighted somehow. He was still a little pissed that Born had never looked back when he started making major moves. Some of their animosity had been resolved at Born's father's funeral. But still there was uneasiness between the two that had been hard to penetrate over the years.

But up north, Born found himself relieved to see Martin's familiar face. And Martin, being the live wire that he was, had established quite a reputation for himself. Born was happy to align himself with his childhood friend. And as the months slowly passed, the two of them bonded again in the prison yard, or the mess hall, and soon they were close once more. It was like old times again.

During the time he spent in jail, Born lost sight of Jada, and had no idea how far she'd fallen after their split. But some news from home did reach him.

Soon, via the ghetto grapevine, Born learned that his stronghold in the streets of Staten Island was no more. Chance and Smitty had allowed some new niggas to take over their neighborhood drug trade. And to make matters worse, Smitty and Chance were now working for the new kids on the block. They were a disgrace in Born's eyes, because all they really had had to do was to maintain what he had already established. He was disgusted. Upon hearing this news, Born tried to stay to himself in order to avoid anybody pissing him off, and causing him to get in trouble. Any little thing was capable of setting him off. So he stayed away from everyone else, and

kept his head in a book to escape. Martin was also irate because of the news that his boys—his brother most of all—had let the block go to some unknown. He and Born both wallowed in regret for making decisions that had cost them both their freedom and their empires. Born stayed in his bunk day after day, and only joined the other inmates when it was time to eat dinner. That was when all hell broke loose.

Born had found out that the man who had killed his friend Bobby years prior, during his crew's shootout with A.J., was now housed in the same prison dorm as he was. The guy was in for drug offenses, and Born wanted badly to keep himself out of trouble. So he had steered clear of the bastard, hoping not to catch any unwanted charges while he waited out his sentence. He figured that the guy, whose name was Ray, would get what was coming to him eventually. Born didn't need the attention that an altercation with another inmate would surely bring. He was still sore about what was going on back home, and filled with worry for his mother, and how she was maintaining out there on her own. The last thing he was expecting was for some old beef to come and provoke his inner monster.

But as he walked past Ray's table in the mess hall, Ray tripped Born on purpose, and caused his food to go flying across the room as he stumbled, trying to regain his balance. Ray sat there and laughed right in Born's face, and Born rushed the man with all his might. Ray wasn't faring too well in the fight, and tried to pull out a makeshift shank he had hidden in his waistband. Born saw him going for it, though, and every ounce of anger, every ounce of rage, fueled his fight. He had never felt as strong as he suddenly was. His adrenaline pumped through his veins. They fought savagely, locked in a ferocious battle, as the correction officers closed in to break it up. By the time they pulled Born off of the man, Ray was bleeding from his stomach. Born was holding a bloody screwdriver he'd taken from his job as a porter in the administrative building. He had liked that job because it allowed him access to the visiting room, and to tools such as

the rusty screwdriver that he'd used to stab Ray four times in the stomach. Born's intention was to kill the man. That way he wouldn't have to deal with him for the rest of his bid. He had known that, with all the bad news he'd received in the past few weeks, whoever he put his hands on would be in trouble. The officers tackled Born to the floor, and wrestled the weapon from his hands. They dragged him off to the box, and shut him in for the night.

He was transferred the next day to a facility in Comstock, New York, where he spent the next eleven months of his sentence in solitary confinement. Ray had survived, though he was reduced to using a colostomy bag for a long time. And Born knew that this was another beef that would follow him for as long as Ray was still alive.

While in solitary confinement, Born was subjected to twenty-three hours of lockdown in a cell the size of a small closet. They only allowed him one shower, one phone call, and one visit each week. He was allowed one hour of recreation in the yard each day, by himself, usually at five or six o'clock in the morning. And when the guards felt like being assholes, they would tell him that he had overslept and missed his hour in the yard. So Born learned not to look forward to it, so that they wouldn't have the power to deny it to him. He would outthink them, he decided. Half the time it was too cold anyway, he'd tell himself. His hours in his cell were spent either reading or jerking off. He read no less than four books a week. When he could use the phone he called his mother most of the time, and Dorian's brothers as well. He liked to check in on DJ. every now and then to see if he was doing okay. Dorian's brothers and the rest of the crew held Born down while he endured his sentence, sending him food packages, cigarettes, money, and clothes, and he was grateful to them for that.

By the time they let him out of the box, Born emerged looking like Saddam Hussein, unshaven and grimy. He felt like an animal. His time in the box had been designed to break him, designed to dismantle his spirit. He wanted out of prison.

He listened to his mother when she told him that he better start thinking about what direction his life was headed in. He saw the wisdom in her advice to turn over a new leaf.

He enrolled in violence-management and parenting classes, and continued to read—now, about two books a week. The parenting classes showed him just how dysfunctional his own upbringing had been. He learned that children interpret and understand what’s going on in their environment long before parents usually think they do. He learned that children mimic their parents, and that was certainly true for him. He had patterned himself after Leo from the time he was small. They taught him about good parenting, and until then he hadn’t really realized how unorthodox it was to be the child of an addict. To witness drug abuse up close from such an early age. All his life he’d worked with the hand he had been dealt, and never took the time to really see it for what it was. He realized for the first time that so much of who he was, so much of how he lived his life, was attributable to his upbringing. It finally dawned on him just how dysfunctional his childhood had been. The odds had been stacked against him from the very beginning. The ease with which he had merged into the fast lane came from watching his father, and from seeing how Leo had handled power. He had studied and watched his father, and became his duplicate. He realized that, all the while he thought that he had the game figured out, and that he knew how to play it, the game was playing him. True, he hadn’t become a drug addict, as his father had. But he was in jail, and there was no victory in that. He thought about the fact that he could have wound up dead instead, and he was grateful that things had turned out the way that they had.

Born began to pay close attention to his fellow inmates. He began to listen when they griped about their lack of family, their lack of a sense of direction, and the fact that they had no plans for their future. But there was one man who was incarcerated with Born who would forever change his life.

Earl “Ace” Frasier, an older cat, was incarcerated alongside Born. He watched as Born took part in classes and read books

like crazy. Ace was observant, and he watched in silence as he saw a slow change begin to occur in the young hustler they called Born. Born was also observant, and being a seasoned hustler, he could tell simply from Ace's mannerisms that he was or had been an addict. But despite Born's suspicion, he still found Ace to be a likable enough guy. Ace hollered at him one afternoon, as they both left the visiting room.

"I see you been reading a lot, youngster. Going to all kinds of classes and shit. Tryin' to change your life around? Or are you up for parole soon, trying to make a good impression?"

Born didn't know why he felt comfortable answering the older man's questions. Ace was a tall black man in his forties, who—judging from his prison I.D. number—had been locked up since the early eighties. He was well respected in their dorm, and could often be found giving sage old advice to the younger inmates from time to time. Born had never really socialized with Ace much, outside of the occasional card game. But this day, when he looked at Ace, he decided to answer his questions. "I guess it's a little of both," Born said. "I want to turn over a new leaf. You know what I'm saying? But it don't hurt that the board will see all the stuff I've been doing to change my life around."

Ace nodded his understanding.

They went through the demeaning ritual of being cavity searched as they returned to their dorm, and when they arrived, Ace picked up their conversation where they'd left off. "You know you're not really like the rest of these niggas in here," he said.

Born frowned. "What you mean?"

"There's a certain energy that you have that a lot of niggas in here don't have. I've been in here for a long time. And when you walked in, I could see that there was no bullshit with you. A lot of these niggas around here purposely try to walk hard, talk hard, and act tough. But, you don't seem to be trying. Your shit is natural. You walk with confidence, but there's nothing extra about it. You talk hard, but it ain't hard to

tell that it ain't just talk. I see a lot of these dudes around here come and sit by you whenever you come back from your classes. It's almost like they anticipate you coming back, so they can sit around and soak up your aura."

Born laughed, and shook his head. "Whatever! The shit ain't that serious."

Ace smiled. "But it is, though. I can tell the fakes and the phonies. You strike me as a real nigga. That's why the fakes gather around you, trying to soak up some realness."

Born smiled, feeling like he was being flattered unnecessarily. "What you in here for, old-timer?"

Ace shrugged his shoulders. "All *kinds* of shit. But mainly homicide. I killed my brother, and then set his house on fire."

Born stared at him in silence, digesting the information

"I was on crack. Strung out, needed money. I went to my brother's house in the middle of the night to get some. I was hoping that, even if he didn't give me the dough, he would let me in so I could steal something, and sell it to get some dough. It was all about getting high for me that night. So my brother came to the door, and I asked him for money. He wouldn't give it to me, wouldn't let me in the house, and I snapped. In my mind I thought that he was turning his back on me when I needed him, that he thought he was better than me. I stabbed him in his chest about seven times. Then I went in the house, stole some shit I could sell real quick, and then set the whole shit on fire. I never realized that my brother's kids were sleeping upstairs, and I left the house to burn down. By the time I was blocks away getting high, the neighbors were trying to get my nephews out of the house as it burned to the ground. The cops figured out it was me, and I was arrested that same night and charged with murder, arson, endangering the welfare of a child, all kinds of shit. Got sentenced to twenty years."

Born shook his head, his suspicions confirmed about Ace's addiction. He was at a loss for words.

Ace continued. “But the time I’ve served in this prison is nothing compared to the sentence of having to live with that guilt for the rest of my life. I can never get the image out of my head—the look on my brother’s face when I stuck that knife in his chest. I can’t escape that. So they can lock me up for as long as they want. I’m serving my own sentence in here.” Ace pointed to his head, and looked Born in his eyes. “I can never bring him back. And that’s the worst punishment. It ain’t like I killed him for betraying me, or for stealing from me, or for fucking my wife. I killed him so I could get high. My own flesh and blood. That’s the price of being hooked on that fuckin’ crack. You sell your soul for that shit.”

Born nodded. “Tell me about it,” he said. “My dad was hooked on that shit. So was my wifey.”

Ace looked at Born intently. “Yet you still sell this shit to someone else’s father and someone else’s wifey?”

Born shook his head. “You sound like my moms. I guess you got a point, you know what I’m saying? But I always felt like, if I didn’t sell the shit to somebody, another hustler would.”

“That’s true,” Ace said. “But if everybody thought like that, what good would that do? If you let yourself think about every fiend after you serve them, you would feel what I’m talking about. You never let yourself feel the guilt of what you’re doing. You get cold to it. You never let yourself feel the desperation of the person willing to give you their body for a hit. If you can imagine how strong a drug must be to have you choosing it over your loved ones! You gotta make a decision for yourself that selling that shit ain’t what *you* want to do anymore. Fuck everybody else.” Ace leaned forward, speaking with sincerity. “I talk to a lot of young niggas in here like this. Most of them don’t hear me, though, ‘cuz all they want is to get out of here and go right back to getting money. They want to get back to the block, back to the fiends, the cash, the hoes, and all the other shit that comes along with it. They don’t really want to change. But I see you around here going to classes, reading books, staying out of trouble. And it looks to

me like you might really have what it takes to get the fuck up outta here and never come back. I fucked my life up. Ain't no hope for me. Most of these young niggas in here are hopeless. They don't know nothing else, and they don't want to learn nothing else. Period. They'll get out of here eventually. But they'll be coming back. Or if they don't come back, they'll end up six feet under. But you're a natural leader, Born. I can tell by how these lil niggas follow you without you even asking them to. And I think if you want to walk out of here and leave this shit behind, you just might be the one who can really make that change. Real talk."

Born listened to Ace talk more about his own life, the depths to which he'd fallen at the hands of the crack he had used. He told Born about the pain he lived with daily, of how he'd destroyed his family, along with any hopes of living a life not plagued by demons. Talking to Ace made Born look at his surroundings through new eyes. He realized how right Ace was. Born wasn't like the rest of the guys he was incarcerated with. There was something about Born that set him apart. He was incarcerated with men who didn't know how to read, men who had never been outside of the cities and towns in which they'd been born. He began to see that there was more to life than what he had limited himself to.

Each afternoon, Born would sit and talk to Ace for hours. Born soaked up the old man's wisdom and life experience. Ace reminded Born of Leo in a way. The fatherly advice he gave made Born miss his old dad even more. At Ace's urging, Born became interested in the notion of higher learning, and this is what he used to deter him from more trouble. He stayed out of further drama and became a model prisoner. Before long, the end of his sentence was near. He gave all of his books and tapes to Ace, promising to keep in touch once he got out. By March 1999, he was going home. Born made a vow to himself and to God that he would never look back.

DOUBLE CROSSED

Some folks in the hood wondered if Jamari had ratted Born out. The timing was sure convenient. Born's arrest closely followed his argument with Jamari. Jada never questioned it, though. She had no reason to suspect Jamari of that type of treachery. Not yet, anyway.

When she heard that Born was in jail, Jada couldn't understand why she felt sorry for him. Especially after all he'd done to distance himself from her. She was hurt that Born had tossed her out, with his mother's help, rather than helping her fight her demons the way Dorian had helped Sunny. She was hurt by the things that Jamari had told her Born had said about her in the barbershop. Jada was hurt that Born had abandoned her so coldheartedly. He had thrown her out. Then he moved on with another woman, all while Jada was still sick without him. Born had moved on with his life without her. And she felt that it was time she moved on as well. Yet, she still had love for the man, and her heart went out to him. But she was caught up in her own bullshit. Too caught up to really focus on anything else.

She and Jamari dated exclusively for close to three months. Jada was high every day, and she still had not been in contact with Sunny, or with her sister Ava. Her only family, her only friend, was Jamari. He fed her habit, and that was all that mattered to her. For Jada it was more about companionship than love. But it was mostly about the drugs. Jamari was her pusher, and she depended on him for that. When her savings

were depleted, he let her move in with him. She was so far gone that she didn't see that as a setback, but rather as a more convenient way to get high. Now she would be living with the drugs, and she could be high as often as she wanted. She was happy to be living under Jamari's roof, and he was happy to have her there.

Jamari had begun to care for Jada, despite the voice in his head telling him not to. At first, he'd wanted to seduce her, clean her up, and then flaunt her in front of Born. He wanted to turn her against him. But Jada wasn't so easily brainwashed. He could tell that she was still in love with Born, and he hated her for that. He hated the thought of Born still holding a place in Jada's heart. Jamari wanted to be the only man in her life, and even in Born's absence he couldn't fill his shoes.

He felt like a loser, but his feelings for Jada persisted. He was eager to have her in his home, and in his bed every night. At last, she was all his. He set about the task of locking her down. He controlled the purse strings, and Jada went along with what made him happy. Jamari saw Jada as a possession. He would have done anything to keep her with him. He showered and spoiled her. He let her get high, as long as she did it with dignity. He tried to fill her every need, so that she wouldn't need another man for anything.

When Jada told Jamari that she was pregnant, he was thrilled. What he didn't say was that he'd been watching Jada closely. Watching her comings and goings in order to determine if she was playing him. He followed her to see if she was cheating on him. He watched her patterns, and knew when her period was due, and documented her menstrual cycle so that he could tell if she was pregnant. So when Jada told him that she was indeed pregnant, Jamari was elated, but he already knew. He was relieved that she told him rather than sneaking off behind his back to have an abortion. He took that as a sign of her affection for him. And that encouraged him a great deal. He was going to be a father, and the woman who was giving him a child was the woman Born loved. Nothing was better than that.

Jamari did whatever it took to make Jada smile. All because his overall goal was to keep her with him. The baby seemed like the perfect solution. But he was disappointed to hear that Jada wasn't sure she wanted to keep it.

Jada asked him one day if he would be mad if she got an abortion. "I'm not sure if I'm ready to be a mother," she said. She saw the dejected expression on Jamari's face, and tried to soften her approach somewhat. "I'm just having second thoughts about this. I mean, especially because I like to get high. How can I have a child? The very meaning of motherhood is being unselfish. It's about loving someone more than you love your own self, and your own happiness. I don't know if I can be that unselfish. I've never in my life been that unselfish." Jada sighed, and felt her eyes well up with tears. She hadn't been high in days, and now all the pain she'd suppressed was bubbling at the surface. "Every day when I wake up, I think about my life. What's my plan for the day? That's what I ask myself. And then I'll think about yesterday. How I got high all day, or how dirty the house looked because I was too high to clean it. I think about the day before that. How I still haven't heard from Ava. How my own mother wants nothing to do with me. And I even think about Born." Jada saw Jamari's jaw tighten at the mention of her former love, and she quickly explained. "I think about how I hurt him, when all he tried to do was love me. Sometimes I hate who I am and what I've become." Jada shook her head, hating the very thought of all the pain she'd caused, all the pain she'd seen in her lifetime. Jada would think about Mr. Charlie, and all the men she'd traded sexual favors with in order to get high. She'd think about her family, particularly Ava, and how she'd caught her snorting coke, and threatened to tell Born.

Born. It was thoughts of him that usually sent Jada searching for her usual escape. "Jamari, I get high just to make it through another day. Where would a child fit into all of that?" Jada waited for his response, angry with herself for the fact that Jamari had ever even hit it raw. She knew she'd gotten pregnant when she was high, because that was pretty

much the only time she had sex with him without a condom. She'd been too high to care. She wanted to kick herself now for being so careless.

Jamari looked at Jada sympathetically. He heard her reasons for doubting whether she was ready to be a mother. But in his heart he truly believed that having this baby would be good for Jada. Maybe this would help her leave the drugs alone for good. He thought motherhood might be good for Jada, that it might teach her how to be unselfish for once. But he also knew that this was a surefire way to hold on to her. Having his baby would ensure that she would always be a part of his life in some capacity. Jamari was prepared to beg her to have the baby.

“Don’t kill my baby, sweetheart,” he said. The words tugged at Jada’s heart, as he said them. “Don’t you think it’s time to do something with your life? This baby will be your reason to take a step back from the drugs and give your body a rest. It might even be enough for you to stop altogether.” Jamari knelt in front of her, and took her hand in his. “Jada, please. I’m begging you. I swear it’ll be alright. We’ll make it work. I promise I’ll be with you every step.”

Jada listened to him plead his case, but made no decision that night. Jamari’s begging went on for seven days. And then she yielded. She awoke beside him one morning, and looked him in the eyes. “I’ll have the baby,” she said. “I think it’s time I turned my life around.”

Jamari was ecstatic. He kissed her over and over again, and his smile spread all across his face. Things were better than ever between them, and he was at Jada’s beck and call.

As the months went by, and her slim and sexy waistline made way for a bulging tummy, Jamari beamed with pride. Jada had mixed emotions. She had never been in love with Jamari. But she felt like it would be cruel for her to have an abortion after all he’d done for her. And little by little, she began to warm up to the idea of being a mother. She would soon have someone to call her own. Someone that she could

love, and who wouldn't desert her like everyone else in her life had.

She stopped smoking crack while she was pregnant. It was hard, because she wanted it so bad on a few occasions. But she stayed clean. She did smoke a little weed during the first trimester. She wasn't proud of that fact. So then she went cold turkey, and really gave it her all. But it wasn't long before she noticed Jamari becoming more controlling. Now that Jada was no longer getting high, she started to notice that he wasn't as likable as she had thought he was. She couldn't tolerate him as much as she used to when she was always high. And, he wouldn't leave her alone, so she was forced to endure him. Jada started feeling trapped.

When she complained, Jamari lightened up. He would pretend to be understanding and supportive. But, it wouldn't be long before he started tightening the reins around Jada's neck. One day, the subject of Jada's relationship with Born came up. Jada shared with him the fact that she had a lot of regrets when it came to their relationship, particularly how it had ended. Jamari went ballistic.

"You're playing yourself," he seethed. "You're pregnant with my baby, and you got the nerve to sit here and express regret over the next man." His face was twisted into a look of disgust.

Jada tried explaining that she had a lot of history with Born. "You said I could talk to you about anything. Well, that's how I feel. I can't control the way I feel, and I'm entitled to my own emotions, whether you like it or not."

Jamari laughed at her. "Regardless of what you're feeling, Born would never take you back now."

Jada sat in silence, thinking about the truth in his words. No matter how much love she still had in her heart for Born, she was pregnant with someone else's baby. All the regret in the world wouldn't change that. She looked at Jamari, who smiled at her sinisterly, and saw for the first time just how cruel he could be.

She was still little then, even though it was almost her fifth month of pregnancy. Jada was hiding her belly behind cute outfits. The pregnancy was progressing normally. The only problem was Jamari's personality. At first she dismissed it as her irritability due to pregnancy hormones. She figured he was getting on her nerves more because she was more on edge than usual. But when she mentioned Born, Jamari got too personal with what he was saying about him.

"That nigga ain't shit!" he yelled. "I used to be friends with the muthafucka back in high school. Both him and his crackheaded daddy wasn't shit." Jamari was really saying some disrespectful shit! It seemed like he had real hatred in his heart for Born, and Jada couldn't understand why. So she asked him about it.

"What's the deal with you and Born? How come you hate him so much? It's almost like you're trying to turn me against him or something."

Jamari frowned, and shook his head. "I ain't trying to turn you against nobody. I know that y'all got history together, or whatever. But I happen to know the nigga longer than you have, and I know he ain't the hero you try to make him out to be."

"What happened to make y'all stop being friends? You said you two used to be close." Jada took the direct approach. She got results, too.

"The nigga thought I stole from him. He took a loss on five grand, and acted like it was fifty grand."

"Did you steal it?" Jada looked directly in his eyes, the way that Born had always taught her. She was searching for the truth.

Jamari shook his head, and diverted his gaze. "I ain't steal nothing from Born. Fair exchange ain't robbery. I did a lot of work for that nigga. I took a lot of chances, and made a lot of moves for him. And I never got compensated for those things. I ain't never complain. The one time he took a loss on my end,

he acted like it was the worst thing in the world. The nigga cut me off like we were never close at all. He did it to you, too! So you should know exactly how I feel.”

“He did, but I deserved that. I never knew him to do nothing to anyone that didn’t deserve it. He’s not that type of guy. And I’m starting to wonder if you really did steal from him. Born’s a smart man—”

“If he’s so fuckin’ smart, then he must be right about you. You must be just a fuckin’ crackhead who ain’t never gonna change.”

Jada looked crushed.

“I don’t think that’s what you are,” Jamari clarified. “But that’s what *he* said you are. And if he’s so smart, then that must be true.”

Jada stared at Jamari, her eyes probing. “There’s more to the story that you’re not telling me. I know there is.”

Jamari looked at her, and wanted to tell her all of it. But he knew that the truth would make her cringe. He wasn’t sure if she was worthy of knowing. But he reconsidered, realizing that she was about to be the mother of his child. She was entitled to know the truth, for whatever it meant to her. She needed to know why, as his child’s mother, she had to forget about Born.

“Sit down,” Jamari said. Jada obliged, hoping to gain some insight into why he hated Born so much. She wasn’t disappointed.

“I grew up, like, ten minutes away from where Born grew up. We went to different schools until we got to junior high school. That was when we started hanging out, and he would invite me to his hood, and all that. We got to be good friends, but for some reason, my mother didn’t like the idea at all. At first she asked me what his last name was, and what his mother and father’s names were. She pretended not to know them, but she said that she had heard bad things about Born being a troublemaker, and all that. She kept telling me he was

nothing but trouble. She told me she had heard all about Born, that he was a bad influence. I didn't listen to her. I just kept doing what I was doing. My mother had a habit, so I wasn't sure if she was one of Born's customers on the low, or some shit like that, you understand?"

Jada nodded, since Jamari had told her long ago about his mother's addiction. She understood why he would question what his mother had really had against Born.

Jamari took a deep breath, and looked at Jada to see what her reaction would be. "I never knew my father. Whenever the subject came up, my moms would tell me that it didn't matter. The nigga never did shit for me, so what difference did it make what his name was—that's what she'd tell me. So my mother waited until I was twelve years old to tell me that me and Born had the same father."

Jada gasped. "Are you serious?"

Jamari nodded. "His pops and my mother were friends. I guess birds of a feather and all that. Anyway, they were friends with benefits. Leo was hitting it, even though she knew about his wife and his family. She was the other woman, and she got pregnant. And she said that when she told him, he told her he ain't want no more kids. He denied me, and he raised another son the same age as me. Good old Leo Graham. She dropped this bomb on me after me and Born were already really good friends. She told me that Ingrid didn't know about me. Leo never told Born's mother about me, because as far as he was concerned, my mother was just looking for someone to blame for her situation. She said that my father had denied that I was his child. And she was a loose woman, so she wasn't surprised. But when I met Born, and I saw how he lived, and how his mother was different from my mother, that shit bothered me. He grew up with his father, and the same man denied me as his child. That shit hurt."

"Does Born know about this?" Jada asked.

"Nah. My moms made me swear not to say nothing. Remember, Leo was still alive at the time. I guess she didn't

want to start no shit, and I respected her wishes. I kept my mouth shut. But it was strange being at Born's house and getting to know his mother. All the while knowing that her husband was my real father. Then my moms died two years after Leo did, and by then, me and Born weren't on speaking terms no more."

"How do you know that your mother was right about him being your father? No disrespect, but you said yourself that she was kind of loose. Maybe she just *wanted you* to be Leo's son—"

"I thought about that. I mean, all I know is what she told me. She said that he was my father, and that he ain't want nothing to do with me. I didn't ask for no DNA test, or no shit like that, so all I can go on is what she told me. Leo never acted like he knew who I was, or knew who my mother was. I don't think he was really thinking about shit like that at that point in his life. He was just as strung out as my mother was at that time." Jarnari smiled bitterly, as he thought back on how he felt seeing how Born was living. "But the nigga had them living like royalty at Born's house. They had VCRs, video games, a floor model TV, nice furniture. I never had any of that shit growing up. I used to borrow clothes from Born all the time, spend the night, and all that. Just to have an up-close and personal look at how the other half lived. I used to lay awake in Born's room while he slept, praying for what he had, and wishing that my moms could be how Ingrid was. There was always food in their refrigerator and in their cabinets. But not at my house."

"So were you jealous because of all that?" Jada asked, already knowing the answer. She was amazed, because she knew that Born felt differently about his childhood. Born was so caught up in not having his father there for him like he needed. But one man's trash is another man's treasure. Jamari had obviously wanted what Born had.

"I never said I was jealous."

“But you keep talking about all the things he had that you didn’t have. It sounds like you were jealous.”

“I wasn’t jealous. I felt like I got a raw deal. Born got two parents, while I had one. All I had was my moms, and she was fucked up.”

“I understand what you’re saying. But even though he loved his father, Born was disappointed in him, because he was an addict. It’s not like Born grew up with the Huxtables, or anything.”

“But at least Leo was there for him. The nigga was never there for me. I didn’t think that shit was fair. That Born grew up with his father and a good mother, and I didn’t.”

Jada frowned. “Well, it’s not Born’s fault that he had a good mother. And it’s not his fault that Leo loved him. He never even knew that you could be his brother.”

Jamari looked at Jada coldly, upset that she was defending Born. “Whether he knew or not, he still played me. The nigga cut me off ‘cause of one fuckin’ mistake.”

“Yeah. But that was a lot of money, Jamari—”

“I *made* the nigga a lot of money! Whose side are you on? I didn’t take *shit* from him that wasn’t due to me. All the time I spent putting in work for that nigga, and all the times I had his back when the rest of his crew deserted him ... the nigga owed me more than that. Five thousand dollars wasn’t shit to Born, but that money meant the difference between life and death to me. I was the one who never had shit growing up. Not that nigga! It was my chance to do me, and I wasn’t gonna let that nigga stop me from doing what I felt I needed to do. He had all the riches to himself all his life. Even the brothers and sisters that he did know about didn’t get as much as he did.” Jamari took a deep breath, and tried to clear his head. He was very animated, and he didn’t want to give off the impression that he was losing control. “All I’m saying is this. When Born cut me off, he made it easier for me to take what I felt should have been mine all along.”

Jada looked at Jamari, and saw him in a whole new light. She wondered if she was one of the things Born had once possessed that Jamari just had to have for himself. She started wondering if she was being used as a pawn, and Jada felt played. She felt stupid, and wondered what Born must think about her being pregnant by a nigga who had double-crossed him. Had she known all of this sooner, she would never have allowed herself to become involved with Jamari. Thinking back on her reluctance to be a mother in the beginning, she quickly felt that she had made the wrong decision. She never would have kept the baby had she known the whole truth. She felt stuck, since she was approaching her sixth month of pregnancy.

Jamari saw the look on her face, and assumed that she was upset. “So now what? You feel like I’m a monster or something?”

Jada stared back at him, neither confirming or denying that fact. “I understand this shit between y’all a lot more now,” she said. “I understand why you two hate each other so much.” Jada stopped talking, and let the silence linger momentarily. “Why would you wait until now to tell me this, Jamari? You knew how I was dealing with Born, and from the beginning you never let on about any of this. And both of you have this hatred toward each other. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Born never told you,” Jamari said. “He never mentioned how he thought I stole from him. So why should I have told you?”

Jada shrugged, unwilling to try to explain it. “I still think you should tell Born about you being his brother—”

“For what? That ain’t gonna change shit. We’re grown-ass men now. I don’t need him to be my brother, and Leo ain’t around to be my father. Fuck it. That’s the hand that I was dealt.” Jamari shrugged his shoulders. “But that nigga Born is gonna get what’s coming to him, though. No matter what happens, I know he’s gotta get his in the end. The nigga had it too good for too long.”

Jada looked at Jamari, and absorbed the words coming out of his mouth. She was disgusted. This nigga—this hating-ass nigga—was the father or the child growing in her womb. From that moment on she hated Jamari, since she felt that he was only out to hurt Born, and was using her to do it. She made up her mind then and there to get him back. Not just for playing her, but for having so much resentment toward Born as well.

Jada knew that Born was a good man. She had let him down, and that was why he'd left her. But Jamari had painted him as some animal, and Jada knew it all stemmed from his own jealousy over Born's lifestyle. She also wanted to pay Jamari back for deceiving her for so long. She started wishing she could undo it all. Just go back and fix her mistakes. But looking at her swollen belly, she knew it was too late.

So instead of aborting her baby and leaving Jamari like she wanted to do, Jada devised a scheme that would have made Sunny proud. She would hit Jamari where it hurt the most, and at the same time give her the resources she needed to leave his sorry ass for good.

Jamari was still hustling with Wizz at that time. Born was gone, and his team had fallen apart. Dorian was gone, with all his artillery and manpower. So Jamari and Wizz were huddled together plotting takeovers like Pinky and the Brain, night after night. Soon they were doing big business, because all the heavy hitters from back in the day were either dead or in jail. The game was changing, and those two knew that they were in the perfect position to shut shit down. They started moving more and more bricks.

Jamari stopped bagging up at home, so Jada didn't see it moving through the house as she used to. He had enough common sense to know that he shouldn't tempt her with it, knowing how she was jonesing for it. But a couple of times Jada was with him when he met his connect, so she had an idea of the type of money that was changing hands. His name was Elliot, and Jada got to know him well. Elliot was Guyanese, and he was handsome. But the nigga was ruthless, too. Jada knew that Jamari was afraid of him, because his

whole demeanor changed around Elliot. He would sit straighter and talk more ghetto, and she could tell it wasn't really in him to be all hard like that. He wanted people to think that he was this rugged, thugged-out hustler. But she was finally starting to see that he was a wannabe. Jada had been through these types of meetings with Born, and he had never changed who he was just to be accepted. You took him at face value, or you didn't fuck with him at all. Jamari was nothing like Born.

She had nothing but time on her hands to think. And she thought about how Born had loved her. He had loved her completely. And he had trusted her, even though he didn't trust people easily. She had let him down, and she was sad about that. Then, to find out that Jamari had done him dirty. She wished that she could talk to Born, but she knew that she was probably the last person he wanted to talk to. Jada didn't care about the baby, and stopped taking her vitamins and eating right, hoping to have a miscarriage. She just wanted to get high again.

The difference between Jamari and Born was that Jamari didn't give Jada any money. None at all. If there was no food, he went food shopping with her. If she wanted clothes, he took her shopping. If she had a craving, he took her out to eat. She didn't have any money in her hands from the moment she spent the last dollar in her bank account. Once she ran out of cash, Jamari took care of her, but never gave her her own dough. He knew that would have meant independence to Jada. And that was the last thing he wanted.

After a while, the block got hot, and Jamari's scared ass got nervous. He and Wizz were moving a lot of blow through the borough, and the cops were stepping their game up. Niggas from all the hoods—West Brighton, New Brighton, Stapleton—were getting knocked left and right. Sweeps took place on Jersey Street, Targee Street, Broad Street, and Henderson, and soon half the borough's hustlers were fighting cases or copping pleas. Jamari and Wizz were scared. But they had to make money. The final straw for Jada was when Jamari asked

her to make a trip for him. She was visibly pregnant, and the son of a bitch asked her to make a run uptown for him. He wanted Jada to go and get a package from Elliot, and then bring it to Wizz. Naturally, she said no, and told him to kiss her ass. Jamari explained that he was only asking her because the cops wouldn't suspect Jada of anything, with her being pregnant and all. So Jada was mad at first that he asked her to do it. Then she thought about it, and realized that this was her chance.

She waited until he brought it up again, and then she agreed to it. She told him that she knew he was only trying to look out for her and the baby, and that she would have his back the same way he had hers. Jada asked him to tell her what he needed her to do in detail. What she was hoping was that he would give her the money, and she would fake, like she was going uptown, and just break the fuck out. But that's not what his arrangement was. Jamari was getting his shit on consignment. He had set it all up with Elliot, and Jada was just supposed to go and get it, and bring it back. But she had a whole different plan.

When she went to meet with Elliot, Jada was supposed to get two bricks for twenty-three grand apiece. They had to get the money back to Elliot after they moved the drugs. Jamari and Wizz were mimicking Born's operation, and selling cocaine in different forms, from wholesale to retail. Elliot had done lots of business with them. But when Jada went to meet with Elliot, she had to convince him to give her five bricks instead of the two she was supposed to pick up. Jada used her pregnancy as a prop.

She explained to Elliot that Jamari and Wizz really needed five bricks and not the two they had discussed. Jada wasn't sure for a minute if the nigga would go for it. She sat across from Elliot, who stared back at her, suspiciously. She wasn't sure if he was buying her story or not, so she repeated it for clarity.

"I'm telling you, Elliot. He said he needed two before he spoke to Wizz. Wizz told him that they needed more than that.

You can call Jamari and ask him.”

Elliot did just that. Jada sat there, nervous as hell, even though she knew that she'd taken Jamari's cell phone with her that day. It was downstairs in the glove compartment in her car. He got no answer and left a message demanding an explanation for the surprise increase.

Elliot hung up the phone, and frowned. “Why didn't he mention this shit to me himself? He sends you all the way uptown to do his dirty work? What kind of man is that?” Elliot's voice dripped with his sexy accent.

“Jamari didn't want to ask you, Elliot. He's too scared of you.” Elliot looked at Jada as if he hadn't heard her correctly. She smiled. “Don't tell him I said that. And don't act like you never noticed. You know you can tell that he ain't all the way cut out for this game, and you know you see the weakness in him.”

Elliot looked at Jada, curiously. “You're telling me that this man is weak. That he has fear in his heart, and that he don't got what it takes. And yet, this is *your* man.” Elliot looked her square in the eyes. “Your man whose baby is growing inside you right now.”

Jada shifted her gaze, as if she was annoyed that this was a fact. “I got caught up. Hindsight is twenty-twenty, you know what I'm saying? It's too late now. Now I got a baby on the way, and a man who's too scared to step up and ask for what we need to stay afloat. We're fucked up right now, Elliot. Shit is bad. But you got what we need to get back on. Now you know Jamari and Wizz move these bricks. I've been on the scene long enough to see how often they come to see you. We're all making money, and they've never caused you to take a loss yet. Dammit, I'll put my word on it, if that means anything to you. But I need you to give us this shot, Elliot. I need your help. Jamari needs your help. Please do this, and we'll always be in your debt.” She rubbed her belly for sympathy, and looked at him innocently.

Jada knew she had tugged at Elliot's heartstrings when he rubbed his goatee as if deep in thought. He looked at Jada, and nodded his head. "I'm gonna give you the shot, *mami*. But you better tell Jamari that I want my money on time, with no excuses. I don't want to hear no bullshit. I mean that. Don't force me to make your child a fatherless bastard. Don't fuck me."

Jada nodded, and smiled. She grabbed Elliot's hand and shook it, and he smiled back at her at last. Truth was, Elliot liked her. She reminded him of his baby sister, who had always possessed a hustler's spirit as well. He summoned his boy, and had the package brought down to them. When it was all there, Elliot had his man bring it out to the car, since Jada was very pregnant, and shouldn't be struggling with a heavy bag. She thanked him, and shook his hand again, knowing that it would be for the last time. As she drove back to Staten Island, she was scared to death that she would be pulled over. She had five bricks of cocaine in her car. She was fully aware of the looming life sentence that awaited her if she was caught. She glanced back at the bag in the backseat containing all five bricks, and headed for Arlington.

A CHANGE IN PLANS

Jada called Born's friend Chance, and told him she had an offer he couldn't refuse. He met her in the parking lot behind his Arlington apartment building, and Jada showed him the bricks she had for sale. Jamari was paying twenty-three grand per brick, so five would have cost him \$115 thousand. Jada offered to sell Chance all five for a flat seventy-five grand. He went and consulted with his boys, and they bought it, knowing that this was a steal. They never questioned where Jada had gotten the drugs, or why she was so eager to get rid of it for so cheap. It didn't matter. They gave her what she wanted, and Jada took the money and ran.

Jada went by Born's mother's house. She wasn't even sure what made her go over there. She just did. Jada knocked on Ingrid's door, and was thrilled when she opened it. Ingrid was surprised to find Born's ex standing at her door unannounced. Ingrid let her in. She took in Jada's pregnant condition. Jada's belly was big and round, and she seemed happy to see Ingrid.

"Miss Ingrid, I know it seems strange for me to be here," Jada said. She knew that Ingrid must be curious to find out why she had stopped by. So Jada told her the truth.

She told Born's mother that she was with a man who she had thought had her best interests at heart. She told her that Jamari had made her feel like she was a queen, and that it all turned out to be a lie. Jada leveled with her, and told her that she had no one she could trust. No one who she could ask for a favor like the one she needed now.

Jada showed her all the money she had just gotten from Chance. She told Ingrid that she had taken that money for her and her unborn baby. But in her head, Jada knew that she had taken it for another reason. She knew that she would be going to get high that night, and she didn't want to take all that money with her. She knew that she would spend every last dime if she did.

Ingrid listened to Jada's story in silence.

She asked Ingrid to hold some of the money for her until she came back for it. Jada gave her five grand for doing her that favor. Then she put fifty-five thousand dollars of it in a bag, and gave it to Ingrid for safekeeping. Jada trusted Miss Ingrid, partly because of how she had talked to Jada when Born put her out. She had a motherly quality about her that didn't end with her own child. Ingrid mothered everybody, and that was one of the reasons why she was so loved by all those who knew her. She had always been so nice to Jada. And most of all, Ingrid was her only option. There was no one else whom Jada could trust. She trusted that Ingrid wouldn't spend all the money, because Jada knew she had her own money. Ingrid was a hustler, and so was her son. Jada knew that she was accustomed to seeing that kind of dough. Ingrid promised her that every dime would be there when she came back for it, and then she touched Jada's hand and spoke to her from her heart.

"Baby, you got another life to think about now. It ain't just you no more. You got a baby on the way, and you owe it to that child to do right. It's time for you to get your act together. You're a beautiful girl, and you got too much going for you to throw your life away so young."

Jada told Ingrid that she would think about what she had said. But she knew that she wouldn't think about it much. Jada left with fifteen thousand dollars, and went straight to West Brighton and copped from some niggas on Broadway. She headed back to Brooklyn, and rented herself a room. Then Jada got high for three straight days. She was fully aware of her pregnancy, but she didn't care anymore. The high she

experienced was powerful, but when she came down she felt like the lowest piece of shit. She got high again and again to avoid facing reality. Jada stayed in that room from sun up to sundown. She was in outer space somewhere. But then she ran out of crack, and she went to Flatbush Avenue to cop some more. That's when it all came to an end.

Jada had thought that being in Brooklyn would put her out of Jamari's reach. She knew that he wasn't familiar with her part of town, and she thought she had gotten away. But when she went to Flatbush to score more crack, Jada's exchange with the dealer was witnessed by some plainclothes cops. She was under arrest, yet again, and headed back to jail. The *Daily News* ran a story, and that was it. Jamari knew where to find her, but he still had no idea what she had done with the cocaine.

By the time Jada went to court, Jamari was in the courtroom staring at her like she was a piece of shit. Jada knew he was in trouble with Elliot. And to be honest, she hoped that Elliot would kill him.

After her indictment, Jamari came to see her down in the pens. Jada had no idea who he knew or how he got down there to see her, but he came. He walked up to the bars, and Jada was glad that they were there to shield her. She could see the fire in his eyes.

Jamari was so angry that he was trembling. He stared at her for several long and silent moments before he spoke. "My nigga Wizz came to me, and asked me why I was trying to play him. I didn't know what the fuck he was talking about. The nigga said that I got more than what I was supposed to get. He thought I was trying to cut him out of a deal. See, Elliot called Wizz and told him about the shit you pulled. Wizz thought that I was in on it with you, and he came to see me. Me and him were supposed to be partners, and I go and double the take and don't tell him nothin'?! He was pissed off and ready to do me in. But then I told him that you never came back with the shit. I was confused, because I thought you got hurt, or got bagged, or something. I told him that I ain't know

what the fuck he was talking about. He thought I was being underhanded, and all the while it was you! That nigga called me a sneak thief, told me that I'm the type to wait till a nigga's guard is down and his back is turned before they take from him. That's the reputation I got now, thanks to you. And on top of everything, now I gotta hide until I find a way to pay Elliot for that shit. How could you do this shit to me, Jada?"

Jada stared at him, coldly. "You did it to Born, didn't you? It was my time to shine," Jada said, mimicking Jamari's own explanation for his betrayal of his former friend.

Jamari looked at her like he hated her. "Where's it at, Jada? Tell me what you did with it."

"Fuck you." Jada folded her arms across her chest.

Jamari stared at her with contempt. "You better tell me what you did with the shit, because my life is on the line here, Jada. I didn't do nothing to you to deserve this."

Jada smirked. "Sure you did. You *used* me to get back at Born, and you didn't tell me the whole story until you had me in a position where I was stuck and couldn't leave. You never cared about me. I was just a part of your plan for revenge. Now Born will probably never speak to me again, and you *know* that was your intention all along! I'm not telling you shit! The cops took the drugs. Just like they took the bail money that you had for Born that time."

Jamari pounded on the bars, causing Jada to step back in fear. "I swear I'll get you back for this. I swear I will. This shit ain't over, Jada. Everything you love, I'm gonna take it from you. Everything. One by one."

"Fuck you." Jada said it calmly, and then went and sat back down on the bench in the cell.

Jamari nodded his head. He stared at her, still nodding, and said, "Okay. I'll see you again soon. Real soon."

He turned and walked away, leaving Jada to await her transport back to prison. She didn't give a damn about Jamari

or his troubles. At the moment, her only focus was on getting out of jail.

Strangely, the whole situation with Elliot was resolved in the most unexpected way. Jamari and Wizz knew that their days were numbered. Elliot had put a price on their heads, and the word was out that if someone could find Jamari or Wizz they would be generously compensated. This wasn't just business. It was personal. And both Wizz and Jamari knew that Elliot would surely kill them as soon as he got the chance. Ninety thousand dollars had been taken from him, and somebody was going to pay with their life.

But mysteriously, someone dropped dime on Elliot. Just as Born had been caught off guard with a law enforcement ambush, Elliot, too, was surprised with a DEA raid. The feds swooped down on him in huge numbers, after being tipped off by a confidential informant. But Elliot knew what fate awaited him. With the amount of narcotics he had in his possession, he would likely spend the rest of his life in prison. Elliot shot it out with the cops, alongside several of his boys. And he was killed. The newspapers touted the fact that a narcotics kingpin had been brought down, and Jada was sick to her stomach. She knew in her heart that Jamari's punk ass had ratted Elliot out in order to avoid his wrath. And it didn't take her long to come to the conclusion that he had probably done the same to Born. Jada cried for Elliot, feeling somewhat guilty that she had played a part in how everything had fallen apart. She wished that for all their sakes Elliot had survived and killed Jamari. It would have been perfect.

Jada was sentenced to eighteen months—nine months in prison, and nine months in court-mandated rehab. Her Legal Aid lawyer told her that she should be glad the judge had taken pity on her, because a lot of offenders were getting five years or more for having even small amounts of crack. She'd appeared before a sympathetic judge, whose own daughter was struggling with cocaine addiction. The judge had taken pity on Jada in her pregnant state, when a lot of judges would have

sentenced her more harshly because of it. She was lucky. But Jada didn't feel lucky at all. She was distraught.

She looked around the courtroom at her sentencing, wishing she would see a familiar face in the crowd. Her mother, Ava, Sunny—someone who cared about her. But there was no one, and Jada felt desperate to get out. All she wanted was to get out of jail, and get back to her money, so that she could get back to getting high.

While she was in jail they put her in a drug program. It was like being in rehab in jail. She went to talk to counselors, and to meetings and classes about drug abuse and what it does to an unborn baby. That's when she learned what she was really doing to her unborn child every single time she got high. They told Jada that once cocaine enters the baby's blood and tissues, it stays way longer than it does in adults. Jada was getting high for maybe twenty minutes, while her baby would be high for more than an hour. Their undeveloped livers don't filter the drugs that fast, and the drug gets broken down slower. Jada felt terrible for all the problems that her baby could have. She hadn't felt guilty up until then, because she had been hoping that she'd have a miscarriage, so that she could rid herself of any traces of Jamari in her life—including the baby. But she hadn't miscarried. And all throughout her seventh and eighth months of pregnancy, Jada was scared to death. She was worried about what her baby would go through because she had been so selfish.

Prison was not a new experience for Jada, so she knew to watch her back, and not run her mouth. Sometimes bitches would try to test her, and Jada got in her fair share of trouble. Some of the other incarcerated mothers would have given anything to be with their kids. And there Jada was—incarcerated for endangering her child's welfare by abusing crack cocaine while in her last three months of pregnancy. She wasn't a favorite among the other inmates. But for the most part, she managed to stay to herself, and she tried to mind her own business. She had enough to deal with in her own life, and had little time for the usual female "she said" shit.

Jada went into labor in August of 1999, at the end of her eighth month of pregnancy. They didn't rush her to the hospital. They let her pace the jail for a while, until she couldn't take the pain. This would be no easy delivery, where the pain was lessened by drugs. Instead, she felt every contraction, causing her to stop walking every few minutes, until the contractions subsided. Her water broke on the way to the hospital, and she had a police escort with her the whole time. They even shackled one wrist to the bed rail. Jada felt like an animal. But she stopped thinking about that whenever one of the contractions shook her. She was a mess in there, and she felt so much pain. There was one nurse—an Indian woman—who took pity on the poor young thing with no one to help her through the birth of her first child. The nurse held Jada's hand and talked to her nicely. She told her to breathe, and to relax between the pains. She probably never realized how much she helped Jada that night. But for Jada, the woman was a godsend. For months she'd become accustomed to C.O.s barking orders and inmates yelling obscenities. For once, it was just nice to have a soothing voice in her ear—especially at a time like this.

Sheldon Marquis Ford was born after putting Jada through ten hours of labor. He was so tiny and so fragile that Jada cried openly when she saw him for the first time. He weighed barely five pounds, and he was pale and scrawny. He cried so much, and they poked many needles into him, hooked him up to a machine, and put him in an incubator. As soon as Jada laid eyes on him, she fell in love.

Jada wanted to stay in that hospital for as long as possible so that she could be close to him. She faked aches and pains that she didn't have, so that they wouldn't release her to be returned to jail, and make her leave her baby in that hospital. From the moment she saw him, she stopped thinking of him as Jamari's baby, and she saw him as her child. Her son.

Jada was determined that they wouldn't put him in foster care, and she hated herself for what she'd done to him. But the saddest part for her was knowing that if she wasn't in jail, she

would have smoked crack again in order to escape that guilt. That was the point when she finally admitted to herself that she had a problem.

After four days, they told Jada that she was being released in the morning. There was a guard right outside her door. With no place else to turn, Jada called her mother. She had to do something. Jada placed the collect call, and was relieved when Edna accepted the charges. Jada told her the truth of how she'd gotten in trouble. She described how frail and small Sheldon was, and how she had named him after her father—the man in the five-by-seven picture she had stared at every single night before she fell asleep when she was a little girl. Edna listened, and Jada thought it sounded like her mother was crying. Jada begged her to come and get her baby, and help her keep him out of the system. Edna listened, and didn't say anything for a long time before she answered.

Finally, she said, “Jada, this is terrible, and I'm sorry you gotta go through this. But I can't get involved in all this mess. God is in control, so you need to let him have his way. It sounds like your baby has the odds stacked against him already. I'll do what I can to help you. But it sounds like it's up to the authorities now. They got you up there in—where are you again?”

Jada didn't answer her. She held the phone, and she just felt like, *Damn! Can't you ever be there for me, even once?* Jada just hung up the phone, cried her eyes out, and prayed for a miracle.

Jada sat in her bed and summoned up the nerve to call Sunny's mother. She hadn't heard from Sunny in more than a year, and she wasn't even sure if she would want to hear from Jada. She dialed 411, and asked for the number for Marisol Cruz in Brooklyn, New York, and was relieved that her number wasn't unlisted. As the telephone rang, Jada prayed that Marisol would accept the collect call. She wasn't disappointed, and hearing Marisol's thick accent was like music to her ears.

“Thank you for accepting the charges,” Jada began.

“Don’t worry about it, *mami*. Are you okay? Where are you?”

“I got bagged—”

“For what?” Sunny’s mother sounded shocked.

“I was getting high, and I got caught. But the thing is, I was pregnant.” Jada’s voice was barely audible. She was embarrassed by her own selfish actions.

Marisol listened, and contained the shock she felt. She held her hand silently over her mouth, as she listened to Jada tell her about how she had gotten kicked out of Born’s life, gotten pregnant by someone else, gotten high, and gotten arrested. Now Jada needed Marisol’s help to get in touch with Sunny, to help her keep her son out of the system. Marisol’s heart broke as she listened to the desperation in Jada’s voice. She took down Jada’s address and prison I.D. number, so that she could try to help.

“Jada, Sunny’s been with my sister in Puerto Rico since a month after Mercedes was born.”

Jada cried silent tears, as she finally learned the sex of her friend’s baby. Sunny had had a baby girl! She could only imagine how beautiful the baby must be.

Marisol continued. “She got a lot of investments and stuff that she cashed in after Dorian died, you know what I’m saying? Insurance and stuff like that.” Marisol knew that Jada would read between the lines, and she did. She knew that Sunny had inherited Dorian’s drug game fortune, and was laying low for the time being. “I will call her and tell her what happened. But for now, *mami*, you gotta pray for your baby, and ask God to spare his life. He’s strong like you’re strong, Jada. Don’t break down now.” Marisol’s heavy Spanish accent was a comfort to Jada. She knew that Sunny’s mom would do her best to help her, and that was a relief to her after so much bad news.

“Thank you, Marisol. You don’t know how much this means to me. Sunny is my last hope. I don’t have nowhere else to turn.” Jada’s voice got caught in her throat as the tears came.

Marisol knew that Jada’s spirit was dampened. “Listen, Jada. Let me tell you something. Don’t go feeling sorry for yourself, and getting all weighed down by negativity. That’s not what you need right now. You are not the first young lady to have a problem like this. Sunny had your same problem once. Right before Dorian died, she was fucked up off that shit. He helped her through it, and she had the baby drug free. But after the baby, she fell back again. Sunny was right back on that shit again. But she went in and got help. Went to a program, you know? You gotta give it a chance. Because Sunny turned it all around, and you gotta see her now, baby girl. She’s a whole different person. She still a pain in the ass ...”

Jada laughed, missing Sunny’s one-of-a-kind personality.

“But at least she’s clean now. You stay strong,” Marisol said. “You’re gonna find your way. I will tell Sunny to get in touch with you. You wait to hear from her.”

The line went dead, and Jada cried, feeling helpless. She spent the remainder of that night in prayer, asking for forgiveness, and for mercy.

The next day, Jada went back to jail, and she cried all the way back. Her last time touching Sheldon’s soft hand through the holes in the incubator, she sang to him. Jada sang “Amazing Grace,” and she hoped her son could hear her, even though she sounded bad because she was in tears. Sheldon had to stay in the hospital, because of all of his medical problems. He had stopped breathing twice, and they had managed to bring him back. And now Jada had to leave him there, and hope that he survived. And *if* he survived, she prayed that someone came in time to claim him before the courts sent him away.

Jada stayed in her bunk crying for days afterward. Jada was severely depressed. They put her on suicide watch, and

everything. She found out that a custody hearing had been scheduled, and she felt a glimmer of hope. But still she wanted more. Every day without her baby was a day in hell for her.

SINCE I LOST MY BABY

September 1999

The visiting room was filled with kids, and Jada's eyes lit up at the sight of so many little ones. Her heart ached for her own child, as she looked around for Sunny's face. She found her friend sitting on one of the orange plastic chairs in the back of the visiting room.

Sunny looked more beautiful than ever. Her brown hair was long and silky, and pressed bone straight, complementing her lovely island-tanned face. When she'd last seen Sunny, her friend had sported a fierce, short haircut that had made her look edgy and sexy. Now her hair was long and beautiful, and she looked absolutely stunning. Jada wished she could have her hair done, since she now wore it in a half-nappy snatch-back ponytail. She was no longer concerned about something as trivial as looks. She hugged Sunny, and realized after so long how much she had truly missed her friend. Sunny began to cry, seeing Jada looking skinny and broken. This wasn't the friend with whom she'd danced the night away all over the city. She remembered the days when they'd gone on thousand-dollar shopping sprees and to parties with the rich and powerful. And now, Sunny had overcome her battles and was watching Jada losing her own. She hugged Jada for a long time, and when she finally pulled away she wiped her tears and looked at her friend.

“Girl, please don’t hate me for leaving,” Sunny began when they sat down at last. “I’m so sorry. I had to get out of New York after Dorian died. Niggas knew that I was the only one who knew where he kept all his money. Even his brothers and them, they wanted to get their hands on his money. I had to get away, because I was scared. And I was fucked up on that blow, too, Jada. I know my mother told you. When I buried Dorian, I buried a part of me, too. I was a mess. I was depressed, and I wanted to die. I got over that shit, but it wasn’t easy. I’m here to help you do it, too. And you’re gonna do it. And we’re gonna get your baby back.”

Jada smiled. “Thank you, Sunny. I need you to get in touch with my lawyer—”

“I already did. I fired him.” Sunny crossed her legs, as Jada looked at her with surprise etched on her face. “I hired Nelson Doyle. He’s a friend of my family, and he’s helping me to try and get visitation with Sheldon.”

“Visitation? They put him with a foster family already?” Jada was confused, because the custody hearing wasn’t scheduled for two more weeks. When she’d last spoken to her Legal Aid attorney, he had told her that her son was still in the hospital.

Sunny hoped Jada wasn’t going to overreact to what she was about to tell her. “Jada, Jamari stepped up and claimed the baby.”

“What?” Jada was stunned. “What? How could he do that, Sunny? He can’t do that, can he?”

Sunny held Jada’s hand. “He went and had a paternity test done; he got a lawyer, and everything. Nelson’s handling it, but Jamari’s lawyer ain’t making it easy. He proved paternity, and they checked him out, and all that. They went all into his background. I heard that the nigga stopped hustling, and everything. He’s working at Home Depot, or some shit like that, and cooperating with the social workers. He had Sheldon moved to Staten Island Hospital, and he’s got sole custody.”

Jada burst into tears. She felt so much hatred surging through her body toward Jamari at that moment. He was rubbing salt in her wounds, and she fell apart. “He don’t want me to see my own son?” she asked.

Sunny shook her head. “He’s saying some terrible things about you, Jada, He got the doctors on his side, because Sheldon’s had a hard time. He stopped breathing four different times, and he’s been in the hospital for over a month. They had a closed-door hearing that Nelson said they didn’t have to allow you to be present for. He said that since you couldn’t challenge for custody as an inmate, you didn’t need to be there. Jamari has a whole plan for how he’s going to shut you out of Sheldon’s life, but we’re challenging him every step of the way. We’ll be there in court, and we got your mother to come, too. Your mother wants to help you, and she swore she’d do whatever she could. Nelson’s gonna put her on the stand and argue that, as the baby’s grandmother, she should be allowed to visit with the baby. It might work. But I don’t want you to get your hopes up. Jamari’s being a real asshole about all this.” Sunny looked at Jada, unsure. “Jada, how could you get high when you could feel your child moving around inside of you?” Sunny needed to understand what had sent Jada to such a terrible low. When she’d been pregnant with Mercedes, nothing could have made Sunny use cocaine. Nothing could have made her hurt her unborn child.

Jada nodded, and looked away. “I didn’t want to be pregnant anymore. I found out so much about Jamari that made me hate him. And I realized that he only looked out for me in order to make me depend on him. It was all part of some crazy plan. I didn’t want to have his baby. I was hoping I would lose it, and then I could be free of him.” Jada sighed. “But Sheldon hung on, and I am so sorry that I ever hurt him.”

“You should be. ‘Cuz he is the most beautiful little boy I’ve ever seen. He looks just like you. You better thank God every day that Sheldon refused to die. He’s a tough little boy.”

Jada was grateful to Sunny. Even though her words were blunt and matter-of-fact, they were pure truth. She was glad

that Sunny knew what to expect when she faced Jamari in court. Jada told Sunny how grateful she was for all of her help. She didn't know what she'd do without her.

Sunny tilted her head to the side, and looked at her worn-down friend. "How the hell did you get involved with this sucka-ass nigga in the first place? What happened with Born?"

Jada shook her head, and told her how it had all gone wrong. She told Sunny everything she'd been through, from the moment she had lost touch with her friend. She told her how she'd stolen from Born to get high, and how he'd caught her and kicked her out. Jada told Sunny about all the crack she had used, how Jamari had given it to her and hadn't judged her. She told her about the bricks she'd stolen, and the money she'd made, and where she'd stashed it. By the time the visit was over, Jada felt only a glimmer of hope that Sunny might be able to help her to hold on to the child she really hadn't wanted at all. Now she wanted him with all her might.

Two weeks went by before Jada's hearing. When she got to court, she saw Sunny and Edna, and was thrilled to have their positive energy on her side. Her lawyer put her on the stand, and Jada cried her way through her testimony, and promised to get clean. Edna got up there and cried, too. But Jada felt that she was crying for all the wrong reasons.

Edna cried, and told the court about how hard it was to see her child as a crackhead. She told them that she wished she could raise Jada all over again, and make up for all the wrong she'd done. Edna felt that she was being given a second chance with the birth of her grandchild. Jada could tell that Edna's testimony didn't really make her look like the best person in the world. She was scared to death. But her lawyer said that the judge might take pity on her. He might see Edna's desire to fix her past mistakes as a reason to grant Edna visitation rights. That was what they wanted. Jamari's lawyer argued that Sheldon should remain with his father because it was a stable home environment, and he was the child's biological father. Then they began their attack.

Jamari's attorney assassinated Jada's character in the courtroom that day. He talked about how Sheldon only slept for ten minutes at a time, and how he threw up like a faucet. He had seizures, and had to sleep attached to a monitor. That was bad enough. But then he talked about how Jada would have had to get high *repeatedly* throughout her pregnancy in order to do the kind of damage that the baby had sustained. Jamari even stared at Jada from the witness stand, and told her she would never see the baby again, and that he hated her. The judge let him talk freely, and every word cut Jada like a knife.

But he was right. She had put her child's life in jeopardy. And Jamari wanted her to pay the ultimate price. He wanted Jada banned from their son's life, but Sheldon was the only thing she had to live for now. Jamari, himself, had given Jada crack. He denied that on the stand, and told the judge that Jada had been a danger to their son from the very beginning, and she always would be. Jamari's lawyer argued that Sheldon was a neglected child before he was even born, because Jada had put him in imminent danger every time she got high. He said that she had failed as a parent, that she couldn't exercise even a minimum degree of care, since she was incarcerated. Basically, Jamari painted Jada as a danger to their child as long as she was not rehabilitated. He emphasized the fact that she was the sole cause of Sheldon's withdrawal symptoms, and that she was unfit to see him. The judge agreed, and they stripped Jada of all her rights. Her mother had no rights either, since Jamari had his lawyer bring up how terrible Jada's own childhood had been with her mother. His lawyer told the court about Edna's lack of parenting, and implied that had she been a better mother Jada's life might have turned out differently. Edna came across as weak and sorrowful, and the judge didn't feel sorry for them. Jada hated that she had ever shared the pain of her past with the cruel bastard who had fathered her child.

Jada was returned to prison, and she suffered every minute. She wrote Jamari a letter, asking his forgiveness and begging him to at least let her just have a picture of Sheldon, or

something. He never even wrote her back. Edna wrote to Jada, though. She wrote to her to ask if she could come and visit her. She sent her Ava's address and phone number. Edna was extending an olive branch to her child. She offered to let Jada call her collect any time she wanted. But Jada just shut down. She didn't write back or call, because she felt like her whole life had been taken away from her. In all, Edna wrote Jada three letters during her incarceration. But Jada answered none of them. She wanted to be left alone. Instead of answering her family's letters, Jada wrote in her journal. She wrote down every emotion, every hurt and pain. In her diary there were dozens of lines of sadness and longing. She filled up several notebooks this way, writing night after night about her pain and anguish. Writing about her guilt. Jada wanted to disappear. She felt like giving up.

But then Sunny saved the day.

February 2000

Sunny sat anxiously, waiting for Jada to make her way over to her at the visiting table. She hugged her, and they sat down, and Jada could tell that her friend was eager. She had something she was itching to share with her. Without a word, Sunny passed Jada the pictures. Jada's heart skipped a beat. Pictures of Sheldon in the park with his father were what Sunny had brought to her. Her eyes filled with tears as she looked at her six-month-old son for the first time. He looked like a replica of Jada, only male and chubby. She smiled and wanted to kiss Sunny. "How did you get these?"

Sunny smiled broadly, thrilled that she could be of help to her friend. "You know I got ways, girl. I got somebody to find out where Jamari takes him to play, takes him to day care, and shit like that. I just want to keep my eye on him, in case the nigga tries to leave town and disappear, or some dumb shit like that. I also want to see if I can catch him in some bullshit that might persuade the judge to see him in a different light. Just

keep these pictures in the meantime, so you can see how adorable little Sheldon is.”

Jada smiled, and stared at the pictures once more. Her heart overflowed.

“Jada, you *have* to use him as your reason to get clean. When you get out of here, you need to go to a program for nine months. Do that for your survival. I’m telling you from experience. You gotta do this shit for real this time, Jada. No more bullshit, or you may have to say good-bye to your son for good. I don’t want to see that happen to you. I’m gonna do everything I can to help you. But you gotta help yourself.” Sunny spoke candidly to her friend. As a former drug offender herself, Sunny knew that blunt honesty was the only way to deal with an addict. They had to hear the truth straight, with no chaser.

Jada made up her mind, as she looked down at the photos of her baby boy, that she would have to leave drugs alone for good if she wanted a chance to be in his life. She committed herself to staying clean in order to get her baby back. No matter how hard it was.

As much as she hated Jamari for taking her son away so coldly, Jada had to admire him for how he had managed to care for their son. Sheldon was a beautiful baby, and he looked happy and healthy. After seeing his condition at birth, Jada knew that Sheldon’s recovery was a miracle. She could tell that Jamari loved him, and that he was taking good care of him. But she still hated him for depriving her of seeing her baby.

Sunny kept coming to visit Jada, and kept bringing her pictures of Sheldon. Those pictures got her through the hard times. Jada sat on her bed night after night staring at the pictures of her son. Sunny went out of her way to stay on Jamari’s trail as much as possible. Since she figured he knew her face from her appearance with Jada in court, Sunny had her mother go to the park and bring Mercedes. She would go and see Jamari there, and let Mercedes play with Sheldon.

Jamari didn't recognize Sunny's mother, but little did he know he was helping his son form a friendship with Sunny's daughter. Sunny often laughed at the irony.

Because of Sunny and her mother, and the pictures and stories they gave Jada about her son, Jada went into rehab wanting to get out of there and be clean. Being in jail and having her son stripped away from her had broken her. But going to rehab—for real this time—made Jada see herself so clearly that it changed her life. She was determined to prevail for once in her life, and she was never the same again.

September 2000

Jada stared out the window of the rehabilitation clinic. She knew that lunch was being served, but she wasn't hungry. All she could think about was the fact that her son was growing up without her. He was sitting up without her, and having his first taste of solid food without her. She was envious of Jamari, and of his ability to witness Sheldon's precious moments. She felt sorry for herself, and frankly she was tired of being in institutions. To hell with lunch.

Jada's lawyer was on his job. He filed motion after motion to challenge the judge's ruling. He argued that Jada hadn't used any drugs after her child was born. Granted, that was due in part to her incarceration, but Jada was giving it a real try. He got Jada's counselor, Miss Walsh, to testify about the strides she'd made. Jada had given Miss Walsh a hard time when she first got there. But she told Jada point-blank that she hadn't put her there. She wasn't the reason Jada found herself locked up and in rehab. Jada had done that all by herself. Miss Walsh said that she wasn't there just because she was bored at home. She wasn't there to rub Jada's back, or to pick her up. She was there to help Jada beat this thing, and to make the transition smoother for her, so that she could reclaim her life. Jada wanted that more than anything. Miss Walsh got through to her because of the raw and uncut way in which she dealt with

her. She didn't sugarcoat the situation, or pretend that it was going to be easy. Jada needed her type of raw honesty, and it helped her to get the monkey off her back once and for all.

Her attorney argued that the judge couldn't base his decision on whether or not Jada was a *current* danger to Sheldon solely based on Jada's *past* behavior. She hadn't used any drugs since the day she'd been arrested. He argued that she deserved the benefit of the doubt, now that she had been clean for more than a year. It could no longer be considered neglect if Jada had genuinely changed her life, and was now drug free. The judge agreed, and placed a condition on her future with her son. If she completed the program, Jada was entitled to supervised visits. That drove her to finish the program. She had her baby boy to get home to. Jada took her recovery more seriously than ever. And Sunny was there for her every step of the way. At the end of nine months of rehabilitation, Jada left that program clean, and didn't pick up a drug afterward. It was like a switch had gone off in her head once she had seen her baby. For Jada, seeing Sheldon fighting to survive made her want to fight, too. It made her want to beat what was weighing her down, and survive, the same way he had. Having Sheldon saved her life. And even though it would take her a long time to get to the point where she could have supervised visits with him, she was grateful to be in his life at all. At first, a social worker came along on her visits with Sheldon, watching how she spoke to him, how she played with him, and observing the way Jada interacted with her son. She was bothered by this, hating the fact that a stranger had to watch her play with her own child. Eventually, she earned the right to unsupervised visitation, and a social worker picked Sheldon up from Jamari and dropped him off with Jada. This was done so that the two of them could avoid any confrontations that may adversely affect Sheldon's development. Jada preferred it that way. She didn't ever want to do anything to hurt Sheldon again. He was her whole reason for living. Jada said a daily prayer of thanks that God had given her a second chance—not just at motherhood, but at life.

Jada went to see Miss Ingrid about a month after she came home. Ingrid was so happy to see Jada now that she was cleaned up, and had gotten her shit together. She opened the door, and she smiled so big that you would have thought she was Jada's mother, and not Born's.

“Jada, oh my God. Look at you!” Ingrid was obviously impressed by Jada's transition. “Girl, you look so good!”

Jada hugged Born's mother, and Ingrid led her into her living room. “Sit down, and let me get you something to drink.” Jada did as she was told, and Ingrid disappeared into the kitchen. Jada looked around at all of the pictures of Born gracing the shelves and tables in the living room. His elementary school picture was the cutest, in Jada's opinion. Born wore a green polo shirt in the picture, and his two front teeth were missing on the top. He looked so cute, and Jada couldn't help wondering if their children would have inherited Born's handsome face. She wished all the time that Sheldon was his child rather than punk-ass Jamari's.

Ingrid reentered the living room, and sat across from Jada. “When did you come home?” Ingrid asked.

Jada sipped her soda, and said, “Last month. I've been staying in Brooklyn with my friend Sunny. She helped me out so much, Miss Ingrid. I had a hard time seeing my baby, because my baby's father fought me for sole custody while I was locked up.” Jada sat and told Ingrid everything. She told her how it had felt to see her baby limp and helpless, his body frail and bony. She remembered Sheldon as a tiny baby with withdrawal symptoms from the crack. Ingrid listened as Jada told her that watching Sheldon fight for his life had made her want to fight for her own. She briefly explained the long story of her legal battles with Jamari for the right to be a part of her son's life. Ingrid listened sympathetically. “Sunny and her mother snuck, and took pictures of my son, and brought them to me while I was in jail, and in rehab. They helped my attorney prove that I was serious about getting my act together, and I'm so grateful to them for that.”

Ingrid nodded. “Your friend Sunny sounds like a real friend. You don’t get too many of those in life. You might get *one*. And if you get one, you should consider yourself lucky. If you get more than that, you are truly blessed. You’ll come across a lot of different people in your life. Some you’ll like more than others. But you gotta learn to differentiate between friends and just plain associates. This girl Sunny sounds like a friend.”

Jada nodded. She thought about Shame, who she had once thought was her friend. Now that she had gotten her life together, Jada realized that Shante had only wallowed in Jada’s misery and misfortune. But what goes around always comes around, and Shante was still getting high, and looking worse than ever. She had teeth missing and a haggard appearance every time she stepped outside. Everybody looked at her, and saw little more than a crackhead who looked twenty years older than she actually was. Jada was happy that her life hadn’t turned out the same way. She had gotten another chance. Ingrid offered Jada a piece of her famous chocolate cake, and that was an offer she couldn’t refuse. They ate cake and drank coffee, and chatted like old friends catching up after journeying down a long and winding road. Ingrid explained the importance of friendship to Jada.

“See, this is how I see it. There are so many young women who depend on the men in their lives for everything. They base their self-esteem, sometimes, on the man they love, and on what he thinks. They think that because he says ‘I love you,’ he’s always gonna be around.

That ain’t always the case. But your friends ... your good girlfriends ... now they’ll be there. True friends will help you back up on your feet. You hold on to your girl Sunny. Sounds to me like she got your back.”

Jada embraced the wisdom Born’s mother imparted to her. It made it easy for her to talk to her about all the things she’d been through. She told Ingrid about her plans to go to school and take up journalism. She told her that writing had been therapeutic for her during her time away, and that she’d love to pursue it professionally. Ingrid was proud of Jada for turning

such a negative situation into such a positive one. Ingrid walked to her closet, pulled out a large shoebox, and handed it to Jada. Jada looked inside and found all of her money. She smiled, grateful beyond measure that Ingrid had been true to her word, and had kept Jada's money secure. She wanted to cry, because she knew there weren't too many people who are honest enough to keep fifty-five thousand dollars untouched for close to two years. "Thank you, Miss Ingrid." Jada's eyes were misty. "Thank you so much."

Ingrid smiled back. She sat back in her seat, and folded her arms across her chest. "You did it. You got back up on your feet, and you did it for the right reasons. You did it for yourself, and for your son. I'm real proud of you." Ingrid smiled. Then she let out a sigh, and looked her in the eyes. "Let me tell you something, Jada. And you need to keep this between me and you." Ingrid knew that her son would be upset if he knew what she was about to say, but Ingrid trusted Jada to keep this discussion between them.

Jada nodded. "After what you did for me, Miss Ingrid, you know you can trust me."

Ingrid nodded. "I know my son very well. You know what I'm saying? And I know that he still cares about you. He talks about you sometimes, and he gets this faraway look in his eyes. You didn't hear it from me, but I think my son still has love in his heart for you."

Jada smiled. "Wow. That's like music to my ears."

Ingrid smiled, and sighed. "But Marquis is about to be a father."

Jada's heart broke into a million pieces. She tried to keep her game face on, but Ingrid could see that she was hurt. "With who? Anisa?" Jada asked.

Ingrid nodded. "Yeah." She shook her head in disbelief. "When he was locked up, she forgot all about him. She was there for him at first, but it didn't take Miss Thang long to hit the road. I wasn't surprised, and Marquis said he wasn't either.

But I think he was kinda hurt by it, even though he tried to act like he wasn't. Marquis contacted her when he got home to ask her why she had played him like that. Next thing you know, she's pregnant. I can't say she trapped him. I don't know that for sure. But I do know that Marquis will make a good father. I'm sure that Anisa knows she got a good man. And I'm not just saying that because he's my son. Marquis has a big heart, and he's gonna be good to her, and to his child. He won't let her and the baby go without, and for that reason alone Anisa does her best to keep my son happy." Ingrid looked at Jada. "He's about to have a son, and he's real excited about it. But I can tell that Marquis don't care for her like he cared for you."

Jada felt relieved hearing that. Surely the man's own mother wouldn't lie.

"He will probably never love another woman the same way he loved you. But you hurt my baby."

Jada looked at the floor, feeling so small and so guilty. "I know I did. That's something I will regret for the rest of my life."

Ingrid shook her head. "Don't regret it, Jada. Regret ain't nothing but a waste of energy, because you can't fix nothing by regretting it. It's better to have loved and lost than to live with regret." Ingrid patted Jada reassuringly on her hand. "All I want you to know is this: You hurt Marquis, you hurt yourself, and you hurt your son. But now you got yourself together, and I think that your situation with your son will work itself out. You got a second chance with him. Now I don't know if you'll ever have a second chance with Marquis. But just know that, even though he moved on and you moved on, somewhere deep inside my son still cares for you." She smiled. "And for the record, I like you a whole lot more than that chick he's with now."

Jada laughed, and gave Miss Ingrid a high five. She was glad that Ingrid liked her more than Anisa. It didn't change the fact that Born was with the other woman, and that she was

about to have his baby. But knowing that she had gotten the stamp of approval from the woman who meant the very most to the man she loved—his mother—made Jada feel like she was the winner after all. Ingrid liked her, despite her struggles and mistakes, and Jada was happy about that. She hoped that someday Born would forgive her as well, and that they could have a chance to at least be friends. She still missed their friendship, and hoped to salvage that, even if there was no chance for salvaging the relationship. “Miss Ingrid, the way I feel for Marquis is everlasting. It don’t matter who has his kids, or who lives with him. I know that what we shared is more special than any of that. And I don’t think real love expires over time. I don’t know if me and Born will ever even be in the same room together again. But when you speak to him, please tell him that I miss him, and that I think about him all the time.”

Ingrid smiled, and agreed to do just that. By the time they finished talking and eating, it was almost one thirty in the morning. Ingrid offered to walk Jada out to her car, since it was late, but she insisted that she would be fine. Her car was parked right downstairs, and it was a cold winter night. No one would bother her. As Jada left her house that day, promising to keep in touch regardless of whether she and Born ever spoke again, Ingrid felt like a proud mom seeing her baby girl succeed. Jada had made it through her darkest days, and Ingrid was happy for her. She hoped that Born would get the chance to see how well Jada had fought her demons, and how she had come through the storm, still wearing a smile. And as she watched Jada leave, Ingrid realized that she still believed in second chances. She hoped that Jada and Marquis would have a second chance someday.

A VOICE IN THE DARK

Jada left Ingrid's house and headed for Sunny's silver Jaguar, which was parked in the lot behind the building. She pulled the keys out of her pocket and disabled the alarm with the remote. She noticed that a black Suburban was parked beside Sunny's car, and wondered why anyone would park so close to her in a nearly empty parking lot. As she got closer to the truck, she heard a voice behind her that made her stop dead in her tracks.

"You know, I never thought you would really be dumb enough to show your face in Staten Island again." Jada spun around, and stood face-to-face with Jamari in the darkness of the deserted parking lot. Her heart beat rapidly, and she clutched her bag tighter. The money she'd come back to get was in there, and she'd be damned if Jamari would get his hands on it.

"Don't talk to me," she said. Jada hadn't spoken directly to Jamari in over a year. There was a court-appointed professional who coordinated her visits with Sheldon, so that contact between the two parents would be nonexistent. But now she'd had the rotten luck of running into him on her first trip back to Staten Island since her release. "You grimy muthafucka! You stood up there in that courtroom and told them that I was a monster—"

"You *are* a monster. You're a fuckin' crackhead, and you made my son a crack baby. But you really got a lot of nerve

coming back to Staten Island after you stole my money. Wizz's money ...”

“I didn't steal shit from you. Or Wizz. You didn't have to pay for that shit. You were working on consignment, so you didn't take a fuckin' loss!”

“I *did* take a loss, bitch! I had to pay Elliot back bit by bit for that shit before he died.” A cold and evil expression flashed across Jamari's face. “I had to rat that nigga out, just like I did to your boy Born.” Seeing the surprised expression on Jada's face he smiled sinisterly. “I swear to God, I'm gonna see you dead before I see you in my son's life. Everything you love, I'm gonna take it from you! I swear I'm gonna get you back for everything I ever lost.”

“What *you* lost! Listen to you, you selfish bastard. I don't owe you a fuckin' dime. And I don't owe you any explanation. I'm living my life, and I'm going to be a damned good mother to my son. You can't control me anymore. Whatever power you had over me is gone. And now I see why Born hates you so much.”

At the mention of Born's name, Jamari seethed. He looked at Jada, venomously. “Is that who you came looking for?” he asked, motioning toward Ingrid's building. “You came looking for Born?” Jamari grinned. “I hope you know that he got somebody else now. She's having his baby, and everything.” He smiled at her menacingly, and waited for her reaction.

Jada didn't give him the benefit of seeing her sweat. She was glad that she knew already, so that he hadn't caught her off guard. “I know about that, and I'm happy for him. At least he has the pleasure of having a baby with someone he really cares about. I got stuck having my son with an asshole.”

Jamari stepped toward Jada, and she stepped back. He was pissed, and it was visible on his face. “Fuck you!” he said. “You'll be back on that crack in no time. Once a crackhead, always a crackhead.”

Jada didn't show it, but those words cut deep. She thought back to what Born had said to her when he found her high in their house that day. *'Once a fiend, always a fiend, huh, Jada?'* Those had been Born's words to her. She still remembered the tone in his voice, the look on his face. It made her heart break all over again, as Jamari said similar words to her now. She ignored his remark, and said, "Well, your mama was a crackhead, Jamari, and look how well you turned out."

Before she knew what happened, he was in her face, and the barrel of his .40-caliber gun was pointed at her temple. Jamari had her back pressed up against the driver's side door of the Jaguar, and Jada was frozen with fear. "You got a lot of mouth for somebody out here all alone in the dark in the dead of winter. I should kill you right here, you stupid bitch!" Jamari was so mad that the vein in his neck was throbbing. "You think I'm gonna let you be around my son when you had him breathing through a machine, and throwing up every fuckin' thing he ate? You had my son addicted to that shit. You dirty bitch! Coming through here in your fuckin' Jag looking for Born. I should kill you just for that shit!" Jada was scared as hell, and he loved the helpless look on her face. "Oh," he said, "what's the matter? You scared?"

Jada nodded, and looked around hoping to see someone she could call out to for help. Jamari saw this, and let out a sinister laugh. "You should be scared. 'Cuz, ain't nobody out here but us. And I want an apology." Jamari cocked his gun, and stared coldly into her eyes.

Jada's whole body trembled, and it made Jamari feel powerful. "Apologize to me, Jada. Tell me you're sorry."

She felt her heart racing in her chest. "I'm sorry." Her voice was barely audible.

"Say it like you mean it," he said, still smiling wickedly.

Jada wanted to cry, but she held herself together somehow. She spoke louder, and said, "I'm sorry, Jamari."

He nodded his head, liking the return of the power he'd once had over her. "Very good. That's more like it. Now, what did you do with the money?" he asked. "You didn't smoke all that money up. Not that fast. Where's it at?"

Jada quickly handed him the bag in her hand. Fuck it! He could have it. Jamari couldn't believe his luck. She had the money with her right then and there! His surprise was obvious, and he lowered his gun, reaching for the bag. But before he could take it away, he heard "click, click!" and he turned to see Sunny standing with a .380 in his face. In the moment of his surprise, Jada ducked out of the line of fire, and grabbed Jamari's gun. Jamari stood still, wondering where this woman had come from. Sunny's smile was as sinister as his had been.

"Hey, muthafucka!" she said. "Hand it over."

Jamari stared at the beautiful woman in front of him, and could tell by the look on her face that she meant business. Her gun had a silencer on the end, and Sunny stood in stiletto boots, jeans, and a black leather jacket, looking at him like she was growing impatient. The driver's side door of the Suburban was open, and for the first time Jada understood why the truck was parked so close. Sunny had been inside the Suburban all along. He handed her the money, while she kept her gun pointed between his eyes.

"Something told me that if my girl Jada came back to Staten Island by herself, you might try some dumb shit. So I took my brother's truck, and followed her here, waiting for you to make your move." Sunny shook her head, looking at Jamari. "You didn't disappoint me. You punk, bitch-ass nigga. You like cornering women alone and putting guns to their heads, Jamari?"

"This ain't got nothing to do with you, ma." Jamari's voice was steady, but the look on his face showed that he was nervous. He thought about trying to take the gun, but knew from the expression on her face that any sudden move would have scratched Sunny's itchy trigger finger. "Jada owes me that money. She took it from me."

“You owed it to *her*. She didn’t take it; she was supposed to get that. I heard all about your little twisted games, muthafucka. You thinking Born is your brother; you wanting to be with her so that Born would get mad; you giving her crack, then taking her son. You’re a real piece of shit. Now,” Sunny looked at Jada. “You wanna off this nigga?”

Jada smiled at Jamari. My, how the tables had turned! She and Sunny had Jamari’s life in their well-manicured hands. She looked at him, his eyes pleading with hers to let him go. She thought about her son, and all the hoops she had to jump through just to see him. All because Jamari had assassinated her character in court. She thought about Born, and how Jamari had hidden his history from her, making it likely that Born would never want to see her again. “I want an apology, Jamari.” Jada turned his words back on him. Now she wanted what he had demanded of her moments earlier.

He looked at Jada like she had lost her mind. “Fuck you.” He frowned, and looked at this woman he had once loved beyond reason. “I ain’t apologizing for shit.”

Sunny shook her head, ready to blast him, and looked at Jada for a cue. Jada folded her arms across her chest. “You sure about that? ‘Cuz, I’m only gonna ask you once more.”

Jamari was done talking. He lunged for the gun, ready to kill both of these bitches. But Sunny was faster. Living life as a gangsta bitch had taught her well. As Jamari made his move, Sunny’s .380 spit a slug into his brain, sending his *eyes* flying open in surprise, and sending his body falling to the ground with a thud. Her gun still smoking, Sunny looked at Jada and said, “You got too much fuckin’ patience!” The silencer had muffled the sound of the blast, but the dead body at their feet would be hard to explain. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

The two women jumped into their cars and drove off, leaving Jamari to draw his last breath all by himself.

When they finally got back to Brooklyn, Jada was a mess. She was crying and scared, thinking that she was going back to jail, but for murder this time. She figured someone must

have seen her and Sunny. Someone must have witnessed the murder they'd just committed. Sunny, on the other hand, was as cool as a cucumber. "Calm the fuck down, Jada! It was like one in the morning. People were probably sleeping, and even if they did see something, they can't prove it was us. You gotta calm down, and let's get our story straight." Jada pulled herself together, and listened as Sunny ran down their makeshift alibi. She was still nervous about what they'd done. But Sunny made her see that at least she was finally rid of the sorry bastard who was her son's father. Maybe now she'd be one step closer to having her son all to herself.

Jamari's murder became another one of Shaolin's unsolved mysteries. The police had come to question Jada, and to ask for her whereabouts on the night Jamari was killed. She had, after all, been locked in an ugly custody battle with him for more than a year. Jada explained that on the night in question, she and Sunny had enjoyed dinner with Sunny's mother and brothers, and that there was no way Jada could have been anywhere near Staten Island. After questioning Marisol, who corroborated Jada's story, the police stopped eyeing Jada as a suspect. Jada was forever grateful to Sunny for saving her life—more than once. But getting custody of Sheldon wasn't such a walk in the park. With his custodial parent dead, the state of New York wanted to place Sheldon in foster care until Jada could petition for custody. But to Jada's surprise, an unexpected ally stepped up to take custody of Sheldon until Jada could wade her way through the mountains of red tape that stood between her and her son.

Jada got a surprise phone call from her sister. The two of them hadn't spoken in years, and it was with mixed emotions that Jada talked with her. It wasn't that Jada wasn't happy to hear from Ava. But she still hadn't forgiven their mother for leaving her to stand alone when she'd needed someone to lean on. And she felt a certain anger toward Ava as well. Ava had left Jada's house after finding out about her drug use, and pretty much never looked back. There had been numerous occasions over the years when Jada had longed for the comfort

of her sister, and Ava had been nowhere around. They had written letters to each other during Jada's incarceration. But to Jada that wasn't enough to erase the void Ava had left when she walked out of her sister's life.

Part of her reluctance to talk to her sister stemmed from some feelings that Jada never admitted she had. She felt inferior to her sister. While Jada had done so many things wrong, Ava had done everything right. Sure she had attempted suicide as a teenager, and been a chronic runaway. But Ava had turned her life around, finished high school, gone on to college, and then to law school, and was now a very successful attorney. Ava was a corporate lawyer working at one of Philadelphia's top law firms, and was close to making partner. No kids, no husband. Ava was just living life to the fullest, and traveling whenever the mood struck her. Ava had never been addicted to anything, never been to jail. Next to her sister, Jada felt like a complete failure. Hearing her voice on the phone did little to soothe that.

The conversation was cordial. They caught up on what was going on in each other's lives. Jada told her sister about Jamari's sudden death, and the fact that the police had yet to find any suspects. She told her about the battle she was now waging in order to win custody of her son, and how she'd been drug free for nearly two years. And most important, she had managed to do it despite the abandonment she felt from Ava and their mother. Staying clean was an accomplishment that Jada was proud of, and she felt stronger because she had accomplished them without her family's support.

Ava had an ulterior motive for this phone call. She wanted her sister to finally forgive their mother for the pain she had caused her. But when the conversation turned to Edna, Jada shut down.

"I don't really want to talk about her," Jada said. "I still don't see how you could act like she never did anything wrong. It's like you erased all the shit from your memory what she did to us. The things she let J.D. get away with doing to us ..."

“There’s some things that you don’t know about Mommy,” Ava began. Edna had sworn Ava to secrecy about her recent cancer diagnosis. She didn’t want Jada to forgive her only because she was sick and dying of an incurable disease. She wanted her daughter’s forgiveness from the heart, and for that reason Ava skirted the real issue at hand. “Mommy wasn’t the best mother on the planet,” Ava said. “We both know that. It took a long time for me to get over what she did when J.D. was violating me. She didn’t help me, and to be honest, she abandoned me. I hated her. I hated her so much. But while I was in the group home, they counseled me. I spoke to people about what had gone on, and I got help for what I went through. Meanwhile, you were out there on your own. And I never realized how unfair it was that I got help, and you just got swept up in the streets. I had a feeling you were using drugs, when we were in high school, because you started losing weight and acting all crazy sometimes. And I’ve always felt bad because I didn’t do anything or say anything to try and stop you in the beginning. Mommy knew, too, but she didn’t know what to do about it.” Ava sighed. “She understands your anger toward her, Jada. She really does. But she never stopped loving you. Every time I talk to her, she mentions your name. She wants to see Sheldon, and she wants to know if you’ve even told him about his grandmother. She needs to see him. And to see you ...”

Jada shook her head, as she held the phone. “Well, I’m not really willing to see her anymore. When I was locked up, and I gave birth to Sheldon, I called her. I begged her to come and take custody of him so that he wouldn’t be taken away from me. You know what she said to me? She said God was in control, and she didn’t want to get involved. She told me to pray about it. I’m laying in the hospital, the night before they returned me to prison, begging my own mother for help. And she told me to turn to God. Like there was nothing *she* could do for me. I’ll never forget that, Ava. You know what happened? Jamari took my baby, and kept him from me for as long as he could. If it wasn’t for Sunny ...” Jada caught herself about to divulge too much information. “All I’m saying is,

where was my family? Where was my mother? She came to court, supposedly to help me. And she got up on the witness stand and told the judge that she regretted raising a fuckup like me, and she hoped she could get a second chance, if he allowed her to raise my son. What the hell was that? How could she have possibly thought that would help me?”

“Jada, Mommy is really into the Bible now. She probably said that in the courtroom that day because that was the truth, in her opinion. She wasn’t going to lie under oath ...”

“Well, then what the fuck did she come there for, Ava? What the fuck did I need her for, if she wasn’t going to say something helpful? When has she ever come through for me? When? You tell me that.”

Ava was at a loss for words, and silence filled the phone. She had known that Jada would have a hard time letting go of the past. But Edna was dying now, and Ava was determined to bridge the gap between mother and daughter. She was tempted to just come out and tell Jada the truth. But her mother had sworn her to secrecy. She wanted to tell Jada herself. If Jada would only talk to her. Ava could see that this would be no easy task.

She talked to her sister for a while longer, and they made plans to get together sometime in the near future. Ava was in and out of New York often, and she told her sister that she would love to see her, and start the process of mending their relationship. Jada agreed, although she knew that she really wasn’t ready for that. From that point on, she avoided her sister’s phone calls, and went about her life as usual. Fuck her family, Jada felt. All she had was Sheldon, and all he had was her. They were the only family that either of them needed. Sunny had been the only one—family or otherwise—to help Jada rid her life of all its demons. So in Jada’s opinion, Sunny and Sheldon mattered more than any sister or mother she’d ever had. She lived her life as such. It was all about Sheldon.

The next few weeks consisted of a series of hearings concerning Sheldon’s custody. Jada appeared at each one with

her attorney, trying to establish that she was fit to have sole custody of her son. At the final hearing, the judge listened to Jada's attorney explain how she had turned her life around. He gave the judge recommendations from her rehab counselors, and Sunny and her mother Marisol both testified on Jada's behalf. But the judge was reluctant. Jada still had no job, and she had no prospects for getting one with a rap sheet as long as hers. She had her own place—an apartment in Brooklyn—but the court wasn't satisfied that her son would be safe in her care without the supervision of another responsible adult. The charges Jamari had leveled against her were serious. The amount of crack she'd used during her last two months of pregnancy was hard to ignore. As Jada stood in the courtroom, listening to the judge speak, her heart sank. She knew that he was about to deny her custody. But then a voice spoke out in the courtroom, and made Jada's heart stand still. It was her mother.

"I'm willing to take my daughter and her son into *my* home, your honor." Edna stood in the back of the courtroom, and everyone turned toward her.

Jada couldn't believe her eyes. She stared at her mother as if she was crazy. There was no way Jada was going to move back in with Edna. "Your honor . . ." Jada began to protest. Her lawyer cut her off, placing his hand on her forearm. He whispered to her, "Be quiet. This may be your only chance."

The judge motioned for Edna to step forward, and he asked her who she was.

"My name is Edna Ford. I'm Jada's mother. I would be happy to have my daughter and her son come and live with me in Staten Island. I don't work, so I can provide child care for my grandson while my daughter gets herself into school, or gets a job. I'm a Christian woman, and there will be no drugs of any kind in my home. You have my word that I will make sure that Sheldon has the best stable environment possible."

Jada stood there dumbfounded, wondering how Edna had known that she would be appearing in court that day. She

wondered what would make her mother think that she would want to live with her. Jada still had not forgiven her. She looked at Edna speechlessly, and the judge spoke up at last.

Looking at Jada, he asked, “Would you be willing to relocate and live with your mother, if you were given custody of your son?”

Jada shook her head. “Your honor, with all due respect, I don’t think I need to be supervised ...”

“May I please have a few minutes to confer with my client?” Jada’s lawyer interrupted. She shot him an evil look, which he ignored, and the judge granted them a five-minute recess to discuss the new developments. Her attorney grabbed Jada by the arm, and motioned for Edna to follow them. He led Jada outside of the courtroom, and pulled her into a secluded corner. Edna was right behind them.

Nelson Doyle was no stranger to family court cases before this judge. He knew that Jada would not get custody of her son unless she pulled a rabbit out of a hat. She needed magic, or some kind of miracle, in order to walk out of that courtroom victorious. And when Edna spoke up it seemed to Doyle that their miracle had just arrived.

“Jada,” he said, “you should listen to your mother—”

“Nah,” Jada interjected, shaking her head. “I don’t even wanna talk to her. She’s never been there for me.”

Edna heard her daughter speak about her as if she weren’t there. “I’m here now, Jada. It’s not too late for you to talk to me. But one day it might be.”

Jada frowned, and looked at her mother. “It is too late. Where have you been all this time? All this time I was out here by myself, fighting for my son, fighting for my own life. And where were you? Now you wanna come in here and ...”

“And help you get your son back.” Edna finished Jada’s sentence, and stood there staring at her. “I want to come back, and try to salvage what’s left of our family. You deserve the chance to be a mother to your son. I want to help you, Jada.

And maybe we can start to fix what's broken with our own relationship.”

“I don't *want* to fix our relationship. What's the point?”

Doyle spoke up. “I think the point is that reuniting with your mother could be the one thing that persuades the judge to give you custody.”

“How? What is that gonna do for me?”

“It would show him that you're so determined to be a good mother to your child that you're willing to relocate and reunite with your mother. It'll show him that you and your mother are committed to your recovery. That you're willing to make whatever adjustments are necessary to give Sheldon a stable upbringing. If you do this, Judge Blackburne will have reason to believe that sending Sheldon home with you will be a good decision.” Doyle saw the pain on Jada's face, and tried to soothe her somewhat. “Jada, I know that you're a good mother. I know that Sheldon will thrive under your care, that you will make sure that you stay clean for him. But that judge doesn't know that. When he looks at you, he sees a drug addict who is still on parole. He sees a mother who got high while she was pregnant, and had an underweight, crack-addicted baby. He's not going to trust that you've recovered fully. Not to the degree of giving you sole custody so soon after your release from rehab, and Jamari's murder. That judge wants to give Sheldon some stability for a change. And he's going to believe that living with your mother will give you that stability.” Nelson looked at Edna, hoping she would have something to add to his pitch.

Edna cleared her throat. “Jada, I know that you don't want to come and stay with me. But this is for Sheldon. He needs you. And the only way that judge is going to give him what he needs is if I help you.” Edna reached for Jada's hand, which was given to her reluctantly. “There's been a lot of mistakes between us, Jada. You've made them, and I've made them. But we have to put all of that aside in order to do what we can for Sheldon. I wasn't always there for you. You're right about

that. But I'm here now, and I'm willing to do whatever it takes to make this work.”

Jada felt so awkward. She had been so angry with her mother for so long; so disappointed in the choices her mother had made. Yet she understood the enormity of the situation at hand. Sheldon was inches from her grasp. She'd already missed his first birthday. She was being given a shot at being there for his second—without Jamari or any court-appointed professional to interfere. She wanted to cry. She was frustrated, and felt like she was being forced to forgive before she was ready to do so.

Edna knew what was bothering her child. “Jada,” Edna said, softly. She handed her a tissue, and waited as Jada wiped her tears and blew her nose. “I'm not asking you to forgive me right away. All I want is for you to come and stay with me. You and Sheldon. And let's see if we can try to get along. Not for us. But for him, Jada.”

Jada dabbed at her face with her tissue, and looked up at the sky for guidance, and sighed. She looked at Doyle, and nodded. “Okay. If it helps me get my son, I'll do whatever I have to.”

Doyle breathed a sigh of relief, and led the two women back into the courtroom. The judge reconvened the case, and addressed Jada directly.

“Miss Ford, before the recess your mother indicated that should the court grant you custody, she is willing to allow the two of you to live with her until such time as you've exhibited a determination to remain clean and sober. Are you in agreement with that?”

Jada wondered if she understood exactly what the judge had just asked her. But she thought he was asking if she was willing to go and live with her mother if they gave Sheldon back to her. “Yes.” She felt Doyle's reassuring hand on her back, and she exhaled.

The judge addressed Edna. “If I release your grandson to the two of you today, will you accept responsibility as his legal guardian, while the court conducts periodic visits to determine your daughter’s suitability as a parent?”

“I will, your honor.” Edna nodded her head affirmatively.

“Your honor, Miss Ford and her mother will comply with any regulations the court sets forth should they be awarded custody of Sheldon. There’s nothing like a mother’s love. And in this instance, Sheldon would be benefiting from the love of not one, but two mothers—”

“Spare me the melodrama, Mr. Doyle.” The judge looked annoyed. “I don’t need to hear that. I’ve made my decision. Sheldon Ford is released into the custody of his mother and grandmother for the period of six months. During that time, the court will appoint a social worker to go out to the custodial home for unscheduled visits with the child and his guardians. Is that understood?”

Jada wanted to cry for joy. “Yes. Thank you!”

“He will be monitored closely for signs of abuse. The home will be inspected for safety, and for any signs of neglect or unsanitary conditions. You will be required ...”

Jada had stopped listening. All she knew was that her son was going home with her. She was getting Sheldon back. She was turning over a new leaf in her life, and she wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. She waited until the judge banged his gavel, and she hugged her lawyer tightly. Nelson Doyle hugged her right back, and then shook Edna’s hand firmly. “Good luck to you two. Congratulations!”

Doyle left in order to complete the necessary paperwork to facilitate Sheldon’s release. And Jada was left standing with her mother, shrouded in an awkward silence. Finally, Jada made eye contact with Edna, and saw a strength in her eyes that she had never seen before. “Thank you,” Jada said. “I appreciate you doing this for me.”

“You don’t have to thank me, Jada. I owe you for all the times I let you down. I can probably never make up for what I did in the past. But I want to try. If you’ll just let me.”

Edna wanted to hug Jada, but decided against it. She wasn’t sure if Jada was ready for that. Instead, she reached out her hand, and let Jada make the decision of whether or not to take it. Jada stood still, and hesitated briefly. She looked at her mother long and hard, seeing how beautiful Edna still was. Edna had lost a lot of weight, and her hair that had once been long and flowing was now cut short in a choppy style. But she was still such a pretty woman. Throughout her childhood, Jada had thought her mother was as lovely as she was shy and reserved. She smiled inwardly, seeing that Edna’s beauty hadn’t diminished over time. Jada was so happy to get her son, and so grateful to Edna for coming to her rescue at last. She took her mother’s outstretched hand, and managed a weak smile. Together they went to bring Sheldon back home, where he belonged.

Jada moved out of her Brooklyn apartment and into Edna’s home in Staten Island. The first few weeks were tense and awkward in the home. The two women rarely spoke to one another, unless it regarded Sheldon’s well-being. Jada wasn’t ready to make nice with her mother, and Edna didn’t want to push too hard too soon. But one night Sheldon awoke after having a nightmare. And both women rushed to his bedside simultaneously. Jada scooped him out of bed, and cradled him lovingly in her arms. She rocked him back to sleep, as Edna stood in the doorway watching. As Sheldon fell into a deep sleep in the comfort of his mother’s arms, Edna smiled.

“You know it’s still amazing to see you now as a mother. I remember—it seems like just yesterday—that you were in my arms just that way.”

Jada smiled, wishing that she, too, could remember. “I bet you wish you could snap your fingers, and start over. I guess I should cherish him being this little, huh? Someday he may be as much of a headache for me as I was for you.” They both spoke softly, so as not to wake Sheldon.

Edna stepped into the room, and leaned against the dresser. She was so glad that Jada finally seemed ready to talk. “Your son is a lot like you were. He looks just like you, that’s obvious. But Sheldon is also very strong-willed. He’s very bright for his age, just like you were. And he smiles, and it melts the coldest heart.”

Jada looked at her mother. She was happy to hear Edna say such nice things about her. But she was still getting used to their new relationship. She wanted to know what had prompted it. “Why did you come to court and do that for me?” she asked, getting right to the point. “How did you even know that I had a hearing that day?”

Edna pulled her bathrobe tighter around her small frame, and leveled with her daughter. “Your attorney called me. Your friend Sunny told him that he should see if I was willing to step up and help you win custody. They told me that they were threatening to put Sheldon in foster care because Jamari was dead. Sunny said that you were too stubborn to ask for it on your own, but she thought you needed my help. I told him that I would do anything to help you.”

Jada laid Sheldon gently back in his bed, and tucked him in. She continued to sit on the edge of his bed, and she looked at Edna. “So Sunny orchestrated the whole thing, huh?” Somehow Jada wasn’t surprised.

Edna nodded. “I’m glad she did. I was waiting for a chance to talk to you about everything that was happening. Everything that happened before.” She searched for her daughter’s eyes in the darkness of the bedroom. “Jada, I knew for a long time that you were using drugs. I knew when you were living with me, and you would come home high. You thought I didn’t know, but I did. The same way I couldn’t stand up to J.D., I couldn’t stand up to you.”

Jada hung on her every word. Edna folded her arms across her chest, and kept talking. “So I ignored it. I started going to church, and praying for you. I remember I used to beg you to go with me, and you refused. So I went by myself, and prayed

and prayed for you. They kept saying that prayer changes things. And I wanted my prayers to change your problems. Every week I went to church, every night I pulled out my Bible and prayed for you. And then I caught you with Charlie.”

Jada looked at the floor in silence, feeling ashamed. She hated that she had done that to her mother. She hated that she had fallen that far down to do something so terrible.

“Jada, I was so hurt when I found you doing that with him. But I wasn’t just hurt because I liked Charlie. I made you get out because I couldn’t handle it. I saw for the first time, just how strung out you really were, and I felt like you and Charlie had betrayed me. It was obvious that he knew you were using. Why else would a beautiful young girl like yourself want his old behind? I felt like an idiot. I was embarrassed. I was an emotional mess after that. I lost contact with everyone—you, your sister—everybody. Ava didn’t hear from me for years, and I know you and her didn’t speak either. I got a letter from you while you were in rehab for the first time. I read that letter so many times that the pages started to fall apart from all the folding and unfolding. But I couldn’t find the words to write you back. What could I say to you? I was so angry with you, so disappointed. I just went into seclusion and all I did was go to church. I prayed for you all the time. I prayed for Ava, too. Ava wrote me a letter after Ms. Lopez, her counselor, convinced her to do it. And I wrote her back. One letter at a time, we put the relationship back together, and it wasn’t easy.” Edna took a deep breath, as if she was admitting something out loud to herself for the first time. “I don’t want you to think that I love her more because I wrote back to her and not to you. It wasn’t that. It was that her problems were small compared to yours. Our problems were easier to fix.” Edna sighed. “I was never strong enough, Jada. I would always hide when the going got tough. And I hid when you got caught up. I ran to God, and threw my problems on the altar. People would come up to me and tell me that you and Shante were smoking crack. All I could do was keep praying.

Looking back now, I think the Lord was telling me to go and find you and bring you home. But I couldn't do that. I didn't want to do that. And then, I saw you for myself."

Jada held her breath as she listened to her mother, and remembered the encounter vividly.

"You were in the corner store in West Brighton, and you looked a mess. I wanted to cry out to you, and hug you, and bring you home. And I wanted to hit you all at the same time. But I didn't know how you would react to me, or if you wanted to talk to me. As grown as I was, I was scared of what you might say to me. So I walked away from you. That was the most heartache I have ever felt in my life."

Jada let the tears fall from her eyes, as she recalled the day her mother had walked past her in the store. Jada had been so desperate to get high, had no money, and was really at one of her lowest points. She remembered crying on her way home, devastated that her mother had walked past her. Now she understood that it had hurt Edna just as much.

Edna watched her daughter cry in the dark, and she knew that Jada remembered the day. "I wanted to reach out to you, but I was afraid. And the Bible says that God has not given us a spirit of fear. But he has given us a spirit of love, power, and a sound mind. So that voice in my head telling me not to reach out to you, telling me not to bring you home again—that was nothing but the devil. I didn't see it that way then. I thought that you were too far gone for me to help you. But then Ava told me about you and Born. How you got yourself together, fell in love, and you were living happily ever after."

Jada smiled at this, her face still slightly damp from crying. She knew that hers had been anything but a fairy tale. "Yeah, right."

Edna smiled, too. "Well, she was happy for you. And that was when Ava began trying to get you to come and talk to me. But you weren't ready, and I understood that. I was happy that you had cleaned yourself up. I thought that my praying had finally done the trick. Then Ava found you using one day at

your house, and she left and came to stay with me. When she came to my house in tears, and I found out that you were back on drugs, I was devastated. I kept praying for you, Jada.” Edna let a tear fall from her own pretty eyes. Her heart was breaking for her daughter’s pain. “And the Lord really does work in mysterious ways. I picked up the paper one day, and saw that you had been arrested. I saw that as a blessing in disguise. At least you were going to get help. I wrote to you while you were away, and you never wrote me back.”

Jada shrugged. “I didn’t write you back because by then I felt like I didn’t need you anymore.” Jada knew that she was speaking bluntly, but she had little concern for whether Edna was disturbed by what she was about to say. “I don’t think you really understand how terrible it was for me being out there all alone.”

Edna was ready to listen, and really wanted to hear what her daughter had been through. “Come in the kitchen, and let’s have some tea or something. We shouldn’t talk in here and wake Sheldon back up.”

Jada agreed, and followed her mother into the kitchen. She sat at the table while Edna got some water boiling for her tea. Edna turned around, and faced her daughter. She knew that this would be the night that it all came pouring out. Sitting before her was her child, who was no longer a little girl. Jada was a woman, with a child of her own. And both women had a lot to reveal. There was a lot to discuss.

“Jada, I want to tell you some things that you may not know. But first I want you to tell me everything that I don’t already know. We both have a lot of catching up to do. For the past few weeks, we’ve been living under the same roof, barely speaking. I want to rebuild our relationship. But before we can do that, we have to clear the air. Tell me everything that you went through. From start to finish. I want to know when you started using cocaine, and everything that happened to you after you left.” Edna sat down, across from her daughter, and waited for her to begin.

Jada took a deep breath, and began her story. She told her everything, from the time she and Shante started smoking crack to the day Jada got arrested while pregnant with Sheldon. She pulled no punches, and held no details back. She revealed to her mother how she'd resorted to selling her body for crack. She told her all about Mr. Charlie, and how he'd taken advantage of her vulnerable state of mind in the midst of her addiction. She told Edna about meeting and falling in love with Born, and how she'd lost him because she couldn't end her new relationship with drugs. Jada told her mother about the day she'd come looking for her mother, and that she'd known that Edna had been home that day, yet had refused to answer the door. She told her about the bricks she'd stolen from Jamari, and how she'd stashed the money at Ingrid's house. The only detail she left out was her and Sunny's roles in Jamari's murder. That would be one secret Jada would never reveal. She watched as her mother cried tears of regret as she listened to her daughter's heartbreaking story. Finally, when Jada was done, Edna wiped her eyes, and looked at her child.

“Jada, I know that saying sorry doesn't fix anything. Sorry is only a word. I can't change the fact that I left you all alone for so long. And I was home that day you came by to see me. I saw you through the peephole, and I couldn't bring myself to open the door. I thought I was giving you tough love. I thought that we had years ahead of us, and that forgiveness could come later on. But I see now that I was wrong.” Edna sighed deeply, and shook her head. “I never should have turned my back on you. I gave up. I quit. And I should have had the strength to fight for you. But I didn't.” She reached across the table, and took Jada's hand in hers. “When you were in the hospital, and you called me to come and get Sheldon, I wish I had come to get him. I really do. But I think now that maybe you had to come that close to losing him before you realized how glad you were to have him.” Edna sounded like she was speaking from experience. “I have something to tell you, too,” she said. “I found out a couple of years ago that I have breast cancer.”

“*What?!*” Jada’s face registered pure shock. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Edna shrugged her shoulders. “Well, for one you weren’t talking to me, Jada.”

“But I would have listened if you told me you were sick! Why didn’t you make me listen ...”

“I didn’t want your forgiveness just because I’m sick. I wanted us to fix our relationship because we both wanted to. I didn’t want your sympathy. To be honest, I don’t think I deserve it. After all the pain you’ve been through, all by yourself ... I have no right to expect you to feel sorry for me.”

Jada began to cry. “So you still have it? Can’t they treat it?”

Edna nodded. “I’ve been through chemotherapy. I’ve had a couple of operations to try and remove it. But it’s spread, and now I have to get a double mastectomy.”

Jada gasped, and the tears flooded down her cheeks. She understood finally why her mother looked so much thinner, why her once long hair was now cut so short. She imagined the pain Edna must have gone through while Jada was busy getting high. Jada imagined her mother’s anguish, knowing that she had to have her breasts removed in order to try and conquer the disease that was ravishing her body. “Mommy, I’m so sorry.” The words got caught in Jada’s throat. Edna got up and walked over to embrace her daughter. They sat and cried together in the kitchen for all the years wasted with anger and bitterness. And when the tears subsided, they looked at one another with so much regret.

Finally, Edna spoke up. “I want to tell you what I’ve learned. Listen to me carefully.” She held Jada’s hands once again. “God is the only reason I’m still standing. He is the only one you need to get you through. Trust Him. I know I’ve made mistakes, and so have you. But the Bible says that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Even as messed up as we are, He still loves us. You have a second chance with your son. And I have a second chance with my daughter. But

the only way that we can even begin to fix what's been wrong for so long is if we lean on Him for strength. I'm not asking you to make a change overnight. But I will tell you this. You are not strong enough to beat this addiction by yourself. I know that you haven't used drugs in a while. But every day there will be hardship and pain, and you will be tempted to go back to the one way you know to numb that pain. The only one who can give you the strength to fight it and stay clean is God. That's your only hope. You have to pray, and trust that He will clean you up, and help you stand. I'm a witness, Jada. When I went to the Lord, I was a weak and broken woman who couldn't find the courage or the strength to fight the demons in my life. But He changed that. He is my strength. And He will be yours, too. All you have to do is let Him."

Jada nodded her head, listening to her mother's advice. She knew that if God could change Edna from the pushover she had once been into the survivor that sat before her now, that He could do the same for her. She hugged her mother, and they began from that evening on to mend their torn relationship. Jada accompanied her mother to church on Sundays, and every night they sat up after Sheldon went to sleep and talked about any- and everything. Every day they added a piece to the puzzle until finally it looked like their relationship might reach completion. It was a dream come true for both women, as they began to become friends as well as mother and daughter. Edna had surgery to remove both breasts, in hopes that the cancer would be completely removed. Jada helped her mother through her recovery, and they shared many laughs and good times in the months that followed. Ava came to spend the weekend once a month, and the three women all enjoyed themselves spoiling Jada's son. They played cards. They played Bingo for loose change, and baked cakes together, just like the good old days, when they were little girls in Brooklyn. Jada helped her mother cook, and learned all her best recipes. And Ava would brush, cut, and style Edna's hair. They had beautiful times. Sheldon was thriving, and Edna's cancer seemed to be in remission. It seemed as if they might get the fresh start they all needed as a family.

In June of the year 2000, the court deemed Jada a fit parent for Sheldon. She no longer had to submit to visits from Administration for Children's Services, and she was officially Sheldon's sole custodial parent. Jada knew that she had gotten a second chance, and she thanked God for it every day. Sheldon was almost two years old, and he was such a smart and beautiful child. Jada loved him beyond measure. She used the money she'd gotten from sheisting Jamari, and bought herself a house in Staten Island, so that she could be close to her mother. She put the rest of her money in the bank. Jada studied for and passed her GED and was proud of herself. Through one of the members of Edna's church congregation, Jada got a job working as an entry-level clerk in the accounting department at a consulting firm. She was working full time, Monday through Friday, and it wasn't long before she pursued her dream of going back to school. She majored in journalism, and focused hard on completing her education. She attended school three nights a week and on Saturdays. She was determined to turn her life around, for good this time, and to make her family proud. Edna watched Sheldon while Jada went to work, and to school. He loved his grandmother to death, and she loved him even more. They sang songs together, and played and danced together, and Edna got the chance to be silly with her grandson, and to forget temporarily about all the pain, both emotional and physical, she'd endured in her lifetime.

Jada graduated from college in May 2005. Edna, Ava, Sheldon, Sunny, Mercedes, and Sunny's mother, Marisol, all came to cheer her on. As she walked across the stage and accepted her degree, they all cheered loudly for her. They didn't care how ghetto they sounded to the other people present. Only they knew the depths to which Jada had fallen, and they were proud of her meteoric rise to the top, where she belonged. Tough as she was, Sunny cried tears of joy for her friend. She was proud of Jada, and proud of herself for all that they had managed to accomplish despite their pasts.

Over the next two years, Jada became an assistant editor at a premier black women's magazine. She and Sheldon were closer than ever, spending their weekends taking road trips with Sunny and Mercedes, or just cuddled up on the sofa watching DVDs. They went to Edna's house every Sunday for her delicious home-cooked meals. Those Sundays were so special, and Jada found herself anticipating them each week. And then Edna had a relapse. Her cancer had resurfaced, despite the double mastectomy, and she was hospitalized. The doctor told Jada and Ava that Edna's prognosis was grim. Cloaked in sadness and regret, the sisters held vigil at their mother's bedside, trying to liven Edna's cold hospital room with laughter and memories. They would lie with Edna in her hospital bed, and reminisce on the good days, never mentioning the bad days. Despite the pain and the weakness Edna was enduring, those last days with her daughters made her smile. After being hospitalized for three weeks, Edna died, with Jada and Ava at her bedside.

Jada was distraught. Now that she had the relationship with her mother that she had longed for all her life, she was gone. Jada cried not only for the loss of her mother, but for the years they'd lost being mad at each other, and unwilling to forgive. She found solace only in the fact that she'd forgiven her mother before she died. She was happy that Edna had gotten to know Sheldon, and that he had been given the gift of having a grandmother who loved him. Despite all the pain she felt her mother had caused her, Jada missed her terribly. With Ava working on some big legal case in D.C., the responsibility of making Edna's funeral arrangements fell on Jada's shoulders. She set about the task of burying her mother, and of burying the pain of her past along with her.

After the Pain

37
FORGIVENESS

January 9, 2007

Jada held her head in her hands, as if doing so would prevent her from remembering all the pain of her past. It was all more than she could stand at that moment. The last thing she needed was to be remembering these things, feeling this pain again. Getting the flowers that Born had sent to her, reading his note ... it was enough to send her back along all the corridors of her recollection to places she hadn't visited in years. Jada was overwhelmed with so many emotions. Instinctively, she picked up the phone and called Sunny. Sunny had been her friend for so long. She knew Jada better than anybody. As dependable as ever, Sunny answered on the third ring.

“City morgue. You kill ‘em, we chill ‘em,” Sunny answered, jokingly.

“That’s not very funny, since I’m in the process of burying my mother, Sunny.” Jada’s voice was trembling as she shook her head at her friend’s twisted sense of humor.

“Sorry. I didn’t even think about that. I was only joking, girl. How you holding up?” Sunny asked.

“Not too good.”

“What’s the matter?”

Jada sighed, rubbing her head to try and stop the headache creeping up on her. “I got a package from Born today.”

Sunny didn't respond right away. Instead, she let Jada's words linger for a few moments. "Wow. What was it?"

"Some flowers. He sent a note with them, and it didn't say much. But now I can't stop thinking about him, and about us. I thought I had dealt with all this shit, but—" Jada's voice trailed off, as she fought to compose herself.

Sunny listened intently, and heard the pain in her best friend's voice. "You want me to come over?" she asked.

Jada closed her eyes, and gripped the receiver tighter. "Yeah, could you? I need to get some of this shit off my chest."

Sunny knew that was exactly what Jada needed. "I'm on my way."

Born walked into his mother's apartment and smiled at his favorite girl. She stood in her kitchen, shredding cheese for her famous macaroni. "Wassup, old lady?" he asked playfully, kissing his mother on her round, brown face.

Smiling back at her only child, Ingrid said calmly, "I got your 'old lady.'" She swatted Born's hand away as he reached for a piece of cheese. "Don't come in here trying to eat up this cheese. Go on and look in the fridge and find something." As Born walked to the refrigerator, and looked around inside for something to nibble on, his mother watched him sideways. She loved to see her only child whenever he walked through her door. He was like a ray of sunshine in her life, and she loved him tremendously. She thought of how proud her husband would have been if he had lived to see his baby boy. No longer a baby, Marquis Graham was a tall young man, solid and well toned. He was always dressed to impress, even if he wasn't trying to, and his smile could be either mocking or sincere. His brown skin was reminiscent of his father's caramel complexion, and Ingrid knew that her husband would have been proud.

Born pulled up a chair at the kitchen table, and poured himself a bowl of Froot Loops. He ate his cereal as his mother filled him in on gossip he cared nothing about. He wasn't thinking about the goings on in the hood at that moment. His mind was on Jada. Born knew that she must be heartbroken about her mother's death. When he'd been with Jada, she was never close to her mother. But Born knew that she was hurt by Edna's absence in her life, and he had no idea whether or not they had reconciled prior to her death. When he'd seen Edna Ford's obituary in the paper, he couldn't resist the urge to send his condolences. Thinking about her, even after all this time, made him feel all the love he had tried to suppress for so long. *Jada*. Her name made his heart pause. Jada had taught Born about love, and about disappointment. She still had a place in his heart.

When Born was in prison, during his conversations with Ace, he realized that he had blamed her for more than just her own addiction. Born had told Ace the whole story of their relationship. Ace had listened, and he asked Born if he was so mad at Jada because of her own mistakes, or because she had repeated his father's mistakes? That made Born wonder if he should have handled things differently. Should he have gotten her into rehab and loved her out of her addiction? Or was walking away from her the right thing to do? He wasn't sure. But he knew that he had never been able to forget her. Almost ten years had passed, and Born still thought about her all the time. A song would come on the radio, and he'd remember dancing with her or singing to her. A movie would come on television, and he'd remember her persuading him to watch it with her. Someone would say a phrase that Jada used to say all the time. It seemed that there were reminders of their love everywhere he looked. There had been a time when it hurt to think about her. He had once believed that Jada had quit on him. But he wondered sometimes if it was the other way around.

"I sent Jada some flowers today." Born said it so matter-of-factly that Ingrid wondered if she'd heard him correctly. She

turned and faced him, placing the cheese on the counter.

“You sent flowers to who?”

Born smiled slightly. “Jada, Ma. Her mother died. I saw the obituary in the newspaper. I don’t know why, but I just felt like I had to send her something to let her know that I know how she feels.”

Ingrid looked at her son. She heard what he wasn’t saying. He made it sound like his concern for Jada was only about the death of her mother and how she must be affected by it. True, Marquis would understand what Jada must be feeling, since he himself had lost a parent. But Ingrid knew that there was more to it than that. She knew her son better than he thought. “How did you find out where she lives?” she asked, continuing the preparation of her macaroni and cheese.

Born sat back in his chair, and cleared his throat. “I called her sister. Ava gave me her address.”

Ingrid stopped making the macaroni again. She turned and looked at her son, and wondered if she should ask her next question. “Her sister? Why are you keeping in touch with Jada’s sister?”

Born shrugged his shoulders. Then, realizing what his mother suspected, he shook his head. “I know what you’re thinking. It’s not even like that, Ma. I never did nothing with Ava. That’s my word. I wouldn’t do that.”

Ingrid scrunched up her lips in disbelief. “Since when wouldn’t you do that? You forget that I know you, Marquis. I know that when you’re hurt, there’s really nothing you *won’t* do to get back at the person who hurt you. I remember that child who cheated on you back when you were younger. What was her name? Well, whatever her name was, you sure did start screwing her best friend when you found out what she was doing while you were away. Don’t think I forgot.”

Born smiled, and shook his head. Damn, his mother had a good memory! Like an elephant. “Well, I didn’t do that this time,” he said. “I saw Ava when I was over in West Brighton

handling some business, like a year ago. She was out there to see her mother, and I was standing in front of the store talking to my boy. She came over to me, and said ‘hi.’ I hadn’t seen her since the time she stayed at my house for spring break. She told me that the real reason she had left so fast, when she came to stay with me and Jada, was because she had found out that her sister was using cocaine again.” Born recalled his conversation with Ava that day in West Brighton. She told him about discovering her sister snorting a line in her bedroom, and explained the argument that followed. Ava had also been honest enough to tell Born that she was feeling him back then, and that that had been part of her reason for leaving. She had wanted him, and when Jada accused her of being jealous, Ava had to admit to herself that there was some truth in that. Ava had explained that she was in a committed relationship now, and happy. “But I had a crush on you something serious back in the day! I always knew that Jada was a lucky girl,” she had said.

Born was flattered. After all, as pretty as Jada was, Ava was breathtaking. But Born’s attraction to Ava had been purely physical. What he had felt for Jada went beyond all of that, and he was kind of glad that Ava had left when she did. If she hadn’t, there was no telling what mistakes his libido would have caused him to make. As he stood and talked to Ava that day, Born had listened to her explain how Jada had gotten her life together. She told him that Jada had graduated college, and was doing big things. Born was happy to hear that Jada had pulled herself together.

As Ava spoke to Born that day, and saw that he still looked good, and that not much had changed, she couldn’t help feeling like her sister had fucked up a good thing. She remembered the way he’d looked at her that day, when he’d found her naked in the bathroom, and she wondered if he replayed that day in his mind as often as she did. Born was sexy, and even though Ava was involved with someone she loved, she couldn’t deny the fact that the mere sight of her sister’s ex made her panties wet. But then guilt set in. This

Jada's man—well, at least he used to be. To get with Born would cross a line that Ava would never be able to come back from. She and Jada were still not as close as they had once been. But Ava wasn't grimy enough to play her sister and fuck her former man. She had cleared her throat and put her hormones in check. And then she gave Born Jada's phone number, so that he could call her if the mood struck him. She also gave him her business card, and smiled when his eyes widened upon discovering that Ava had become an attorney. He was impressed.

But Ava had unselfishly steered the conversation back to the subject of Jada. "I know she still loves you, Born," Ava had said. "Don't tell her that you got this from me, but you should call her someday. I'm sure she'd be happy to hear from you." And as hard as it was for her to do, Ava walked away from Born, and hoped that he would call her sister.

Ingrid nodded. "So you think Jada will be happy to hear from you?" she asked. "Y'all haven't spoken to each other since ..." Ingrid stopped cooking for a moment and thought about it. "How long has it been since you last saw Jada, Marquis?"

Born finished chewing his cereal. "Almost ten years. We broke up in ninety-eight. I think she got locked up the following year, and by then so had I." Born chuckled at the irony in that. Both he and Jada had gone to jail, and it had changed their lives for the better. Ava had told him that her sister was clean, and that she had regained custody of her son after Jamari was killed. Born still hated the thought of Jada having Jamari's baby. Even though Jamari had been slain in a late-night drug deal gone bad (at least, that's what the police had called it), Born still hated Jamari, and he hated the thought of Jada ever letting him get close to her.

"Do you still love her?" Ingrid asked, without turning to face him. She didn't need to see her son's face in order to know if his answer was sincere or not. She could tell simply by the tone of his voice.

Born hesitated. He thought about it. And then he leveled with himself. “Yeah.” He shoveled the last of his cereal into his mouth, and sat back in his chair. “But I’m having a hard time forgiving her. She hurt me.” Born shrugged his shoulders. “And I still can’t help it that I love her. I don’t want her to feel no more pain.”

Ingrid smiled with her back still turned. At least Born was admitting it now. “So what if she calls you?” Ingrid asked. “You know. To say thank you for the flowers. Will you meet with her?”

Born shrugged his shoulders, as if it didn’t matter. But deep inside he was praying that Jada would call. “Yeah. I would meet her for drinks, or whatever, you know what I’m saying?” He tried to sound nonchalant. “If she calls.”

Ingrid nodded outwardly, and inwardly said a silent prayer that Jada would pick up the phone and call Marquis. This was her big chance!

Sunny sat in the backseat of the red Aston Martin, her Dior shades perched perfectly on her nose. She looked across the water as they crossed the Verrazano Bridge. She loved autumn in New York City. The trees were all shades of red, brown, green, orange, and yellow blended together into a beautiful mosaic. She inhaled the cool air from the partially opened window and was so grateful to God for a chance to see such a beautiful day. Thinking back over her life, there had been many times she didn’t know if she’d make it to see and appreciate a day this blissful.

Sunny’s driver that day was Raul, a middle-aged black man. He was a good driver; kept the radio tuned to one’s liking, and talked very little. Sunny liked that about him. She couldn’t stand drivers who wanted to discuss current events or politics, sports or whatever else. Those types were never employed by her for very long. Sunny preferred a silent driver, like Raul. She had a lot on her mind.

She thought about Jada and about how sad she had sounded on the phone. They had both had more than their share of

heartache in their lives. Both had been through hell. But Sunny always felt she was made of stronger stuff than Jada. Sunny was a bad bitch, and she knew it. But Jada was not as tough, despite her efforts to make the world believe otherwise. In Sunny's opinion, Jada was fronting. She could make believe real well, pretend that she wasn't incomplete in some places. But Sunny knew the truth. She knew that inside of Jada dwelled pain and distrust, and plenty of untold stories.

As they approached the toll plaza, headed for Staten Island, Raul held the EZ Pass up on the windshield. Sunny looked beside her, checking on her most precious cargo. Her nine-year-old daughter, Mercedes, sat calmly beside her in the backseat. Dressed in calf-length brown suede boots, a brown turtleneck, a denim jumper, and a matching jacket, Mercedes looked like a living ad for any children's clothing line. She looked as sweet as pie, with her light brown complexion and soft light brown curly hair. She was adorable. Seeing that Mercedes was secure, Sunny relaxed and directed Raul to Jada's place. The radio was tuned to KISS-FM, and Sunny couldn't help singing along to the oldie but goodie as it played: "I'm wishing on a star, to follow where you are ..."

Raul smiled as Sunny continued singing off-key all the way to Jada's house. Raul couldn't help laughing at her. She was a gorgeous girl with a filthy mouth and an effortless charm about her. Sunny could make you cry from her verbal tirades, or melt you with her silky, sexy words, depending on her mood. She was, indeed, a handful.

But when it came to little Mercedes, Sunny was a pussycat. She loved her daughter, almost to the point of adoration. It seemed that, despite the hard life she had obviously lived, when Sunny gave birth to Mercedes, her life had reached its fulfillment. It was intriguing to all who knew Sunny as the hard rock from around the way to witness her melt like butter in the palm of Mercedes's hand.

By the time they pulled up in front of 104 Christopher Lane, Raul was happy that the trip had come to an end. Sunny may have been beautiful, but her singing voice was anything but.

Sunny looked around at Jada's neighborhood and couldn't help feeling proud of her friend. The two of them had seen all types of shit—from back alleys to penthouse suites. And now Jada was living in suburbia—a cozy, quiet, tree-lined street in Staten Island, while Sunny resided in a deluxe Manhattan high-rise apartment building, complete with a doorman. She and Jada had once lived self-destructive lives. And now they both lived tucked among doctors, lawyers, and accountants. It was truly remarkable. But damn, what a high price they'd paid to get there.

Sunny was modeling now. She was no Tyra Banks or Naomi Campbell. Not yet, anyway. She did mostly print work and magazine ads, a couple of runway shows here and there during Fashion Week, but it was work nonetheless. Finally she was living her dream. The only thing working against her was her age. Sunny was in her early thirties, and in the modeling world that was considered very old. Most of the girls who got the big ad campaigns were in their teens and twenties. The competition was fierce, but Sunny was holding her own. Having invested much of what Dorian left her hadn't hurt either. Sunny was a rich socialite, spoiling herself and her daughter with the fruits of Dorian's labor, and with her own. She wanted for nothing, and she had enough money to live lavishly.

She dated smartly. A Knicks player for close to two years, and most recently a Golden Globe-nominated actor, whom she'd accompanied to the event. She was doing her thing and helping Jada pen a novel about the nightlife they'd enjoyed in their pasts. The two of them were learning how to balance motherhood and the single life. And more important, both of them were no longer addicts.

Sunny handed Raul a crisp fifty-dollar bill as he helped her from the car. He promised to return for her as soon as she called, and she smiled graciously. She helped Mercedes step from the car, and the two walked hand-in-hand up Jada's driveway.

Sunny rang the doorbell, and ran her fingers through her natural brown hair, which was long and luxurious. Her makeup was flawless, as usual, and Mercedes looked up at her mother adoringly. Sunny tapped her foot as she waited for Jada to open the door. When the door at last swung open, Sunny could see that her friend had been crying. Her nose was red, and her eyes were puffy.

Sunny hugged Jada, and rubbed her back. “Here you go with this crying shit again,” she said.

This remark made Jada laugh, and Sunny smiled as she walked inside. Jada hugged Mercedes warmly, admiring her cute little outfit. “Baby girl, you get more beautiful each time I see you.”

“Damn!” Sunny looked around at all the flowers that had been delivered, and shook her head. “People go too far with their condolences sometimes. It smells like a damn funeral parlor up in here!”

Just as she strolled into the living room, Jada’s eight-year-old son, Sheldon, rushed over and threw his arms around Sunny’s waist. “Was-sup, Aunt Sunny!” He said it enthusiastically, genuinely happy to see her. Sheldon was always happy to see Sunny, the two of them sharing a unique bond. Over the years Sunny had spoiled him beyond reason. Sunny knew that she would never have another child. Mercedes would be her first and last. And aside from DJ.—Dorian’s son with Raquel—she knew that Sheldon was as close as she would ever come to having a son. She gave him everything he wanted. Every chance she got, Sunny sent Sheldon presents, and she took him on expensive vacations. Jada smiled, grateful once more that her friend was such a positive force in Sheldon’s young life. At a time when Jada was cloaked in darkness, it had been Sunny who had held up a flashlight for Jada to find her way. For this, and for many other reasons, Jada was eternally grateful to Sunny.

“Wassup, Sheldon?” Sunny pinched his cheeks as she always did, and Sheldon blushed. “Your face looks older,

you're getting all tall. Pretty soon you won't have no time for Aunt Sunny."

"Nah, I'ma always have time for you, Aunt Sunny." Sheldon looked away shyly, and Jada laughed.

"Stop making my baby get all sensitive." Jada smiled as she said it. Sunny ignored her completely.

"Mommy's just hatin' 'cuz can't nobody make her big behind blush no more!" Sunny joked. Sheldon laughed, as Sunny tickled him.

Jada also laughed at this remark, because at five-foot-three and a solid size six, Jada was anything but big.

Sheldon hugged Sunny once more, and then smiled at Mercedes, who waited patiently on the sidelines. Mercedes loved Sheldon, and each time they played together she would entertain her mother with tale after tale of their adventures. They were so close in age that they played together for hours at a time. Grabbing her by the hand, he ran back to his room so that they could play with his Xbox. Sunny plopped down on the sofa, and Jada sat down as well. The card she'd received from Born sat looming on the coffee table.

Sunny scooped it up, and read it. When she was done, she sat back and looked at Jada. "So?" she said. "How did you feel when you got this?"

Jada shook her head, at a loss for words. "I felt like somebody sucked all the air out of my lungs. I haven't heard from him since ... it's been years. It's crazy that he would contact me after all this time. How the hell did he know where I live?"

Sunny pursed her lips, and sucked her teeth. "Girl, please! He's the man out here. He knows everything that goes on in Staten Island. You can believe that. He's probably known where you've been since the day he last saw you." Jada closed her eyes at the thought of that, and Sunny crossed her legs. "So how do you feel about him after all these years, Jada?"

Jada chuckled somewhat, and looked helplessly at the ceiling. “I still love that man as much as I did almost ten years ago.”

Sunny frowned. “How? Explain that to me. How can you still love a man who did that to you?”

Jada fell silent, and looked Sunny in her eyes. “He was the love of my life,” she said.

Sunny looked at her friend like she was crazy. “He was the love of your what?” She was dumbfounded. Sunny pulled a cigarette out of her purse. She’d been swearing she was going to quit, but it was shit like this conversation that sent her reaching for a square. She lit it, and exhaled the smoke. “Don’t get me wrong, Jada. I always liked Born. Him and Dorian were tight like brothers. And when y’all were together, I thought he really loved you. But I lost some respect for him after what he did to you. Girl, the nigga threw you out on the street with a muthafuckin’ monkey on your back. And he was the love of your life?” Sunny’s expression was incredulous.

Jada sat back, and folded her arms across her chest. “I hate him for throwing me away like garbage. But I can’t help loving him still. I can’t explain it. It probably sounds dumb, or whatever. But I think I’ll always love him.” Jada looked away from Sunny, her eyes staring at nothing in particular. “I guess it has a lot to do with his relationship with his father. But that’s a long story.”

Sunny stood up and walked over to Jada’s small bar. She poured herself a drink, and returned to her seat on the couch. “Well then, start talking, girl. ‘Cuz I got all night.” Sunny stretched her legs across the sofa’s cushions and got cozy.

SECOND CHANCES

Born walked into Anisa's house, using his own key, and dropped his jacket on the leather recliner. Seeing his son, Ethan, stuck in his usual spot on the floor in front of the TV playing Def Jam Fight For New York, Born smiled, happy to see his boy.

"Wassup, Dad?" little Ethan greeted his father.

"What up, boy?" Born lovingly rubbed his son's head and glanced at the TV screen in time to see Method Man knock Snoop Dogg into the path of an oncoming subway train. Born glanced at all the games Ethan had—Xbox, PlayStation, Game Cube, even the new PSP. He had the hottest games for each and every system. Born knew that it was overkill, that all of this was too much for one seven-year-old to have. But Born was determined that Ethan would have his every heart's desire provided to him by his father. For that reason, he went out of his way to fill Ethan's closet with every designer children's outfit by the likes of Phat Farm, Sean John, Rocawear, Akademiks, etc. Ethan had eleven pairs of sneakers—Jordans galore, Timberlands, Uptowns, and all that. Every two weeks he got a new pair of sneakers. The boy had a leather jacket, a Sean John snorkel, a suede Phat Farm coat, and a gold chain. Born even brought a hot hero from the local pizzeria to Ethan's school each day so that his son wouldn't be subjected to the school's lunch. Anisa refused to make his son lunch every night, so Born bought it for him, since Ethan hated the cafeteria food. It was that serious. He had everything a kid his

age could ever possibly want, and his father was proud of that. Born enjoyed seeing Ethan enjoy the finest things.

To him, that was one of the marks of being a good father, ensuring that your child's wants and needs were fulfilled. Born wanted to do whatever was necessary to ensure that Ethan knew his father had his back no matter what.

Ingrid often told her son that what he did for Ethan was excessive. He was spoiling the child, giving him more clothes than necessary, more toys than any child could ever play with. But to Born, it was all part of doing whatever it took to feel like he was doing a better job at fatherhood than Leo had. Born's disappointing relationship with his father shaped the type of father he was to his own son. In his lifetime, Born had seen his share of death and destruction, sorrow and sadness. But on the day that Anisa gave birth to Ethan, he had finally witnessed the miracle of life. He had seen life and hope, and his outlook had changed drastically. For the first time in his life, he had a reason to live. Ethan was his everything.

His relationship with Anisa had changed long ago. They'd gone their separate ways not long after Ethan was born. When Born had first come home from jail, he had called Anisa, wanting an explanation for why she'd left him all alone while he was away. Anisa had apologized for her disappearing act, and begged Born to come and see her. He did, and he spent some time with her, and caught up on some much needed sex with her. But to him, that's all it was. Sex. Then, to Born's surprise, Anisa had discovered that she was pregnant. When she'd first told him about her pregnancy, Born had mixed emotions. His intention had never been to get involved seriously with Anisa. She was just a plaything for the time being, and he wondered if he could trust her. What if she was lying about him being the father of her child, in order to trap him? To be certain, he insisted on having a paternity test when Anisa gave birth. Sure enough, Ethan was his son, and Born assumed the role of fatherhood like a pro. He changed Pampers and went to doctor appointments. He was such a good father to Ethan that Ingrid couldn't help beaming with

pride whenever she saw them together. From day one, he was hands-on. He wished Anisa hadn't been the one who wound up being his baby's mama. But he was happy to have his son, and knew that Ethan would be the reason that he changed his life for the better.

Born had given Anisa a chance to redeem herself after Ethan was born. And he tried forgiving her for the sake of their new family. But something inside of him wouldn't let him get past the way she'd abandoned him while he was locked up. Something wouldn't allow him to let go of the fact that she had proven herself to be untrustworthy. Anisa tried to look and act the part of Born's ideal woman. Still, no matter how she tried, in Born's eyes she was just the young lady who'd been lucky enough to have his firstborn. He still hit it every now and then. But Born knew that there was no real future between them. Still, in his determination to ensure Ethan's well-being, Born set her up in a nice one-family home on Bement Avenue. He spent the night with her every once in a while. But he had his own home—a duplex condo off of Richmond Avenue—where he spent the majority of his time. He gave Anisa money for whatever she needed, and spent tons of money on their son. This was his way of ensuring that Anisa didn't cause him any baby mama drama, and also that she wouldn't move too far away from him and take his son away. Anisa didn't date much. Not publicly, anyway. She had one or two “maintenance men,” whom she called for physical emergencies, whenever Born got tired of servicing her. But she dated none of them seriously. Anisa held out hope that she could sucker Born into having another baby with her. That, she figured, might restore her to the number-one slot in his life. Especially now that he was getting involved in the entertainment industry.

Born had come home from prison, and gone back to getting money with Dorian's crew. But it didn't feel right to him anymore. Born was growing tired of the game. Having had so much time to think while he was away, he'd come to some conclusions. Drugs had destroyed the lives of those around

him, and they had come damn close to destroying his. Leo was gone, and so was Jada, in a sense. He thought about Ace, just coming down from a twenty-year bid, and about his half siblings, who were still strung out in this day and age. And he thought about all the years he'd spent in jail, years he had lost forever. He wanted to be there for his son, and the risk of going back to jail or being killed in the streets was a risk no longer worth taking. Born began looking for an exit from the game.

While still doing business with Dorian's crew, Born opened a sneaker store in Park Hill, on Targee Street. He did good business with that, and used it as a front for the few shady dealings he still had left to handle. He enjoyed the day-to-day operations of running his store, but the money wasn't nearly enough to entice him to leave the game alone completely. Eventually, he also took over Slim's barbershop, and that business was successful as well. Still, Born was reluctant to do anything other than the one thing he'd done all his life—hustle. The legitimate businesses were merely excess income. It just allowed him to keep putting money away for Ethan's future, as well as for Dorian's son.

D.J. was being raised by his uncles. And part of what bothered Born was the fact that he knew that Dorian would have been displeased with how his son was being brought up. Born knew what Dorian had wanted for D.J.'s future, because it was very similar to what he wanted for his own son. An education, without having to worry about paying for it. A chance to go to college, or to play professional sports, or to get into the entertainment industry. The sky was the limit for their sons, because of the work their fathers had put in, and the connections they'd made along the way.

But D.J. was being groomed to be a heartless, fearless hustler. Born knew that Dorian would not have wanted that life for his son. Not so soon, anyway. DJ. was fifteen years old, and rarely went to school. He was constantly on the road with his uncles, learning the game and soaking up all the wrong shit. Born felt a sense of responsibility toward the youngster.

After all, he himself had once been groomed as Dorian's successor. He began to put in more time with Dorian's son.

D.J. wanted to be a rapper. And he was good enough to be a multi-platinum success, if only he were given the chance to do something other than learning the game. Whenever Born went to spend time with D.J.—as he constantly did, often for days at a time—he took him to a recording studio to help him learn the industry, meet artists, and cut demos. Born used his connection with Zion, his childhood friend who was well connected in the music industry, which allowed him access to all the best studios in New York City. They spent hours at the Hit Factory, where hundreds of artists over the years had created timeless classics. Born drilled it into D.J.'s head that someday he might be among those who had created number-one hits in that very same studio. D.J. was excited whenever Born came to pick him up, because he knew that Born took a genuine interest in what interested D.J. Music. And getting into the industry seemed like an attainable goal, not something that was beyond his reach.

Born also talked to D.J. about his father all the time. Not in the way that D.J.'s uncles spoke about Dorian. They made him sound like a Nino Brown type of guy, who had made a fortune by taking no prisoners in a game so ruthless that it would chew you up and spit you out if you weren't careful. They made Dorian sound like he was 100 percent hustler, and nothing else. But that wasn't how D.J. remembered his father. He remembered Dorian being a very handsome man, who drew all the attention whenever he walked into a room. He remembered Dorian as the ideal father, who taught his son to play ball and shared a love for music with him. He remembered Dorian as a good man, just as Born remembered him. A loyal and trustworthy friend with a heart of gold. Not one made of stone, the way D.J.'s uncles portrayed him. As young as D.J. was, he knew that Born had been a true friend to his father. He could tell by the way Born took responsibility for him, as if he were his own son. Born talked to D.J. about girls, about life, in a way that a father would. He didn't sugarcoat his past. Instead,

he described in explicit detail the way he had come to know Dorian, and the ways in which they'd taken the game and played it to the end. Born let D.J. know all the pitfalls that came along with being a hustler. He explained why he wanted to get out of the game, told him all about his past. And, by leveling with Dorian's son as if he were a *young* man as opposed to a *grown* man, Born gained D.J.'s respect and admiration. D.J. could clearly understand why the man who had become his mentor and father figure had also been his father's best friend.

Seeing how DJ. related to him made Born extremely proud. He loved him as if he were his own son, and he knew that Dorian would be proud of how Born was helping to shape and mold him into a strong and determined young man.

His time in the studio began to pay off. D.J. auditioned for a chance to battle on *Cipher Sundays*, a rap freestyle competition, in which contestants battled for the chance at a recording contract. He was thrilled when they called him for the show, and Born worked with him to get ready for his big shot. He really believed that D.J. had what it took to go the distance. Already, he'd been in freestyle ciphers in Brooklyn, and uptown, and D.J. had held his own, and made Born proud. Born had ensured that D.J. had been exposed to all the areas of the industry that he himself had access to. He figured Dorian's son was ready for the world.

When D.J. won the first round of the competition, everyone began to pay attention. Dorian's brothers, who up to that point had only seen rapping as a pastime D.J. enjoyed when he wasn't soaking up the game, began to take notice. They were still a little skeptical that he had what it took to compete on such a high level. Many youngsters dreamed of being famous rappers, yet few actually achieved that goal. But after watching him on TV, and seeing him demolish the competition, everyone in their family began to take notice of his talent. For five consecutive weeks, D.J. conquered opponent after opponent, and the title of *Cipher Sundays* Champion was within reach.

Dorian's two brothers—William and Lamont—invited Born over for a meeting at Lamont's house. They explained that they wanted to talk to him about D.J. and his career. When he got there, D.J. had smiled at him as if he knew something that Born didn't know. He did. Dorian's brothers sat Born down, and explained that they'd thought D.J. was best suited to follow in Dorian's footsteps in the streets. But after seeing D.J. pummel the competition for more than a month on *Cipher Sundays*, they were convinced that he had a different destiny. Finally, they believed that DJ. had what it took to be a rapper. And, they explained, the reason they had called Born over to discuss this was because they wanted him to be D.J.'s business manager. DJ. already had a terrific chemistry with Born, and it didn't hurt that Zion—a man with considerable industry connections—had suggested, and almost insisted, that Born be the man chosen to manage D.J. Both Born and D.J. were thrilled at their new business relationship, and Born began to see that this might be his big chance to get out of the game once and for all.

DJ. went on to win the last two rounds of *Cipher Sundays*, and everyone was ecstatic. It was on! DJ. was the champ, and almost every major record label was interested in signing him. He was a teenage ingenue, with the charisma and personality of a seasoned hustler. His interviews were flawless, and D J. effortlessly displayed a mixture of humility and pride that made fans embrace him by the thousands. Born spent his days negotiating contracts, and getting DJ. in the studio. Born gave him feedback on his songs, suggesting lyrics from time to time. But for the most part, DJ. wrote his own rhymes, and Born offered constructive criticism, helping DJ. shape an image for his growing legion of fans. Zion assisted him in choosing producers, and in obtaining media coverage for D J., and soon they inked a great deal with one of the biggest labels in the industry. D J. was featured in major urban magazines, as well as on MTV and BET. He was on his way. Everyone could tell that this was only the beginning for the young powerhouse.

And ever since she'd heard the news, Anisa had been more anxious than ever to sink her claws back into Born. She knew that, as he began touring with DJ., he would inevitably meet beautiful and successful women. She wanted to try and get back "in" before that happened. Born saw her clearly, though, and he paid her no mind.

Born left Ethan in front of the television and walked into the kitchen. He found Anisa sitting at the table with her two good friends, Kiara and Precious. Born groaned inwardly, not exactly thrilled to see these two bitches sitting in the kitchen.

"Hey, baby." Anisa smiled at Born as he entered. Her hair was freshly done, highlighting perfect cheekbones and a glorious smile. She was a pretty girl; still, Born knew that an ugly side existed within her. Anisa was all about the Benjamins, and Born knew that, since she was being nice today, she must want some money.

"Hey," Born greeted Anisa, and said, "Wassup, y'all?" to the other two.

"Whattup, big baller, shot caller?" Precious's ghetto ass responded. "You came just in time. We was just talking about Anisa's birthday, which you should know by now is coming up. And we think you should get us a limo and let us take Anisa to Atlantic City to celebrate."

Born walked over to the refrigerator, completely ignoring Precious's audacious comment. Kiara chimed in. "You only turn thirty once, Born. Don't you want Anisa's birthday to be memorable?"

What Born wanted was to tell these gold-digging hos to get the hell up out of his house. After all, it was *his* house. Anisa just lived there. But instead of saying that, he poured himself something to drink and continued pretending he hadn't heard a word. Finally, Anisa spoke up.

"Born, you don't have to be so rude. You could just say yes or no. It's that simple." She folded her arms across her chest,

sat back in her chair, and rolled her eyes at his back. Precious grimaced at Born from behind, and Kiara giggled quietly.

Born sipped his iced tea, and turned around to face the women in his kitchen. “Y’all bitches is crazy if you think I’m coming out of pocket to send y’all *anywhere*.”

“Born!” Anisa cried, defending her friends.

He continued talking. “Y’all better roll some quarters, or sell some ass, or do something so you can go to Atlantic City. ‘Cuz I ain’t paying for a muthafuckin’ thing. Don’t come at me with dumb shit.”

“Born!” Anisa looked steamed.

“What? You knew that shit was dumb when they started talking.” Born frowned, turned, and walked out of the kitchen.

Anisa avoided looking at her friends, until finally Precious said, “I told you his cheap ass wouldn’t pay for it.”

Born went back into the living room, picked up the extra joystick, and played a game with his son. He could hear Anisa’s voice mixed with those of her friends as they continued talking and cackling in the kitchen.

Within an hour or so, the two guests left, and Anisa came to see what Born was up to. He knew she had an attitude about how rude he had been to her friends, but Born didn’t really give a damn.

“Why you had to be so mean, Born? You know how Precious is. You know how she acts. She didn’t mean no harm.”

Born shrugged. “I don’t care what she meant by it. Ain’t no free rides over here. Whoever don’t like that, they can kiss my ___”

“Okay, okay. I get the point. But, it *is* my birthday weekend, and I *would* like to go to Atlantic City with my friends. So can I have some money to pay for the hotel room—”

“Hotel room? How long are you planning to stay there? It’s, like, two hours away, so what the hell do you need a hotel room for?”

“Just for the weekend, Born. And this is all I want you to give me for my birthday.” Anisa batted her pretty, long eyelashes at him. “Pleeeeeease. It’s close by, so you’ll be able to get in touch with me if Ethan needs me, or something.”

Born knew that Anisa really didn’t concern herself with Ethan as much as she should. Born played the role of Mr. Mom, while Anisa was busy being a diva. She was a good mother, but not what one would call a supermom. Born decided to give in so that he could have some valuable alone time with his son. He figured it would be better to have Anisa out of his face for a little while. Fuck it. “Go ahead and make the reservations, and I’ll pay for your room,” he said. “But you three can get down there the best way you can.”

Anisa smiled, pleased with the outcome. She didn’t need a limousine, as Precious had suggested. She could always drive her Range Rover instead. She hugged Born, and then ran off to call her girls to give them the good news. Born finished his game with Ethan and made sure that he ate dinner and took a bath. Then he tucked Ethan into bed, kissed him good night, and prepared to head home.

But when he peeked his head inside Anisa’s bedroom to say good-bye, she pulled him inside and kissed him deeply. She pulled him closer to her, until the heat of their bodies was too much for either of them to ignore. They had sex on top of the covers of her queen-size bed, and then Anisa fell asleep almost immediately. Born laid in bed beside Anisa, watching her sleep. He thought about slipping out while she snored softly. But instead, he lay there fitfully tossing to and fro, not realizing that Anisa’s peaceful slumber was a hoax. She knew, as she feigned sleep, that something had Born lying awake later than usual. Something had him troubled.

Born thought about Jada. He thought about her voice, the way she sounded so sexy, especially in the morning when she

first woke up. He remembered how they used to talk until the wee hours of the morning about any- and everything. Jada had stimulated his mind like no other woman since. She had made him think about things that he probably never would have thought about otherwise. And he missed that.

Sunny was exhausted. After drinking a whole bottle of Hennessy, talking to Jada for hours about their past, and ordering pizza for Sheldon and Mercedes, she had finally ended her conversation with Jada and gone to sleep beside her daughter. It wouldn't be the first time Sunny had gotten lit and camped out at her friend's place. The two of them were so close that they made themselves at home whenever they visited one another. Jada looked in on Sunny and Mercedes sleeping comfortably in the guest bedroom. Sunny was sprawled out in the queen-size bed, with Mercedes nestled peacefully beside her.

She shut the door and then looked in on Sheldon, who was knocked out in his own bedroom. Jada looked at the assorted sports paraphernalia scattered throughout the spacious room and smiled, thankful for the second chance she'd been given to be a mother to her child.

She took a long, hot shower, and washed and conditioned her hair. Then she moisturized her skin with lotion and pulled on an oversized T-shirt that she liked to sleep in. She wrapped her hair up in a silky scarf and walked into her bedroom. Her feet sank into the plushness of her thick carpet. She loved the feeling of climbing onto her pillow-top mattress and lying back across her sky blue comforter. What a day it had been. Her conversation with Sunny had conjured up lots of things she'd long ago forgotten. She stared at the ceiling, thinking about all the memories her conversation with Sunny had brought back. Jada toyed with the card in her hand and read Born's script for the thousandth time:

Believe it or not, I still think about you all the time. And I'm sorry for your loss.

She smiled. He still thought about her. He was sorry for her loss. She wondered why those words meant as much to her as they did. She thought about their story, about all the things that she and Sunny had discussed that evening—both good and bad. Jada remembered the love she had shared with Born, and the pain of losing him, as if it were all recent. But at that moment, what consumed her was an overwhelming need to talk to him.

Jada fluffed up one of the seven pillows on her bed, and laid her head on it. She closed her eyes, and could see Born's face so clearly. She could see his lips vividly, lips she used to love to kiss, lips that had taken her to ecstasy countless times. Jada opened her eyes, hating herself for ever going back to where she swore she'd never go, back to the drugs and the crazy lifestyle, and leaving Born and all his love for her behind.

She picked up the phone and dialed the cell phone number quickly, before she could think better of it. She listened as the phone rang several times, and she tried to control herself, tried to calm down. After five rings, Jada got ready to hang up. But as she pulled the phone away from her face, she heard his voice.

"Hello?" Born sounded like he was asleep. She put the phone back to her ear and waited. "Hello?" he repeated, his voice husky, and so damn sexy after all these years.

Jada sat there in the silence of her bedroom, and realized that she had no idea what to say. She hung up without uttering a word, and she buried her face in the pillows. Damn! He still had a voice that melted her like butter. Jada's heart beat rapidly in her chest, and she hugged her pillow close to her. The man still had the power to make her weak.

Born woke up to the ringing of his cell phone. The caller ID read "Unknown Number," and he wondered who would be calling him this late from a private number. He couldn't sleep as it was, although he had been lying in the dark for about two hours. He got out of bed, and walked into his son's room. He saw Ethan sleeping peacefully, and he was content with that.

Born walked downstairs and sat on the couch in the dark. His eyes were completely adjusted to the moonlight glowing in the windows. He sat down, and once again, she was on his mind. Jada. He wondered if it was she who had called.

Born fell asleep on the sofa downstairs, sitting alone in the dark, thinking about the past. He dreamed that they were all together again: him, Jada, Dorian, and Sunny, all together in a car, driving to an unknown destination. In his dream, Dorian looked over at Born riding shotgun. The ladies were chattering as usual in the backseat. Dorian smiled at Born, and said, “I been in this game a long time, my nigga. You feel me? I’ve seen a lot of things, and met a lot of people, made a lot of connections. But you are the best friend I’ve ever had. You got what it takes to do everything I did, and then some. So remember this. You only get one shot, Born. You hear me? Just one shot.” He held up his index finger to illustrate his point.

In his dream, Born didn’t ask what Dorian meant, because in his heart, Born already knew. He meant that you only get one shot at life. And you damn sure better not waste it.

BURYING THE PAST

Jada woke up the next morning with the difficult task of her mother's wake looming ahead of her. The viewing of Edna Ford's body was to be held that evening at seven o'clock, and Sunny had agreed to watch Sheldon while Jada handled her daughterly obligations. Jada wanted to spare Sheldon at least one day of sadness and grief. He would attend his grandmother's funeral, but he didn't need to be present at her wake. The wake was still hours away. Jada sat at the breakfast table, amazed that Sunny had prepared French toast, eggs, and sausage all by herself.

"Girl, I didn't know you had it in ya!" Jada munched on the soft, sweet bread drenched in syrup. "You have never been domestic. When did you learn to cook?"

Mercedes and Sheldon smacked their lips as they devoured Sunny's breakfast. Sunny laughed, pleased that everyone was enjoying her cuisine. "I learned how to cook after Mercedes was born. Even though I have Jenny G., I still like to cook for her myself every now and then." Jennifer Gonzalez was Sunny's housekeeper. She came by every day, except Sundays, to clean up Sunny's spacious high-rise apartment, and to prepare meals for her and Mercedes. Sunny paid Jenny G. a very competitive wage, and in turn she got whatever she needed from the Dominican woman. She cooked, cleaned, ironed, ran errands, answered phones. Whatever Sunny wanted, Sunny got it, and Jenny G. was more than happy to do it. After all, she was an illegal immigrant who spoke little

English. Sunny spoke Spanish, thanks to her mother, and was happy to have her daughter exposed to a second language as well. In spite of her lack of credentials, Jenny G. was getting paid in full, and she knew well enough to shut the fuck up and jump whenever Sunny told her to. Jada had never guessed that Sunny knew how to cook. For Sunny, it wasn't that she didn't know *how* to do it. She just very seldom *wanted* to do it. "There's a lot that you don't know about me," Sunny said, winking at Jada.

Jada laughed. "Yeah right. I know everything there is to know about you, Sunny. I could write a book on your behind!"

Sunny smiled big at the thought of that. She nodded. "And it would be a bestseller!"

The women slapped each other five, and enjoyed their food. When the kids were done eating, they went to watch TV, and Sunny looked at her friend from across the table. Jada looked bewildered. "What?" she asked.

Sunny folded her arms across her chest, and sat back in her seat. "Last night, when we went to bed, I did a lot of thinking before I fell asleep. You should call Born. He's obviously thinking about you." She shoveled some food in her mouth, and looked at Jada expectantly.

Jada shrugged. "That's easier said than done," she said. "I mean, I would definitely like to talk to him. But what would I say? Where the hell do I even begin?" She shook her head. "I'll think about it."

She finished her breakfast and then went to get dressed. Jada put on a black Donna Karan pantsuit and went on her way to her mother's wake. She paused at the door, and looked at her watch. "Ava's supposed to meet me at the church before the wake begins. We'll finish talking when I get back," she said to Sunny as she kissed Sheldon good-bye. Jada headed down the driveway and got inside her SUV. Sunny shut the door and returned to the living room, while the children played in Sheldon's room.

Sunny sat on the sofa and looked at the photo albums stacked on Jada's coffee table. She picked one up, flipped through it, and saw a picture of Jada and her sister as children. They looked like two peas in a pod. She saw some other pictures that she assumed were pictures of family members whom Sunny didn't recognize. And then she saw it.

A picture of Born at the birthday party they'd thrown for him aboard the cruise ship was on a page all by itself. Born was smiling, his dimples prominent. She looked at the man standing beside Born with his arm flung over his young apprentice's shoulder. *Dorian*. He looked so happy, with his *sexy* smile gracing his brown face. The stars over New York Harbor twinkled in the background, and Dorian's eyes seemed to sparkle just as brightly.

Sunny sighed, and thought about how things had changed after her confrontation with Dorian that night. Born's party had taken place on the same night she had confronted Dorian about his infidelity, and he had confronted Sunny about her addiction. With Dorian's help, Sunny had cleaned herself up. Dorian had helped her every step of the way. She thought about how much she loved that man. How much she truly missed him. Sunny shed some long overdue tears, and she reminisced on the love they'd had. Damn, she missed him. Not a day went by that he didn't cross her mind. Sunny sat there alone, and cried for the love she'd been stripped of way too soon.

Meanwhile, Jada entered the church on Richmond Terrace, and smelled a sanctuary full of flowers that had been sent over to commemorate Edna Ford. Edna had been heavily involved in the church, and was a born-again Christian. Over the years, she had become a fixture at Sunday service, and at Wednesday night Bible study. And during the time that Jada had lived with Edna, she'd accompanied her mother to church every Sunday. The whole congregation had embraced Jada. And she had learned that you don't have to pray using big words, or a scripted monologue. You could speak to God from your heart, and he would still hear you, and still listen. Jada had prayed at

the altar countless times, holding her mother's hand. She'd prayed for strength to stay clean and sober, and she hadn't touched any drugs in eight years. She had prayed for a job so that she could support her son, and one of the members of the congregation had helped her get the job she now held at the magazine. She had prayed for forgiveness for all the things she'd done wrong in the past, and that she continued to do wrong. And she hoped that God had heard, and had answered that prayer as well. These days Jada no longer went to church every Sunday. Instead, her appearance at Sunday service was more like an event that took place quarterly. But she still prayed every day, and she was grateful that her mother had brought Jesus into her life. She sure did need Him now.

She saw the undertaker from Sanderson Funeral Home standing at the altar near Edna's casket, preparing the body for the viewing at that evening's wake. Jada's heart caught in her throat, as she realized *fully*, for the first time, that this was it. This was final—death. Her mother was gone forever, and she'd never get the chance to play cards with her or cook with her, or even to pray with her, again.

But that was her reason for being an hour early. The wake began at eleven o'clock and it was only ten. Jada needed some time alone with her mother. She allowed the undertaker a few minutes to complete his duties, and then she gingerly stepped closer to the coffin. Her mother lay there, her body thin and frail, and her hands folded across her belly. Jada looked at her mother's face, and she smiled. Her face was still as lovely as it had been when Jada was a little girl, staring at her mother in awe.

Her gaze fell again to the hands that told the true story. Her mother's hands, with wrinkles and veins looking as twisted as the journey Edna had taken through life. Edna's hands were folded across her stomach—over her womb. Jada thought of the irony of Edna's hands being clasped over her womb—the same womb that had held her and Ava. But in Jada's memory, the womb was the only time Edna had offered protection to her young daughters. Once they had emerged into the hard,

cold world, Edna had let them fend for themselves. But when she had needed her most, Edna had finally stepped up and given Jada the love and attention she had needed to clean up her act. Edna had saved not only her relationship with Jada, but also Jada's relationship with her son.

"Wow," she said, wiping the tear that had rolled down her right cheek. "I think you look lovely in that dress." Jada had chosen the cream-colored silk dress for her mother, thinking she would look pure and free. Looking down on her mother now, Jada thought she looked angelic.

"I don't even remember the last time I actually told you that I love you," she said, gently touching her mother's body. "But I do. I love you."

"She knows you do, Jada."

The voice came from behind her, and Jada spun around to face it. She smiled through her tears, as she saw her sister standing there. Ava looked amazing as usual. Her long hair still hung past her shoulders. She wore a tailored black suit, and her figure was flawless. Ava took off her Gucci shades and closed the distance between them, walking toward Jada. Jada wanted to jump for joy as she embraced her sister, still crying. When she hugged Ava, it felt the same way it had the night that they had cried together before Ava's suicide attempt. Once again, they were scared little girls from Brooklyn left to find their way together. Once again, they were yearning for their mother's protection, which would never be theirs again.

Their hug was so intense that they clung to each other, both of them needing their sister for strength. Ava finally pulled back and looked at Jada.

Jada smiled, but it quickly faded. "I don't know how I feel about this." Jada was being entirely honest. "I don't know if I feel more happy that she's not suffering through treatment anymore, or sad that she's gone." Jada wiped her eyes. Sadness and pain weighed heavily on Jada's heart. She looked silently at her mother's dead body and held tightly to her sister's hand.

Ava looked at her sister and said nothing for a few silent moments. Then she led her to the very first pew in the church nearest their mother's casket. She sat down, and Jada sat beside her, and they looked at each other.

Ava crossed her legs, and propped her elbow on the back of the cushioned bench. "Mommy loved you more than anyone else in this world," she said.

Jada shook her head in disbelief. She knew that Edna had cared for her, but surely Ava must have been her favorite. Ava had done everything right. She had never gotten addicted to any drugs, never been arrested. Ava was the "famous" attorney who Edna always bragged about when she was working on high-profile cases. Ava was well traveled, and wasn't weighed down by a relationship or kids. She was free, and living her life perfectly. Jada was just the black sheep of the family who had turned her life around in time and had managed to become a success after being a failure for so long. "I don't think that's true," Jada said.

Ava grinned. "I'm telling you, Jada. During the years that you weren't speaking to Mommy, me and her did a lot of talking. I would come back to New York to check on her, and to see if she was lonely, or if she needed anything. And every time I came to see her, she talked about you. She admired you so much, even when you were strung out. I have her personality. I'm reserved, and I play it safe, and all that. But Mommy said that you were more like Daddy. She said that he was never the type to back down from a fight. That he was fearless and bold and sometimes loud."

Both sisters laughed, knowing that Jada had been a hell-raiser in her youth. Ava continued. "But Mommy admired that about you. She said that you got all the strength that she never had. And she said that you were stubborn, and that was why you had such a hard time forgiving her. But when you went to live with her, she was the happiest I had ever seen her, Jada. She had you back, and she was so glad. She knew that you forgave her. Even if you never said it. Because actions always speak louder than words. She knew that she had your

forgiveness. And you should know that you had hers, too.” Ava looked at her sister, still beautiful after all the storms she’d weathered. “I used to be so jealous of you, Jada.”

Jada frowned, and looked at her sister in surprise. “Jealous of what? You lived your life way better than I did.”

Ava smiled. “Exactly. I felt like I had done it all the right way. And yet you still managed to get all the attention, all the time. You got the great guy. Born was so sweet, and so handsome. You had the cool girlfriend, and the fabulous wardrobe. The day I walked in on you getting high, you said that I was jealous, and wanted what you had. In a way that was true. And even Mommy longed for you. I always knew she loved me, and that she was glad that I forgave her. But she missed you. She was incomplete without you. She wanted your forgiveness so badly. And when she got it, she started living again. I was hating a little sumthin’.”

Jada smiled, amazed, because she’d never suspected that this was the case. “Well, you never showed it. I wouldn’t have guessed that. For so long I was jealous of you, too. But I think she loved both of us equally. She was probably just happy that I managed to clean up my life’s mess.”

The pastor entered the sanctuary, and cleared his throat. He saw the siblings in the midst of what had obviously been an emotional discussion, and he was sorry he had to interrupt.

“Ladies, it’s eleven A.M. now, and I see some cars pulling up. I just wanted to let you know, so that you can prepare yourselves for that.” Reverend Wilkins was a distinguished older man in his fifties. His salt-and-pepper hair was always styled to perfection, like Steve Harvey’s, and his suit was well fitted. He was a good man, with a virtuous wife and a devoted following. He smiled warmly at Edna’s daughters, and felt like he knew them well. Edna had spoken of them during her testimonies over the years. She’d shared with them the pain of having a daughter addicted to crack, and then the pride of having a daughter turn a horror story into a success story. He had prayed with Edna for Jada’s recovery, prayed that God

would loose the young lady from her shackles. And he hoped that Edna could see now that prayer really changes things.

The sisters thanked the pastor for his help, both of them shocked that an hour had passed so quickly. Jada turned to her sister, and felt the sorrow they both were cloaked in. She said, “I know I should have told her this more often when she was alive, but I loved her. I love you, too, Ava. I mean that.”

Ava smiled, big and beautiful. “I love you, too, Jada.” They hugged, and fixed their clothes in preparation for the process of greeting the well-wishers.

“Where are you staying while you’re in town?” Jada asked.

Ava shrugged. Jada nodded. “You’re staying with me.”

Ava smiled, took her sister’s hand, and they greeted the mourners who came to bid farewell to Edna Ford. It was the end of one chapter, and the beginning of one brand-new for them, as their sisterly bond was renewed.

When Jada arrived back at her house, with Ava in tow, Sunny was sitting on the couch with the kids, cracking up at an episode of *South Park*. Jada shook her head as she entered, and said, “You know damn well these kids don’t need to be watching this, right?”

Sunny turned around, and saw the two sisters. It was Sunny’s first time seeing Ava since 1996. She stood up, and hugged Jada’s sister, truly happy to see her after all the time that had passed. She stood back and looked at her, noting that her suit was Prada and her shoes Manolo Blahniks. Yes, Miss Ava had done alright for herself.

Ava smiled at Sunny, thrilled to see the woman she had always secretly looked up to. Ava liked Sunny’s outgoing nature and her bubbly personality. Sunny had a vivacious spirit that neither tragic loss nor addiction had been able to break. She was thirty-six years old, and she still looked twenty-one. She was a diva without trying to be.

“You *look fabulous*,” Ava told Sunny, looking at her outfit. Sunny was dressed in painted-on DKNY jeans, cuffed at the

calf, with a pair of Prada boots and a Prada blouse. Her diamonds gleamed in the light, from her ears, neck, wrists, and fingers. She looked brand-new.

Jada looked at Sunny, and frowned. “How did you change clothes?” she asked.

Sunny waved her hand, as if bothered by the question. “I called my driver, Raul, and he came to get me and the kids. We went to my place, and I packed some stuff for me and Mercedes. We’re gonna stay here until after the funeral. You know, just in case you fall out or some shit.”

Sunny said it so bluntly that Ava and Jada both cracked up laughing at her crass remarks. Sunny knew that she really wanted Jada’s company as much as Jada would probably need hers. Talking about Dorian after so many years had tugged at her tough heartstrings, and made her remember the love of her life in such detail that it almost scared her. She could still hear Dorian’s voice in her ears, still feel his breath on her neck as he woke up nestled beside her every morning.

Jada shook her head, and smiled, not at all surprised that Sunny would invite herself to stay at her place. Sunny had cunningly made it sound as if she was doing Jada a favor, but she knew that her friend needed her, too. Sunny wanted everyone to think she was made of steel, but she was fragile at her core, and Jada knew it.

“Well, Ava’s staying here, too, so it’ll be like old times.” Jada smiled.

Ava smiled, too, anxious to catch up with her sister. But first she hugged and kissed her nephew until he begged for mercy. Ava kissed him all over his handsome face, and hugged him tightly. She wanted children desperately, and envied Jada for having such an adorable son.

Soon the kids went off to play and to watch their shows on Nickelodeon and Disney. Jada and her sister changed into sweats and T-shirts and joined Sunny in the living room. They sat around with a bottle of Sunny’s finest white wine. It was a

vintage bottle of Moscato from some valley in the south of Chile. And it was delicious. Sunny, true to form, kicked off the night's discussion.

“Here’s a toast,” she said, raising her glass with her wrist perfectly poised, diamonds glistening. “To the women who weathered the storm. The men may not have made it to shore. Or if they did, they still have a lot to learn.” She looked at Jada. “But we’re still standing, and we’re still here to tell the story. To us!”

Ava nodded, and Jada smiled, as they clinked glasses like they had done once many years before. So much had changed, so many lessons had been learned. So many doors had been open and shut since the last time the three of them had sat together as they did now.

Ava looked at her sister. Jada was still lovely, despite her trials and tribulations and the rough roads she’d traveled. She had so many questions for her sister about what her life had been like. She had so many things to tell her sister about her own life, now that they were older and relating on a new level. But first, Ava addressed Sunny. “Sunny, I’m so sorry about Dorian. I know you two loved each other, and I know you miss him.”

Sunny looked at the floor. “Yeah. I thought about him a lot today, while y’all were at the wake. I think of him every day. Every time Mercedes smiles, and her eyes light up the way his did, I see him. I see his face in hers. I hear his laugh when she laughs. But I had forgotten what it was like to see him every day. To sleep beside him, and to walk into a room with him. I didn’t let myself think about that too often.” Sunny’s voice cracked, and she cleared her throat. “But today, I started thinking, and looking at old pictures, and I just miss him so much.”

The women sat silently for several poignant moments. Ava took a deep breath, feeling the gravity of Sunny and her daughter’s loss. They began to discuss the old days, particularly how everything had gone so wrong after Dorian’s

death. Jada laughed at some memories, and was moved to tears by others. And as they sat in her living room reliving the past, it was like a spring rain had washed over them, and they were cleansing old wounds. It was time for letting go.

TROUBLE SLEEPING

As Jada filled her sister in on all the details of her past, Sunny slipped upstairs and changed into her pajamas. Knowing that the sisters needed time to talk, she made sure that the children ate dinner, and then she rejoined the sisters in the living room.

Sunny came back, and listened as Jada was filling her sister in on the delivery she'd gotten from Born. Sunny had on a Victoria's Secret silk gown and matching robe, and Jada laughed at her friend, the diva. "Why are you dressed head to toe in silk, like there are men here to impress?"

Sunny smiled flirtatiously, and sang, "I'm feeling sexxxxxyyyyyyyyy," like Beyonce sang in "Naughty Girl."

Ava laughed, and shook her head. Sunny would never change. "Well, girl, there's nothing wrong with feeling sexy sometimes. Shit, I feel like that all the time."

Sunny slapped Ava a high five, and then sat down on the sofa beside Jada. She looked at Jada, and asked, "So, what did I miss?"

Jada shrugged. "Not too much. I was just about to tell Ava how I got the flowers from Born, and started reminiscing." She looked at Sunny, who was yawning and stretching, and obviously tired. Jada herself was exhausted. "I'm sure you're riveted by my life story, but I need to get some sleep. So do you, Ava. We have to bury our mother in the morning." Jada closed her eyes, partly from fatigue, and in part to picture Edna Ford's face one more time. It would be a bittersweet good-bye.

Jada was missing her mother, and the good times they'd managed to have after all their turmoil. But part of Jada was anxious for the closure her mother's death had brought her. It was time to let go of old pain, and old regret. Time to move forward and embrace what was yet to come.

Ava agreed, and stifled a yawn of her own. They found Sheldon and Mercedes already sleeping in his bed, and decided to leave them. Sunny insisted on sleeping on the couch, and Ava took the guest bedroom. Jada went to the sanctuary of her own room, and stretched out across the bed.

She lay back in the dark, thoughts swimming around in her head. She couldn't fall asleep, and she got sick of tossing and turning. She looked at the clock, which read 3:54 A.M. She wanted to call Born. But she questioned what she would say to him. She had so much to say, and wasn't sure where to begin. She wondered how she would start the conversation. But more than anything, she just needed to talk to him. She had to get some closure for once. Without second-guessing herself she reached for the phone. He answered on the fourth ring.

"Hello?" He sounded sleepy, just as before.

"Born?" she said. "It's Jada." Her heart was pounding at the sound of his voice.

She heard a loud thud, and then some commotion, before he came back on the line. "I'm sorry," he said. "I dropped the phone."

Jada laughed, silently. She knew that hearing from her must have been the last thing he expected. Especially at four o'clock in the morning. "I'm sorry I called so late," she said. "I should have waited until the morning—"

"Nah, Jada," Born said, getting out of bed and whispering, so as not to wake Anisa. He was glad that his fumbling the phone hadn't woken her up. He was in a state of shock, hearing Jada's familiar voice over the phone after so many years. He walked downstairs quietly and slipped into the kitchen to avoid being heard. "I'm glad you called me." His

face bore a smile so wide that his whole face lit up. “It’s good to hear your voice.”

Jada, too, was smiling. She hadn’t heard him speak her name in far too long. “Thank you for the flowers,” she said. “I was real surprised when I read the card. I didn’t expect to hear from you again.”

Born had almost forgotten the sad occurrence that had prompted him to contact Jada in the first place. He apologetically said, “I’m sorry, Jada. I’m sorry to hear about your moms dying.” Born knew how strained Jada’s relationship with her mother had been. There were many times over the years that he had sat and listened to her tell him story after story about her childhood, and about how her mother had let her down. Still, even with all their faults, Born knew that when one loses a parent, there’s a terrible emotional barrage that accompanies that loss.

“Thanks,” she said. “I’m dealing with it.” Jada switched the phone to her other ear. Jada’s voice was tinged with regret. “I wish I could have told her that I forgave her.” She sighed, thinking of her mother’s delicate face, her soft voice, and her calm demeanor. Jada had never wanted to be as soft, as weak as her mother. But after a day spent thinking back on her addiction, she realized that she had been just as weak, just as pathetic.

Born cleared his throat. “I know how that is. I had a lot of shit that I never got to say to my father before he died.”

Silence filled the conversation, as the two of them searched for what to say. So many days, months, and years had passed since their last conversation. So many things had taken place, and the two of them were so very different from the people they’d been when they were younger. But they were also still very much the same.

Jada searched for something to say, but it was Born who filled the silence. “I think about you all the time,” he said. He was being honest. “I really do. I know that the last time we

saw each other, it wasn't nothing nice. But I just want you to know that I still think about you. I think about you a lot."

Jada wanted to cry and smile at the same time. His words were such a comfort to her, and yet it hurt her so badly to know that he still cared for her after all she'd done. "Born, I'm sorry that I ever hurt you. I don't know what to say to explain why I did what I did." Jada paused, knowing that there *was* no excuse for what she'd done. Born had loved her enough to make up for all the love she'd never had. And that hadn't been enough to keep her from going back to drugs. She knew that she had let him down just as much as she'd let herself down. "All I can tell you is that I never meant to hurt you. I always loved you, and I'm so sorry for everything."

Born held the phone, with his *eyes* closed. Hearing her say those words, he felt her sincerity. He knew in his heart that she hadn't meant to cause him any pain. "I wanna see you," Born said before he realized it. "I need to see your face."

Jada held her breath, completely mesmerized by what he'd just said. She was still amazed at the fact that she was talking to her soul mate after so many years, and so many tears. "I want to see you, too. We've got so much catching up to do."

"Good, so let's meet somewhere tomorrow," Born suggested, wasting no time.

"I can't tomorrow. I'm burying my mother tomorrow. Ava's staying with me, and Sunny's here with her daughter. I got a house full of guests coming, and I can't slip away, even after the funeral."

"I understand."

"But what about the next day? Friday. Can't we see each other then?"

Born thought about Anisa's birthday plans. She was going away on Friday with Precious and Kiara to Atlantic City. He smiled at the perfect timing, and agreed. "Yeah. That's perfect. We can get together on Friday." He was glad that he'd allowed himself to be suckered into footing the entire bill after all. He

would be rid of Anisa for the weekend, and free to catch up with Jada, the one who still held the key to his heart. The situation was a win/win.

“Good. I can’t wait to see you.” She paused, summoning the courage to say what was on the tip of her tongue. She could feel her heart racing in her chest. “I miss you.” Jada’s voice sounded soft and unsure.

Born pictured her face, and wondered why he started smiling. “I miss you, too.”

They hung up after agreeing to meet at a new soul food restaurant on Forest Avenue that Friday. They both fell asleep with thoughts of each other running rampant in their minds.

The next day Jada and Ava set about the task of burying their mother. She didn’t mention to Sunny or to Ava that she had spoken to Born the previous night. She kept replaying their conversation in her head, as they headed to the church. Throughout the ceremony, Jada cried and Ava consoled her, and then they’d switch roles. Sunny sat with Sheldon and Mercedes, trying to keep them entertained in the somber setting. She played a game of hangman with them silently in the last pew of the church, while some of the older women in the congregation looked at her disapprovingly. One of the ushers whispered loudly enough for Sunny to hear that it was wrong to play games in God’s house. Sunny resisted the urge to give the Christian women the finger, and simply ignored them, while she continued playing with the kids. The service was beautiful, and when it was concluded, they all piled into the limousine for the journey to Edna’s burial site. Ava had her Gucci shades on to hide her *eyes*, bloodshot from crying all day. She turned to Jada and held her hand. “I want you to know that it wasn’t easy for me to forgive her either, Jada.”

Jada squeezed her sister’s hand. She had often wondered how Ava had been able to forgive Edna after all their mother’s emotional neglect had driven Ava to run away and to attempt suicide.

“I couldn’t forgive her at first, because I knew that she suspected J.D. was pushing up on me long before I told her that he was. Later on, after me and her started speaking again, she admitted that she was suspicious and that she was in denial. She said she wanted to keep us and keep J.D., and so she made herself see what she wanted to see rather than what was really going on. The picture-perfect family she wanted outsiders to see was really a twisted mess. She tried to hide it. That was her way of dealing with things at that time. Mommy never found the courage to fight until she found Jesus.” Ava wiped her eyes. “It took me a long time to forgive her for being so weak. So don’t think you’re the only one who wasted valuable time being angry. I did, too.”

Sunny handed Ava a tissue, and Jada rubbed her back to comfort her.

At the cemetery, the entire congregation seemed to be present, as they all circled Edna’s final resting place. Jada held Sunny’s hand, and Ava’s, and they prayed with the minister, who said a final prayer for the soul of Edna Ford. As soil was thrown upon Edna’s casket, the minister said that from dust they had all come, and to dust they would all return. Jada glanced around as Edna’s fellow parishioners gathered around her grave. She smiled, seeing that her mother had made such an impression on so many of the members of her church. It seemed like the entire congregation had come out for Edna’s funeral. Jada was happy that her mother had managed to find solace in her faith. She held Ava’s hand, as Ava cried softly with her head on her sister’s shoulder. As they headed back to the limousine for the ride to Jada’s house, Sunny put her arm around her best friend’s shoulder. “Your mother must have been so proud to see who you are now, Jada. You came a long way, and I’m proud of you.”

Jada smiled, and held Sunny around her waist as they walked back to the car. She nodded her head, too choked up to respond verbally. Because after all she had been through, Jada was proud of *herself*. They piled into the limo, and headed to Jada’s house to welcome the steady stream of well-wishers

that they knew would surely come. Some of Edna's friends would be there to show support, and to genuinely express their condolences.

Others would only be coming to see what was what. They had heard about Edna's two daughters—one who was a recovering crackhead, and the other, a successful attorney from Philly. They wanted to see what they looked like, and how Jada's house looked. For that reason, Jada began to straighten up the house, so that the nosy broads coming to snoop would have nothing but good things to run back and tell the rest.

Soon the guests began to arrive, and they all had stories about Edna. One after another, they regaled Jada and Ava with story after story about Edna's acts of kindness. How she'd volunteered at soup kitchens, and visited the sick as a member of the missionary board. The solo that Edna sang off-key whenever she got the chance. They all spoke of Edna's faith and devotion to the church. Jada and Ava were soon overwhelmed with hearing all the wonderful stories about their mother. Jada listened, happy that so many people had come to love her mother. She continued playing the perfect hostess, as guests milled about her house. But her mind soon drifted elsewhere.

All she could think about was Born's voice in her ear. He missed her.

He didn't hate her. He thought about her all the time. Jada went through the motions of entertaining her guests, and she counted down the hours until she could see the man she still loved once again. The hours ticked by so slowly, and she could hardly wait to see his face once again.

Born sat at the corner table in the back of the soul food restaurant, wondering why he felt strange sensations in his stomach. Could it be that Jada still made him feel this fire after all these years? Born was anxious to see her, but nervous at the same time. So much time had passed since the last time he'd been face-to-face with her. He sipped his drink, glancing

periodically at the entrance, waiting for the moment that she would walk through the door. She didn't make him wait very long.

Jada entered the restaurant, greeted all the regulars, and scanned the room for the love of her life. She felt a knot in her stomach from anticipation. It had been so long since she had last seen Born that she wondered how he had changed, what was different. She wondered if he would think she looked the same, or if she had aged. Would the few pounds she'd gained over the years be instantly recognized? These things she wondered about as her eyes subtly perused the scene.

Jada glanced down at her clothes, unsure. But she decided that the 7 For All Mankind jeans, salmon-colored top, and matching stiletto boots she wore were fine. She couldn't believe her hands were actually trembling from jitters. Born took it all in, noticing how sexy she still was. Her body was still exquisite; she looked even better than she had the last time he had seen her. He sat dumbfounded, in awe of her, and remembered the very first time he had laid eyes on her. Strutting down the street, with all that body and so many secrets. All the years of loving her came flooding back. Jada turned, and their eyes met across the room. She spotted Born at the table in the back, where she knew he had strategically placed himself to avoid being seen. Born had always been the type to lay in the cut, and avoid detection. She headed toward him smiling, her heart racing all the way. He still looked so good. His smile was so familiar, the way the corners of his eyes creased when he did so. His dimples, which Jada loved so much. Jada felt his eyes penetrating her, and she grabbed her snakeskin clutch tighter in the palm of her hands, and scanned his face as she walked toward him. She felt like time was standing still as she approached his table. Each one step felt like two.

Born stood to his feet, and Jada realized that she had forgotten just how powerful his presence was. He towered over her, fifteen pounds heavier than the last time they'd seen each other, but still so handsome, still so incredibly sexy. He

wore a button-up Rocawear shirt, matching jeans, and a pair of Uptowns. His icy chain, dripping in brilliant diamonds, hung low on his chest. She took all of him in, and he could see by the look on her face and the sparkle in her eyes that she liked what she saw. Her smile made his heart race. He pulled her close to him in a firm embrace that was so long and so meaningful that some of the other patrons turned and smiled at them, seeing that there was obviously love between these two. The years had passed, so much had changed, and yet his arms—these arms—felt so familiar. Jada lost herself in them briefly. For several moments, he held her. Then he pulled back ever so slightly and gazed into her eyes, seeing the tears that she was trying so hard to hold back.

“You’re still gorgeous. You know that?” he asked.

She smiled, shyly, getting butterflies after all this time. “Thank you.” Jada smiled, still holding on to him for dear life. She felt that if he let go she might not be able to stand on her shaky legs. “And you’re still the Ayes t nigga on Staten Island.”

Born smiled, and hugged her once more. Then he released her body’s familiar softness, and pulled Jada’s chair out for her. She sat down, and he sat across from her. Jada felt like she was sitting in the middle of a crowded room, and all she could see was Born. She knew that he saw her clearly. She felt transparent, and naked, like she had felt the first time they made love. This was the one person who knew her inside and out. And she knew him just as well.

Born sat there looking at her for several moments. No words were necessary, as they took in one another’s presence. He had seen her in his dreams countless times, pictured her face perfectly in his imagination. But seeing her now—in the flesh—brought him a joy that was unexplainable.

Jada broke the silence that lingered, saying simply, “Wow.” She looked at him staring back at her. “I can’t believe it took us this long to see each other again.”

He shook his head. “Me, either. Yo, I thought about what it would be like to see you today, and I never thought it would feel like this.”

Jada frowned, slightly. “Feel like what? How do you feel?”

He shrugged. “I can’t explain it. I feel so fuckin’ ... happy,” he said, grinning from ear to ear. “Man, if you only knew how fast my heart started beating when you walked in here!”

He looked at her pretty doelike eyes. He collected himself, and said, “I’m really sorry to hear about your mother.”

She thanked him, and Born looked at Jada. He saw her through new eyes as she sat there, so vulnerable still. He remembered when he’d hated that vulnerability, recalled that he’d seen that as a weakness. The same type of weakness his father had shown. They were one and the same in his mind all those years ago. But now he realized *how much* he had held Jada accountable for how Leo had let him down, and he was sorry for that. It wasn’t weakness he seen in Jada. It was tenderness, underneath all that tough talk. It was gentleness and vulnerability beneath the surface of her rough layers. What she had needed wasn’t tough love, but a love that would have helped her overcome any obstacle. Looking at Jada, he felt like he had let her down as much as she’d him. He could only imagine what depths she’d fallen to before climbing her way out and rising to the top of the heap. He was proud of her for being strong enough to pull herself up. For being stronger than his father had been.

Jada, on the other hand, stared at Born, realizing just where she’d gone wrong. This man before her was just a man. Nothing more. She had expected him to save her. To change her life and right all the wrongs she’d suffered. And for a while Born had done just that. But it wasn’t up to him to save her life. She’d had to do it for herself. Just like Miss Ingrid had told her. Jada understood how true that was now. She had had to fight her own demons, just as her mother had learned. Like Edna, Jada had wanted to relinquish control completely. She’d wanted Born to rush in and save her. Writing had become

more than a job for Jada. It was so therapeutic, and Jada had learned a lot about herself through her writing. She had realized that she had been longing for a father all her life. When she was angry with Edna as a teenager growing up, part of that anger stemmed from the absence of her father. Jada had never really grieved his loss. Instead, she'd mothered Edna back to life, and then gone in search of someone to take her father's place. Someone to fill the void of a daddy's love, which every girl needs so desperately. Born had become that father figure to her, and she had depended on him for everything. She had expected Born to rescue her from addiction. But instead he had left her to fend for herself, and for a long time Jada had been angry with him for that. Now she understood that Born was not to blame. She knew that it had been her fault that she'd sunk deeper into addiction and further away from herself. When Born left her, she still had herself. It took her far too long to realize that she was all she needed. Still, Born had left her *alone*, when he said he'd never do that. And as much as she loved this man—as much as she adored him and the memories they'd shared together—she somehow couldn't forget how easily he'd abandoned her.

“Born, I want to talk about what happened between me and you.”

He nodded, glad that there was no need for awkward small talk. Jada had dived right in. “Listen.” He paused, and took a deep breath. “There's some things I want to say to you about that.” He drained his glass, and felt his chest burn from the alcohol. Then he looked at her intently. “I was never good at trusting people. I don't usually allow people to get that close to me. But I thought we were friends. I thought we had honesty and love between us.” Born couldn't hide the pain in his eyes. “You lied to me. You stole from me, Jada. I never cheated on you. That was the first time in my life that I was faithful to any woman.” He looked at her, curiously. “Did you cheat on me?”

Jada shook her head. “No,” she said, truthfully. “I swear I never did.” And she was relieved to know that he hadn't

cheated on her either.

Born continued. "I was good to you, and I had so much love for you.

I tried to show you that. I accepted you and your past... all I ever asked was that you keep it real with me. I trusted you." He paused, and looked at her. "You broke my heart, baby girl. And I wanna know why you did that to me."

Jada felt so sick as she looked at him. She knew that she couldn't even begin to tell him how much she loved him. How many times over the years she had longed for him, and wished that he would come back and get her. Now that he was sitting right across from her, she had no idea where to start. So she was honest, and told him exactly what she was feeling.

"Born, you were the first man to ever love me for me. You knew what I was, and what I had been through. You knew all the mistakes I made, and all the shit I had done. And you still loved me, anyway. You never held my past against me. You made me feel accepted, and beautiful, safe and loved. And I blew it. I messed that up." Jada sighed deeply. "I fucked up. But I never stopped loving you, Born. Not for one second. You've always been my soul mate. I was just too stupid to see that your love should have been enough to keep me from going back to the drugs. But loving you was something I never stopped doing."

He was the person who had mattered most in her life. She knew that, even after all this time, she owed him an honest explanation. "I never wanted to lie to you. I loved the honesty in our relationship, too. In the beginning it was just me and you. And I was alright then. I was good, and I loved you so much. Then, when you and Dorian started working extra hard, and me and Sunny started spending more time together ... I got strung out, Born. I wouldn't admit it to myself, but I was twisted." Jada took a deep breath, and she explained how she'd taken her first trip across the white lines with Sunny in the men's room at his friend's party. "I came face-to-face with cocaine with no one around who would judge me, and I

couldn't walk away from it. I remember standing there staring at it, and knowing that I wanted it. I pushed the thought of you out of my mind. Told myself that I would only do it that one time. Just to make the party more enjoyable. And that night I felt so guilty. I hadn't lied to you or stolen from you yet. But I knew I'd let you down. After that, I would get high in order to escape the guilt of what I was doing behind your back. I know it sounds crazy, but it's the truth. I owe you the truth." Jada was raw and honest as she described the times she and Sunny had gotten high together, and how she'd resorted to stealing from Born once Sunny disappeared. She looked at Born lovingly. "I'm so sorry that I hurt you. It was the last thing I ever wanted. I wanted to be the woman you wanted me to be. I wanted to be the Jada that you fell in love with. But part of me enjoyed being the Jada that got high behind your back, and was the life of the party."

"So, Sunny got you caught up in all that? I didn't know she got high, or I never would have wanted you to be friends with her."

Jada shook her head. "I can't blame Sunny. I knew I shouldn't have done it. But I was having fun when I was high. When I was high, I was happy. I had money, I had love, I had friends, and life was a party. But when I wasn't high, I was ashamed, because I was a cokehead, and I had betrayed you. I was living a double life. But in the midst of all of that, I didn't ever want to cause you any pain. I loved you. I never wanted to hurt you, Born. I only wanted to be one thing to you, and another thing the rest of the time. I was selfish."

Born watched her talk, and listened to what she said. He saw so much growth in her. The fact that she was taking responsibility for her actions was impressive to him. She had been in denial for so long, it was a relief to hear her admit that she'd been wrong. He remembered the lies she used to tell, and was relieved to hear some honesty from her at last.

He thought back to the days when they had walked with their fingers laced at the mall. The days when they had put on their flyest shit, and gone to rap concerts or parties. He missed

this woman, his baby girl. And now that she was here, he could barely keep his hands to himself. He reached for her across the table, and she gave him her hand, willingly.

The waitress walked over, prepared to take their orders. Born ordered roasted chicken and mashed potatoes. Jada ordered the same. He smiled, remembering that she had always followed his lead. Except for the one time it mattered.

The waitress took their drink orders, and set out to retrieve them. Born continued stroking Jada's hand, and she looked into his eyes.

“Well, I have some questions, too,” she said. Born leaned back, and prepared himself for the inquisition. Jada needed answers of her own. “How could you leave me alone like that? And why couldn't you face me, instead of sending your mother to kick me out of our house?”

Born nodded his head, feeling that these were valid questions. “I reacted like that because I was hurt. I had a whole lotta faith in you, and I was so mad that you lied to me. You made a fool out of me. I just wanted you to go away from me.” He looked at her sincerely. “I could have really hurt you. I wanted you to feel the pain you made me feel. And the only way I knew how to do that was to physically hurt you. Deep down I really didn't want to do that. So, I just cut you off. I let my moms speak for me. Looking back on that, I can see that wasn't really a good look. But I didn't know how I would react to you if I saw you face-to-face.” He recalled gripping Jada's throat as he tossed her out of his life. He had known that he was angry, and powerful enough to snap her neck with his bare hands. All the love he'd had for her had been replaced by rage, and he was dangerously close to hurting her. “I think it would have ended a lot worse if I would have been there that day instead of my mother.” Born shook his head. “You made me give up on love. I'll never give another woman my heart. It hurts too bad when you trust somebody, and it turns out that they lied to you. My heart is off-limits.”

He ordered another drink, and decided to ask another question. “What happened to you after we broke up. How did you start fuckin’ with Jamari?”

Jada took a deep breath. She felt herself well up with emotion at the thought of the rocky road of her past. “When you left, Marquis—” Her voice trailed off.

Born wanted to prevent her from having to feel all that pain again. “I know it wasn’t easy.”

“Nah.” Jada sat back, shaking her head. “You have no idea. You cannot imagine what it was like for me. I had a hard time. You know what I’m saying?” She looked at Born directly. “It wasn’t easy for me to live without you. And I had a real hard time at first.”

Born noticed that she looked at him unflinchingly. Her gaze was steady. He remembered that she used to have a hard time maintaining eye contact with him. And he noticed that she had no problem looking him in his eyes now. She was direct, and the tone of her voice was firm. It seemed like she had waited a long time to get this off her chest, and he sensed that she needed to say this to him. Jada took a sip of her drink. Born listened as she told him her story.

“When you threw me away—when you let me go—I felt like nobody else was in my corner, like nobody else had my back. And it was all about me from that point on. I felt like all I had was me. I went through my phase of feeling sorry for myself, being depressed and all that.” Jada paused to sip her drink, remembering how she had kept her outer appearance flashy and classy, while on the inside she felt dirty and unwanted. “And, then I saw you and Anisa in the mall. You grabbed her, and walked away from me. Then I saw you at a party that night. You avoided me the whole night. I was crushed. So, I dealt with Jamari, knowing that for me it was all about his paper, never about any love on my part. I was playing him. I thought that I was in control. But he was playing me, too, because I was always high.” Her eyelashes fluttered daintily, as she blinked away the memory. “And he

knew what I was doing. He would give me the shit, buy it for me. He had me right where he wanted me, and he knew it.”

Born frowned, disturbed by what he was hearing. “You’re telling me that he *gave* you crack, and he knew you were smoking?” His facial expression was one of pure amazement.

Jada nodded. “He did. The first time he gave me drugs was when he told me how you put me down when you and him argued in the barbershop.”

“I didn’t put you down. If anything, I gave you a compliment.” Born chuckled at the memory. “The nigga was in there talking shit about how he was with you now, and I wasn’t. So I just said, ‘Yeah, she got some good pussy, don’t she?’ I didn’t put you down.”

Jada set her glass back down. “That’s not all you said.”

Born looked her in her eyes. “Yes, it is.” He shook his head, already assuming that Jamari had told her something far worse. “What did he tell you I said?”

Jada shook her head, feeling played once again. “He said you told them about how I sucked your dick—”

“*What?*” Born’s face was twisted in disbelief. “That nigga was lying. I ain’t never said no bullshit like that about you.”

Jada shook her head. “Well, he said that you were saying some pretty foul shit. And then he gave me crack, and told me that I could smoke if I wanted to. That he wouldn’t judge me, like you did.”

Born laughed, uneasily. “Well, he didn’t love you then. If he cared about you like I did, he wouldn’t have ever let you do that in front of him.”

Jada nodded. “Eventually, I saw that. I realized that he was just too willing to accept my addiction, and it seemed like to him it was no problem. The only time me and him had a problem was when your name came up. At first I thought that he didn’t like you just because you were my ex. But then he told me about you. He told me how he betrayed you, and how

you cut him off. He said some really fucked up things about you. And I never saw him the same way after that.” She paused, wondering if she should reveal what else Jamari had said.

Born sensed her hesitation. “What?” he asked. “What else did he say?”

Jada sat back, and looked at Born. “He said you were his half brother.”

Born nearly spit out his drink. “Whose half brother?”

“He said that you were his half brother,” Jada confirmed. “He told me that Leo was messing around with his mother behind Miss Ingrid’s back. They both used crack, so Jamari said they were getting high together, and doing their thing on the low. Anyway, his moms told him that your father was also his father. But apparently Leo denied him, and raised you instead. Jamari had resented you ever since his mother told him that. He was jealous that you had your father there all your life and he never had that.”

Born sat staring at Jada for a long time. “That nigga really was crazy!” Born shook his head, and laughed uneasily. “He *wished* we had the same father.”

Jada shrugged her shoulders. “Well, he really believed that, and he was so jealous that Leo was there for you and not for him.”

Born got lost in thought for several moments, trying to think of whether this scenario was at all possible, or likely. But he quickly brushed it off, thinking to himself that Jamari was just delusional.

Jada continued. “When he told me that, I started to see things clearly. I realized that he didn’t care about me. It was all about getting back at you. I could tell that he was just using me to make you mad, and I felt like such an idiot. But by then, I was already pregnant.” She paused, and sipped her drink. “I was so mad at that nigga for playing me, and mad at myself for not seeing it from the beginning. So I figured out a way to

get revenge—for me, and for you. I stole his package, and I sold it and kept the money.” Jada looked at Born to see if he looked confused. He didn’t. Born knew all about the heist that she had pulled off. His friend Chance had told Born about it when he came home from prison. Plus, his own mother had held the money for Jada until she came back to claim it. Jada wasn’t the least bit surprised that he knew either. Born was always a step ahead of everybody else. He knew about every card game, every dice game, every number runner, every loan shark, and all the angles to get money in the streets. So it didn’t surprise Jada at all that he didn’t flinch as she continued her story.

“He was heated. Elliot—his connect—wanted to kill him and Wizz, and I was on the run. I didn’t know if Elliot might want to kill me, too. I took the money, and got the hell out of dodge. I went back to Brooklyn, and I was getting high again. Then I got arrested, trying to buy crack.” She shook her head, still disturbed by the fact that she had fallen so far down that she had been getting high while she was pregnant with her beloved only child. “I went to jail, and that’s where I had Sheldon. Jamari waited until after I gave birth, and then he snatched him from me. He took custody, and painted me as a horrible person. I guess I was, but I needed *help*. I didn’t need to have my lifeline taken away from me.” Jada felt that Born had also taken her lifeline away once. But Jamari was the one who had tried desperately to break her spirit. “He took my son when Sheldon was all I had to live for. He kept him from me for the whole time that I was locked up. The nigga dragged my name through the mud, and all that. He made me regret the fact that I got pregnant.” She saw the expression on Born’s face change, and she clarified her statement. “I don’t regret it now. But back then I did. I was so mad, because if I had known the whole story, I never would have gotten in so deep with him.”

Born understood what she meant, and he hated Jamari even more for putting Jada through so much hell. He felt better hearing that Jada had had no clue about Jamari’s beef with

Born before she got involved with him. He just wished that she hadn't gotten involved with him at all. "So how did you get your son back?" Born looked incredibly moved by her story. He loved and adored his son like no one else. To be deprived of being a part of Ethan's life would have killed Born. He empathized with her situation, wondering how a nigga like Jamari could be so cruel. Then he realized that he, too, had once been just as cruel to Jada.

"It wasn't easy," she said. "I had to fight to get him back. Jamari told them that I was using crack during my pregnancy, but he didn't tell him that he was the one giving it to me! When I mentioned that in court, he called me a liar. He was the worst." Jada paused. "It wasn't that I didn't realize that I had done wrong. Using crack while I was pregnant was like putting a loaded gun to my baby's head, and I realized that. I knew that I was wrong for that. But I was sick, and Jamari took no responsibility for his role in my addiction. He had never once tried to help me. All he wanted was to control me. Sunny kept me from losing my mind, because she told me that if I crumbled, if I gave up, then Jamari had won. I didn't want him to win, but he was making it so hard for me to fight. But I got back on my feet one step at a time. I stayed clean, got an apartment, and I started with supervised visitation. The social worker sat and watched how I talked to my son, how I played with him, what my home looked like, how much food was in the fridge, and all that. Then I got unsupervised visits. A social worker would go and pick Sheldon up from Jamari and bring him to my house. I was so glad that they assigned us a go-between. I couldn't stand the sight of Jamari, and I didn't want to have to see him every time I wanted to see my son. And then somebody killed the muthafucka." Her voice was flat as she said this, and both she and Born knew that that had been one of the best days of her life. "I guess he got what his hand called for." She sipped her drink again.

Born watched her closely. He was looking for a sign that Jada was leaving out part of the story. "You went to see my moms the day that Jamari got killed." Born watched the

surprise on Jada's face emerge, and then quickly disappear. Jada hadn't thought Ingrid had told Born about that visit. Ingrid had surely not missed the coincidence in the fact that Jamari was killed within minutes of Jada's departure from her apartment.

"Yeah. I did." Jada said it, but didn't elaborate.

Born smirked. "Did you do it?"

Jada looked away, and wanted to tell Born the truth. But that would mean incriminating her friend. And even though she trusted Born not to tell another soul, Jada couldn't risk getting Sunny implicated in Jamari's murder. There was no statute of limitations on homicide. "Nah," she said. "I didn't kill him. But I was glad that somebody did."

Born nodded, and took another swig of his drink. "So you and Sunny gonna take that shit to your graves, huh?" He asked the question, and smiled. Then he sat back in his seat.

Jada looked at him, not blinking for several moments. She didn't know how Born had figured out the truth. But she sure wasn't going to elaborate. "Me and Sunny will take a lot of things to our graves. Death before dishonor, you know what I'm saying?"

Born nodded again. He had taught her well. What Jada didn't know was that Ingrid had watched the entire episode play out from her apartment window. She had seen Jada and Jamari arguing and she was preparing to go out there and help. Then she had seen a very attractive and well-dressed woman come to Jada's aid. Ingrid saw the exchange between the three of them, and saw Jamari get shot and the two women make their escape. It didn't take Born very long to surmise that Sunny had been the woman Ingrid had seen. He smiled, knowing all that Jada wasn't saying.

Jada directed the conversation to safer territory. "If it wasn't for Sunny and her mother, Marisol, I don't know if I would have made it through all that. Sunny helped me out a whole lot. She took pictures of Sheldon, and brought them to me. She

was my only hope for a long time. For that, I will always be grateful to Sunny. For real.” She sighed. “I got my GED, and I petitioned for sole custody of my son. But they gave me a hard time about it. I had to live with my mother in order for me to have Sheldon with me. They wanted to be sure that he was living in a stable environment, and I had been unstable for so long. So I lived with her until they said that I could raise him on my own.”

Born nodded. “So that must have been awkward at first. You and her living under the same roof after all those years of not even speaking to each other. What was that like?”

Jada shook her head. “At first, it was real tense. I wouldn’t talk to her. I thought she was wrong for shutting me out. But I realized that she was angry with me, too, and she had every right to be. So once we finally started talking, we both got to say some things that needed to be said. We got to reconnect as a family. And I’m grateful that we got the chance to do that before she died. I’m glad she got a chance to see that I turned my life around.”

Born looked at her, truly proud of what she’d done for herself. “So, do you ever get tempted to use drugs now?”

Jada looked at him, knowing that he wondered if she was clean for good this time. “No. I don’t get tempted at all. When I think of all the things I did to get high, and to stay high ... I would never put myself or my child through that again. Sheldon is all the reason I need not to ever go back to that life again. I love him too much for that. When I look at him, I don’t see his father. I see my baby, *my* son. I was so far gone that I put his life in jeopardy. I owe him my very best for the rest of his life. I don’t want to let him down like I did in the beginning. He’s my everything.” She felt herself getting a little misty-eyed, and she looked away briefly before continuing. “I never want to be without him again.” Jada told Born about her mother helping out with Sheldon while she got her life together. “I went to college, and graduated with a degree in journalism. Me and Sunny are collaborating on a book now. I think it’ll be a bestseller.”

Born smiled. “I bet it will.”

Jada smiled, too. “I’m living a very different life than the one I once lived. I’m not gonna fuck it up again.”

Born listened quietly, soaking all of it up. His mind was like a sponge, absorbing each detail. He had known that Jamari had taken custody of Jada’s son. But he had not known the lengths to which Jamari had gone to ensure that Jada was humiliated every step of the way. Knowing her story—knowing that Jada had been subjected to humiliation at the hands of men for most of her life—he felt sick to his stomach with pity. He was mad at himself for all the pain he had caused Jada. He was also somewhat mad at *her* for falling prey to a nigga as corny as Jamari. He hated Jamari for taking her child away from her, because Born knew that Jada—like him—needed her child to survive. Born felt that Jamari had taken advantage of Jada’s weakness, and had used it to feel powerful for the first time in his life. His rage was evident on his face, and Jada spoke on it.

“Cat got your tongue?” She sat back, drained her glass, and looked at Born dead-on. She smiled at him, looking relaxed from the effects of the rum.

Born recalled saying that same thing to her so many times over the course of their relationship. He used to always use the phrase when an awkward silence fell between them, because he knew that Jada would be far off in her mind, deep in thought. Hearing her say that now—“Cat got your tongue?”—it made him smile inside.

Jada read him perfectly. “I remember,” she said. “I remember everything.” She stared at him, wondering about Anisa. “Earlier you said your heart is off-limits because of how I hurt you. So how is it that you have a son with the woman who took my place?”

Born grinned a little, flattered that she was still jealous after all this time. “Nobody ever took your place. That’s first of all. And Anisa never even came close. She just got pregnant.” He loved Ethan with all his heart, and took the role of fatherhood very seriously. Born had always felt like his own father had

disappeared when he needed him the most. He was determined not to disappear from Ethan's life, despite the fact that his relationship with Anisa was basically over. "Anisa takes pretty good care of him. But, even though she may not have been the woman I *wanted* to have my child ..." Born looked at her suggestively. "I'm glad she had him for me, because he made me want to turn my life around."

"How is he? Is he bad, or is he a good kid?" she asked, wishing all the while that he was her child.

Born noticed the sadness in her eyes as she asked the question. "He's good. Ethan really has a lot of my ways, a lot of my habits. He's something else." Born smiled, thinking of his boy. "How is Sheldon doing? He's healthy and all that?"

"He's great." Jada, too, smiled. "He's so beautiful, and so smart. He has such a crush on Sunny that it's ridiculous." She laughed.

Born laughed, as well. He could see how a little boy would have a crush on Sunny. She always dressed sexy, and D.J. had told Born about his "funny feelings" whenever Sunny came around. Sunny had remained a part of D.J.'s life after Dorian's death. When he and D.J. got together, he often told Born about his visits with Sunny and his little half sister, Mercedes. But Born hadn't had the pleasure of crossing paths with Sunny in years. "Good ole Sunny! How is she? She still the same live wire she always was?"

Jada nodded, as their second round of drinks arrived, a rum and Coke for her, Hennessy straight for him. "She'll never change too much. Having Mercedes calmed her down, but Sunny still has the same loud mouth she always had. But I love her to death. She helped me out a lot with Sheldon when I was in trouble."

Born smiled. He cleared his throat, and tried to sort through all the things they'd discussed. "What do you tell your son about his father? Does he ask you about him?"

Jada nodded. “Yeah, he does, sometimes. Like any kid, he wants to know what his father looked like, and why he’s not around anymore. Of course he was too young to remember Jamari, because he died when Sheldon was a toddler. I just try not to talk shit about him around my son. That’s not easy to do, because I still have hate in my heart for him. I just tell Sheldon that his father loved him very much. But he wasn’t living his life right, and he died young. That’s all I can tell him right now. Someday, when he’s older, I plan to tell Sheldon the whole story. I know it won’t be easy. But I’d rather him hear it from me than from anybody else.” Jada often worried about the day that she would have to explain her past to Sheldon. She and Sunny went about raising their children, and Sheldon and Mercedes didn’t know about the past that both their mothers kept secret. Sunny often joked that one day she’d tell her daughter the story of her life, and poor little Mercedes would never be the same. Jada, however, dreaded the inevitable day when she would have to reveal to her son that she’d once been a crackhead. But she took comfort in one simple fact: She wasn’t a crackhead anymore. And she never would be again.

“You know, I named him after the only two men I’ve ever loved in my life. My father, and you.”

Born put his drink down, and looked at her. “Are you serious?” Born looked at her as if he wasn’t sure if he should take her seriously. He was flattered, though, and he smiled, once more revealing those beautiful dimples Jada loved so much.

Jada nodded. “Yup. His name is Sheldon Marquis.”

“Wow,” was all Born could think to say in response. But he couldn’t stop smiling. He knew that must have made Jamari sick!

Finally, their food came. Born, as usual, bowed his head, and prayed. Jada prayed, too. “That’s the first time I’ve ever seen you pray, Jada. You born again now, or something?” He asked this as he poured salt on his mashed potatoes.

She looked at him, and spread butter on her potatoes. “I pray every day. I used to go to church with my mother back when I lived with her. She was really into church, and all that, and I guess some of it rubbed off. I know that I wouldn’t have been able to get clean and stay clean if it wasn’t for God. He’s important in my life, but I wouldn’t say that I’m born again. I don’t wanna lie like that. I don’t want to pretend to be so devout, and then do dirt when the prayer is finished ... like some people.” Jada winked at him, suggestively, and shoved a forkful of chicken in her mouth.

Born laughed, loudly. “Wow!” he said. “I forgot that you got all that mouth. You really do know how to put a nigga in his place.”

She smiled. “I was only speaking hypothetically,” she lied. “I wasn’t talking about you in particular.”

True to form, Born filled his mouth to twice its capacity, and proceeded to chew with his mouth half open. Jada frowned in disgust, and he seemed pleased by this, smiling as he chewed.

“I missed your old stankin’ ass,” he said.

Jada laughed. “I missed your old stankin’ ass, too.”

Born drank some water. “So, tell me this. I know you told me you got your degree, you’re writing a book, you bought a house, and all that. So you got a man?”

Jada nodded. “Yup. His name is Sheldon. My son is my man, and I’m totally committed to him.”

Born smiled. “I hear that.”

Jada laughed. They shared their meal, and some small talk about the other aspects of their lives from the time they’d been apart. And they began to reconstruct the friendship they had once had, before disappointment got in the way. Born told Jada about how he’d been arrested and incarcerated. He told her about the time he’d spent in solitary confinement, rethinking the direction of his life. He explained that he had gotten out of prison, and opened a sneaker store, then bought a

barbershop. How he'd continued doing business with Dorian's crew until it became apparent that D.J. had a gift that couldn't be ignored. He told Jada about his new role as D.J.'s manager, and about how that had been enough to finally get him out of the drug game.

Jada smiled. "You're the perfect manager for him."

Born smiled, too. "Yeah, I got love for the kid. I won't let nobody take advantage of him, or exploit him. I feel like I owe it to Dorian." He looked at Jada, knowing that she had witnessed him mourning the loss of his boy. Jada knew his history. She had held him when he got weak enough to cry over the loss of his friend, and she didn't need any further explanation. Born was glad to be sitting there with Jada, enjoying a meal and making amends. He was amazed at how mainstream their lives had turned out, with him working in the entertainment industry and Jada having a career of her own. It seemed that they had both learned from their mistakes, and made the best out of bad situations.

By the time they finished eating, they had fallen back into their old ways—somewhat. Their conversation had turned to the good old days. They reminisced on the times they had shared when they had been happy, and such a good team. They laughed at old jokes and recalled things that had been special to both of them. Jada realized how much she had missed him, and their love. She enjoyed watching the way he moved, the way he talked, his voice, and his laughter. And as they ordered another round of drinks, Born found himself wishing that things had turned out differently between them. No one had ever made him feel the way Jada had. He had never loved a woman as completely as he had loved her. Seeing her now reminded him why he had loved her so much.

Jada stared at him, wishing they had never parted. She had one more bone to pick with him, though. "When you threw me out, it seemed like you had Anisa waiting in the wings to take my spot. Are you sure you never cheated on me with her?"

Born frowned. "I never cheated on you, Jada. I was faithful to you always." He saw the skeptical look on her face, and got defensive. "Is that what you thought? That I cheated on you?" He shook his head. "I never played you. Never."

"Well, shit! You started seeing her damn near the day after me and you broke up." The contempt was so evident in Jada's voice as she spoke. In her mind, she thought, *You didn't even wait!*

Born sensed her disdain, and he looked at her dead-on. "I know you're mad at me for that."

Jada started to deny it, but it would have been pointless. "You gave it *all* to her, Born. Everything that used to be mine. She got your attention, your lifestyle, your friends, your son." Jada fumed inside. "I hated her. I hated you. You would see me, and you just walked on by like I was a stranger. Like I was never your girl, and we were never in love. You kicked me out of that house, and out of your life. All our mutual friends became your friends and her friends. I was on the outside looking in. And I thought you were being so cruel. It took me a long time to stop feeling like that. I had to understand that you just moved on."

Born heard the pain in her voice. "I was hurt, Jada. You made a fool out of me. Niggas in the street were coming to me, and telling me that they saw you high, that they saw you embarrassing yourself. I felt betrayed. And I guess Anisa helped me forget about the hurt I was feeling." Born stared at her intently. "I never loved her the way I love you," he said. "Anisa looks good, she gets attention. But she's not you. She doesn't move me anymore. It's been a long time since I can honestly say I felt any type of love for her."

"Do you still feel love for me?" Jada surprised herself that she'd asked the question.

Born was also surprised. He thought about the years without her in his life. He realized how much he missed her input, her smile, her voice. He wondered if she had any idea how difficult it had been for him to walk away from her all those

years ago; wondered if she knew how hard it had been for him not to call her or go after her. He had watched her blossom from a young lady to a woman over so many years. And leaving her behind had been no easy task. Looking at her now, all grown up and standing on her own two feet, he was so proud of her. Jada had been his ride or die chick. And sitting with her in the back of that soul food joint, he realized that she still held his heart after all these years. Their love had been a fairy tale, only their story's ending had had a sordid twist. "Yeah. I still love you a whole lot."

Jada smiled, glad to know that Born still had a genuine love for her; glad to know that her feelings hadn't been hers alone. "I still love you, too." She blushed slightly, feeling vulnerable. "Do you forgive me, Born?"

He nodded. "Yeah. I forgive you," he said. "Do you forgive me?"

Jada smiled. "Yes. I do."

Born reached for her hand, and kissed it. Both of their hearts were comforted being in one another's presence after so long. They finished their drinks, and Born paid the check. Yet the two of them sat there, not moving, neither of them wanting to end the evening. Finally, Jada reached for her purse, and slid her chair back. "Thanks for a lovely meal," she said, half jokingly. Things had never been that formal between them. She smiled. "I have to admit that I don't want to go right now ___"

"So don't." Born smiled back at her. He wanted nothing more than to kiss her, but he held back. He couldn't believe that he was with Jada after all these years. Yet, despite the affection he felt toward her, there was still a wedge between them of pain and disappointment.

She was thinking the same thing. So many years ago, this man had made the kind of love to her that makes you want to kick up your leg like one of the Rockettes. She remembered how she literally had felt every nerve in her body respond to Born's touch. He had loved her perfectly, once upon a time.

Jada shook her head, trying to break free of the memory. “I have to,” she said. “If I don’t leave now, I probably never will.” Jada stood up, and Born followed suit.

Jada stepped around her chair, and walked closer to Born. She wrapped her arms around his neck, and pulled him into a firm embrace. He hugged her back, and held on tightly. “You can call me, and I plan to call you, too. I’m glad we’re on good terms now, Marquis.” He smiled at her calling him by his government name. “I missed you,” she said.

Born got a little choked up, but kept his game face on. “Yo, I missed you, too. A whole lot.” He hugged her tightly, grabbed her by the hand, and led her out of the restaurant. They said good-bye to the friendly restaurant staff, and walked out hand in hand. Jada showed Born where she’d parked her car, and he walked her toward her silver Buick Rendezvous. He complimented her on her taste in SUVs, and then they stood awkwardly beside her truck.

“Jada, I want you to know that I wish I would have reacted differently when I walked away from you. I wish I had been strong enough to help you through it. I didn’t know how to handle that. But now I know that if I really loved you, I should have tried to help you. I didn’t have it in me to help you, so I shut you down. I’m sorry, baby girl.” He moved closer to her face, and caressed her cheek with his hand. “I’m so sorry.”

Jada tried to control her runaway heartbeat. She felt flutters in her gut, as she felt his warm breath on her face. Then he kissed her gently, and she let go, kissing him back fully. His tongue tasted sweet in her mouth, and she kissed him with an intensity that surprised both of them. Their kiss lasted several moments, and not once did they stop to think about their public display of affection.

Born didn’t care who saw them. In his arms he held the love of his life. Whoever didn’t like it would just have to kiss his ass. When he pulled himself away from her, he kissed her once more gently on her lips. Then he looked at her, his expression full of regret, and full of love, even after all this time.

Jada's eyes were tear filled, and she looked away in order to blink back the waterfalls. She laughed uneasily, and said, "I need to go." She took her keys out of her purse, and looked at Born. "I'll call you," she said. Born watched her climb inside her truck, and she rolled down the window to talk to him.

"Think about this," he said. "This don't have to be the end of our story. It might be the start of a whole new chapter. We said we'd always be friends, right?"

Jada nodded.

Born smiled at her. "Well, if you ever need a friend, holla at your boy." She smiled, as Born walked away backward. He winked at her. Then he put his hands in the pockets of his jeans, turned around, and walked away. Jada sat watching his familiar stride as he walked. She put her key in the ignition, and started to drive away. But she couldn't help feeling like her heart was breaking all over again. She called out his name, and Born stopped walking and turned back to her.

"Why don't you come by my house? I think Sunny would be really happy to see you."

He nodded, grinning that same irresistible grin he always had. "I'll follow you," he called out. Jada smiled, and waited for him to pull his car up behind her, so that they could drive to her place. She wanted to jump for joy, but she contained her enthusiasm as they headed for her house.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Born followed Jada inside her house, and they were immediately greeted by two kids. Sheldon and Mercedes ran to Jada, and hugged her. Born looked at the two happy children and smiled. Sheldon looked so much like Jada that it was obvious to him that this was her son. She introduced them, anyway.

“Sheldon, this is my friend Born.” Sheldon shook Born’s hand, and Born smiled at him.

“Wassup, little man?”

“Wassup?” Sheldon responded.

Born noted how handsome Jada’s son was. He turned his attention to the pretty little girl standing next to Sheldon, and Born had to fight the urge to cry.

Jada pointed to Mercedes. “This is—”

“I know who she is,” Born said softly. “She looks just like her father.” He looked at Mercedes, and saw Dorian’s features all in the beautiful girl’s face. She had Sunny’s long brown hair, and her light complexion. But everything else was Dorian. Born felt the guilt he still couldn’t shake after all these years pounding in his heart. “Hi, Mercedes.”

Mercedes smiled at the tall man who was smiling at her. “Hello. Are you Aunt Jada’s boyfriend?”

Born laughed, and Jada wanted to die from embarrassment. “I used to be Aunt Jada’s boyfriend,” Born explained. “But

now I'm just her friend." He smiled. "And I can see you got your mother's outgoing personality!"

"Ya damn right, she did!" Sunny stood behind Born with her hands on her hips. He turned around, and saw her standing behind him with a smile plastered across her lovely face. She opened her arms to him, and said, "Wassup, baby?"

Born hugged Sunny for a long, long time. Seeing her and Mercedes made Born feel so good and so bad at the same time. He felt happy to see Sunny, who still looked like the star she had always been. He was also happy to see her daughter for the first time. But seeing the two of them also brought back the feeling that he had let his friend down, and cost him his life. And that made him want to cry.

Sunny smiled at Born. "Now you're the last person I expected Jada to bring home." She looked at Jada, curiously. "Where the hell did you find him?"

Jada smiled back. "I called him. We met for lunch, and I invited him back here."

Sunny nodded, and was glad that Jada had taken her advice and called him. She looked at Born, still smiling. "Well, I'm sure your ears have been ringing 'cause we've been talking about you for days!"

Jada frowned at Sunny, not wanting Born to know that he had been the topic of so much of their conversation over the past couple of days. Born frowned, too. "What were y'all talking about?"

Just in the nick of time, Ava emerged from the kitchen and saw Born standing in the foyer. "Oh, my God!" she exclaimed. "Hey, Born. What's up?"

Born smiled back at Ava, as she came over and hugged him. She still looked good, and Born recalled the day he'd seen her naked. He was glad now that he hadn't violated Jada's trust by sleeping with her younger sister; otherwise this reunion would have been very uncomfortable. She smiled at him. "When did you get here?"

“Just now,” he said. Jada ushered Sheldon and Mercedes back to their room so that the grown folks—particularly Sunny—could talk freely. She came back, and ushered everyone into the living room, and then gave Born a tour of her home. He was amazed at how well Jada had done for herself. He was proud of her for spending the money she had taken from Jamari to put a down payment on this house. It seemed that Jada had turned a major corner in her life, and Born was happy for her. He commended her for having the courage to turn her life around, and they prepared to head back downstairs.

Born stopped Jada at the top of the stairs. “I wanna say something to you before we go back down there.”

Jada looked at him, wondering what was on his mind.

“I’m so proud of you,” he said. “You did all this by yourself. You stayed focused, and you did what you had to do. And look at you now. I know I ain’t no one special, or whatever. But I just wanted to say that I’m proud of you, and I really admire you for being strong enough to do all of this on your own.”

Jada smiled, truly thrilled that he had noticed how extraordinary her accomplishments were. It had been no easy task for her to stay off drugs, to fight for her son, to go back to college, and to buy a home for her family. She knew that it was her own strength, and God’s grace, that had gotten her through it all. But she also knew that there was one other contributing factor. “I had a good teacher,” she said. “You taught me how to be a survivor, and how to fight my way to the top. I owe you so much for all the things you taught me.”

Born shook his head. “You don’t owe me nothing. In fact, I’m the one who owes you. I know I can’t make up for walking away and leaving you by yourself. But if there’s ever something I can do to help you in any way, Jada, I’m here.”

Jada looked around for Sheldon or Mercedes. Satisfied that the coast was clear, she leaned in and kissed Born softly. His lips were so perfect, as if they were made to kiss hers. She stood with her face only inches from his. Then she took him

by the hand, and they headed back downstairs to the rest of the crew.

They spent a long night catching up on each other's lives. Sunny smiled, watching Jada and Born together again, laughing and talking. She thought about how her conversation with Jada had started, when she'd first gotten the flowers from Born. Jada had told Sunny that Born was the love of her life, and Sunny's reaction had been negative. She had wondered how Jada could feel love toward a man who had tossed her out on the street with no one to turn to. Sunny had seen the depths to which Jada had fallen, and she couldn't understand how Jada could come out of that situation feeling anything but anger toward Born. But as she sat and watched the two of them that night, laughing and smiling at each other, or catching each other's gaze as they talked, Sunny understood. Their love reminded her of the love she'd shared with Dorian. It was something unique, that she knew she would never have again with any other man. Sunny dated. She had several wealthy and successful suitors who would give her the world. But Sunny's world had been Dorian, and no one could bring him back. She didn't want to ever fall in love again. But she hoped, now watching Jada and Born together, that they would be able to salvage whatever was left of what they'd once had.

"So, Sunny, what are you doing these days?" Born asked. "I bet you got your hands full with Mercedes. All the little boys in school must be beating down your door."

"Mercedes goes to an all-girls prep school on the Upper East Side. Ain't no boys beating down shit." Sunny smiled. "Besides, I'm hoping she and Sheldon get married someday."

Jada laughed. "Wouldn't that be something?" she said. "Poor Sheldon. If Mercedes is anything like her high-maintenance mama, my baby's in trouble."

Everyone laughed, knowing that Sunny was the supreme diva. Sunny waved her hand at Jada, and then turned her attention to Born. "I'm modeling now. Nothing major, yet. A couple of runway shows here and there. Just some magazine

ads, cosmetic ads, and shit like that. Baby Phat, Apple Bottoms, fashion layouts in *Essence* and *Vibe*, and all that. My friend Olivia has been hooking me up with some of her designer friends, and they seem to love my face.” Sunny smiled, happy with her little claim to fame.

Jada smiled, too. “It’s all that ass, not the face, that they love,” she joked. Sunny stuck her middle finger up at her friend, and they all laughed.

“In the modeling world, I’m old,” Sunny explained. “Most of the girls who get the big ad campaigns are in their teens and twenties. Either that, or they’re household names who have paid their dues, and their faces are easily recognizable. I’m trying to change that. I’m thirty-six years old, and in my mind I’m still young. The fashion industry doesn’t see it that way, though.” Sunny shrugged. “Thankfully, I don’t need the money. Every dime I make goes into a trust for Mercedes. When Dorian died, he left me all of what he had, and he damn sure had a lot! I don’t have to work. I just want to.”

Born nodded. “Well, it’s good that you’re doing what you always wanted to do. Dorian used to always tell me that you thought you were a supermodel.”

Sunny laughed, remembering the days when she used to demonstrate her runway walk for Dorian, and he would tell her how sexy she was. She missed him so much, and she could tell by the look on Born’s face that he missed his friend, too. “Dorian loved you, Born.” Sunny’s face and tone were sincere. “You were his favorite from the very beginning. Once he met you, it was like he found his protégé. Dorian used to always tell me that you were the one who would take over his empire. You were the one he knew would come out on top.” Sunny smiled at Born.

He nodded. “Yeah. I thought it would be me and him on some Biggie and Puffy type shit for life. That was my man, you know?” Born’s eyes got misty. “I just wish I could have stopped what happened. I feel like that shit is kinda my fault.”

Sunny frowned and shook her head. “It wasn’t your fault, Born. Nobody’s to blame for that shit but Raquel. You didn’t know that she was deranged. And none of us knew she had a gun. You tried. You shot the bitch in the leg! And for a sane person, that would have been enough to stop her. But Raquel was trying to kill me. Dorian saved my life. He saved Mercedes’s life. And that’s how he would have wanted it. I know it. Don’t blame yourself.” Sunny wiped one tear that drifted down her cheek. “He loved you, Born. He loved you a whole lot.”

Born smiled at Sunny, and he felt better. At least she didn’t blame him for Dorian’s death. He hoped that someday he could stop blaming himself. Mercedes came in with Sheldon in tow, and Sunny explained to her daughter that Born had been a very good friend of her father’s. Mercedes smiled big and hugged Born. “My daddy was a hero. He saved Mommy’s life.”

Born nodded. “Yup. I could tell you a whole bunch of stones about your father.”

Mercedes’s face lit up. “Really? Tell me!”

Born looked helplessly at Sunny, and she threw her hands in the air. “What, Mr. Big Mouth. You told her you got stories. Go on and tell her some stories!”

Mercedes tugged at Born’s hand and pulled herself up onto his lap. “Tell me.”

Born laughed at Mercedes’s aggressive personality, and cleared his throat.

“Well, one time, me and your father were in Brooklyn ...”

For the next hour or so, Born entertained Mercedes, and all the other folks present, with story after story about his adventures with Dorian. Mercedes was enthralled, and never took her eyes off of Born. Sunny, too, hung on Born’s every word. Some of the stories were familiar to her. Dorian had told her some of them. But others, Sunny heard for the first time, and she smiled, reminiscing on her one true love.

The night wore on, and they all enjoyed the atmosphere. Everyone laughed and joked and talked until the wee hours of the morning. Sunny had everybody laughing. Mercedes fell asleep in Born's arms, and Sheldon fell asleep in Jada's. They carried the two of them to Sheldon's room, and laid them down. Jada tucked them in, and they went back to the living room, where everyone was beginning to grow sleepy.

By the time Born got ready to leave, at close to two o'clock in the morning, he and Jada had rekindled their friendship, and agreed to see each other again soon. She walked him to the door, and he stood there smiling down at her. "Thanks for inviting me over here," he said. "It was nice being back around you and Sunny again. Your son is so handsome, and Mercedes is beautiful." He reached over and touched Jada's cheek lightly, tracing his finger across the silky texture of her skin. "I'll see you again real soon."

Jada smiled, and relished the feeling of his hand against her face. "Okay."

Born turned and left, and Jada shut the door. She turned around to find Sunny standing behind her with a smile plastered on her face. "You got your second shot, girl," Sunny said. "Don't blow it."

Sunny turned and headed to the bathroom, leaving Jada standing alone—still feeling Born's strong hand caressing her cheek.

Epilogue

LOVERS AND FRIENDS

Things were never quite the same for any of them after that night. Born and Jada rediscovered the reasons they'd become such good friends in the first place. Though neither of them was in any rush to take things too far too soon, their chemistry was unchanged. Anisa hated that Born and Jada had made amends, and she was upset that he'd forgiven her. Anisa gave him hell whenever he brought Ethan around Jada and Sheldon. Born told her, truthfully, that he and Jada were just friends. He also made it clear to Anisa that he owed her no explanations about his private life. His relationship with Anisa had long been over. And deep in her heart she knew that he had never really been hers to begin with. Still, Anisa held on, hoping that he'd change his mind. But in truth, she knew that Jada had won Born's heart after all.

Sunny became reacquainted with Dorian's brothers as a result of Jada and Born becoming friends again. Up to that point, Sunny had always been cordial yet distant with the brothers, because she didn't like their inquiries about how much money Dorian had left behind. She wanted no discussion about Dorian's money. When they came to see Mercedes, Sunny always met them curbside, and dropped her daughter off with little conversation. But once Born started coming back around, that began to change.

Sunny was happy to hear that the uncles were busying themselves with D.J.'s success. Born had him poised to go platinum with his debut CD, and Dorian's brothers were eager

for a lifestyle of fame and fortune on a legitimate level. Born became the mediator between them, and he convinced Sunny that she could come back around their crew without worrying about people going after her money. She and Mercedes's uncles made amends, and Sunny was glad that their attention was diverted to what D.J. would inherit rather than what Mercedes would. Sunny and Jada found themselves attending barbecues, and reacquainting themselves with Dorian's brothers and their crew. These connections proved to be valuable when Sunny and Jada finished their novel, aptly titled *Truth Is Stranger Than Fiction*. They'd based it on their own trials and tribulations in the game, and it was as entertaining as it was fact-based.

In order to help them drum up support for the novel, Born helped them secure a meeting with Monarch Publishing. They aced it, signed a nice book deal for not one, but two novels, and drummed up so much of a buzz that the book was on back order before it was even released. This was due in large part to the spot Born booked for them on Mindy Milford's radio show.

Mindy, the scandal-obsessed radio personality, started the interview off nicely enough. She described the two women to her listening audience, pointing out that both of them were iced out in brilliant diamonds, and wearing designer duds. She told them both that they were very beautiful women, and Sunny and Jada smiled and thanked her. Then Mindy asked about the book, and what the story was about. Jada gave a brief synopsis, and the interview seemed to be going well. Mindy seemed to be behaving. But out of nowhere, she attacked. Mindy asked them both point-blank if they had ever dabbled in cocaine use.

Sunny had looked at Mindy like she'd lost her entire mind. But she recovered quickly. "Yes," Sunny had deadpanned. "I did. That's how I'm able to write about it so well. The character in the book—Charlene—she goes through a lot of things I went through, things that lots of young ladies are

going through. That's why the story's called *Truth Is Stranger Than Fiction*."

Mindy cut Sunny off, and cut right to the chase. "But is it true that *before* you started dating award-nominated actors, you were once the wife of a major drug kingpin in Brooklyn?"

"What the fuck does that have to do with this book, Mindy?" The censors worked eagerly to bleep out the expletives in Sunny's tirade. "Why does that shit matter? Who cares about all that? The book is called—"

"*Truth Is Stranger Than Fiction*, that's the name of the book everyone," Mindy's voice boomed in the microphone. "I encourage everyone to go out and buy a copy, because it is beautifully written."

"Thank you," Sunny said, firmly.

"You're welcome. And I think it's so impressive, because the whole time you were living so fabulously you were getting high every day—"

"Mindy, why you trying to make me fight you in here today?" Sunny was pissed, and her voice conveyed that. "I didn't come in here to talk about my life. When I write that book about my life, you'll be the first to know."

"Well, I'll look forward to reading it. Because the things I've heard about you and your lifestyle back when you were getting high, *honeeeee!* That's something we all want to read about!" Mindy pressed a button, and sound effects filled the speakers. Fake applause filled the airwaves. "Is it true that you were pregnant with the football player Michael Warren's baby?"

"I'm not answering that," Sunny said. "Let's talk about the book, Mindy. The book!"

Mindy nodded. "Yes. The book is going to be a bestseller. The streets are already buzzing. But not nearly as much as they will be once you write that life story of yours. I'm sure you'll mention the fact that your child's father was murdered at your baby shower by his other baby's mother—"

“Bitch!” The next sound heard in the studio was the sound of microphones coming off, and the censors bleeping out the words Sunny was yelling. The phone lines lit up.

Mindy defended herself, insisting that as a public figure Sunny should be prepared to open her personal life up to scrutiny. Sunny gave her hell, and the censors worked hard to block out Sunny’s curses. Still Mindy pressed on. “I’m giving you a forum to answer the rumors. The streets are talking.”

Sunny stepped back to the mike once more, and said, “Well, the streets should shut the fuck up then. Read the book, and shut the fuck up.”

Sunny stormed out and Jada shook her head. Jada leaned in close to the mike, and said, “*Truth Is Stranger Than Fiction*, in stores now. Find out what all the fuss is about.”

And that’s exactly what plenty of Mindy’s listeners did. The segment got a big reaction from the syndicated listening audience, and it became the subject of plenty of the phone calls. It turned out to be great exposure, and the book was a national bestseller. Sunny and Jada were on their way, and they had Ava—their attorney—handling their business.

Meanwhile, Born was leading D.J. to the promised land, and for the most part all of their children were happy and healthy. For all of them, the whole situation was surreal. None of them had expected things to turn out as they had.

All of them now worked in an industry where the drug game was often glamorized and held up as a badge of honor. And they all knew the ugliest side of what that lifestyle entailed. Lucky for them, they had managed somehow to escape the game’s clutches. But all of them still bore the scars of numerous battles. All of the good times had come on the heels of suffering. They had survived only because they’d learned the power of forgiveness. Their would-be fairy tale may not have ended happily ever after, but it came pretty damn close.

Jada had her life back, and she had Born’s forgiveness—his friendship. They never shared anything more than an

occasional kiss. And an awkward silence always followed that. Both of them were afraid. He was afraid of losing control, and she was afraid of letting him down. Jada was determined in her heart that she would never get high again. But she knew that Born wasn't so sure about that. He doubted her, and rightfully so. And Jada wasn't sure if she could ever find enough ways to convince him. Born had a wall around his heart, and she knew that she had helped lay every brick within it. So even though she loved him more than ever, she allowed things to move at his pace, and hoped that someday she could completely regain his trust. And his heart.

Their connection was still unmistakable. They laughed together often and called each other several times a week. Once in a while, they had dinner together, and whenever their eyes met across the table, it was like magic. It was like music. True friendship knows no bounds. And they were grateful that at least their friendship had survived all the pain caused by white rocks, glass pipes, and powdery white lines.

Turn the page for a sneak peek at Tracy Brown's
upcoming *White Lines* novel

WHITE LINES 3: ALL FALLS DOWN

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“Where is he?” She was breathless. “What happened?”

“He’s okay. There was some kind of explosion. They don’t know if it was a gas leak, but they said something about a suitcase at the front door. They ain’t saying much, but he’s okay. Some neighbors called 911 and they got him here. They called Miss Ingrid, and she got in touch with me. We’ve all been trying to get in touch with you for hours.”

Jada groaned in frustration. She had been staging Sunny’s intervention all day. “Where is he?”

“Listen.” D.J. took a deep breath. He put his hands on Jada’s shoulders, looked her in the eyes. “Anisa’s here. She’s in there with Born right now.”

Jada held his gaze. Her heart raced. With her jaw clenched, she narrowed her eyes at D.J.

“Where’s Ethan?”

“He’s with Miss Ingrid. She took him to get something to eat.”

Jada glanced around. “Which room is he in?”

D.J. led the way. They stopped outside Born’s room, and Jada could hear Anisa laughing softly.

“Now I *know* you’re okay. You’re back to being fresh again.”

Jada heard Born mumble something she couldn’t hear, but she had heard enough. Her blood was at a brisk boil.

She stepped into the room, and saw Born lying in the bed with his head and right arm bandaged heavily.

Anisa had basically draped herself across him, despite the IV and other monitors connected to him. Born looked at her as she stepped in.

“Hey, Jada.”

He seemed groggy. Jada wasn’t sure whether they had him doped up or if he was still mumbling as a result of the explosion.

“Hey,” she said. “Why is she here?”

“Excuse you?” Anisa frowned as she sat upright. “I’m right here. Why don’t you ask me?”

Jada side-eyed her.

“Nah,” Born said. “Don’t ask nobody nothing.” He wasn’t that groggy, and he could tell that this was not about to go well. “Lis-ten.” He tried to sit up, but his right side was racked with pain. His head was pounding, and it hurt to move. He spoke in a jumbled whisper in an effort to keep his head from throbbing worse than it already was. “Listen, ’Neece, let me talk to Jada for a while. Please.”

He watched Anisa contemplate it. This was her big chance. She could blow it all up, and tell Jada the truth about their reunion. Or she could play it cool and let Born handle things his way. Anisa was the type who could go either way. She was a livewire. But, he was counting on the fact that they’d bonded recently. He hoped that they had an understanding. She sighed, gathered her sweater, and touched Born tenderly on the leg. “I’ll be outside.”

She walked past Jada without a second glance. And it was then, as Born looked at Jada, that he saw the pain etched on her face. She stood close to his bedside with

her hands in the pockets of her hoodie, her eyes heavy with tears. “She’s ‘Neece’ now?”

“Don’t start.” Born shook his head slowly.

Jada wiped her eyes quickly. She was an emotional wreck, and she knew it. Seeing Born like this wasn’t helping. “Are you all right?”

“I will be. Right now everything hurts.” Born licked his lips. They felt dry as hell.

“She was all over you,” Jada said. She gestured with her chin toward the door. “What’s up with that?”

Born cleared his throat. “My lips are dry. She was putting some Vaseline on for me.”

“I bet she was.” Jada sniffed. She snatched the small jar of Vaseline from Born’s bedside table and applied it to his lips with her fingertip. “What else has she been doing with your lips?”

“Oh, you care now?” Born tried to move into a more comfortable position, and winced a little at the pain that shot through his right side. He resigned himself to his uncomfortable fate, and looked at Jada standing there with the nerve to be mad. “It’s hard to tell if you even know I’m alive.”

Jada’s eyes watered unexpectedly when she heard him say that. It was true. “Come on, Born. You know what I’m dealing with. Sheldon is—”

“Sheldon is what?” He sucked his teeth.” He’s a fuckin’ brat.”

Jada’s tears turned to rage then. “What did you just say?”

“You heard me.” Born was done playing. Somebody was out to get him, and he wanted to know who it was. Being so close to death had put things into fresh perspective for him. “Word. That’s how I feel. For months I been calling you, texting you. Nothing. You want to blame Sheldon, but you’re the parent. He’s not in charge.”

“It’s not that simple.” Jada shook her head.

“I think we have different definitions of family.”

“He tried to kill himself, Born.”

“Right. So now you give him what he wants for the rest of his life. That’s smart.” His sarcasm was evident despite the rasp in his voice. “We’re talking marriage and making future plans, and then he does that and—BAM! Silence.” Born’s hurt was evident. “You just disappeared on me.”

Miss Ingrid returned with Ethan. Jada greeted Born’s mother warmly, but she couldn’t help being upset about the interruption.

Born, on the other hand, was grateful for it. He wasn’t interested in talking to Jada about their relationship since it was clear that she was still feeding into Sheldon’s bullshit. All he cared about at the moment was figuring out who had rung his doorbell that afternoon.

Ingrid sat at the foot of Born’s hospital bed. She was still terribly shaken after finding out that her son had brushed with death so closely. Ethan, too, had been so afraid that his father was harmed. It had taken much reassurance from Born to calm him down.

Jada managed a weak smile, and greeted Ethan with a hug. He seemed to have grown in the months since the last time she'd seen him. Jada hadn't realized how much time had passed while she was being held hostage to Sheldon's wishes.

As if reading her thoughts, Ingrid asked, "How's Sheldon doing?"

Jada glanced at Born. "He's okay. Ava's with him now."

Ethan sat in the chair next to his father's bed. He didn't miss Sheldon one bit, and wished his grandmother hadn't asked about him. Ethan was no punk. But he was smart enough to realize that Sheldon was crazy.

"Tell me what happened." Jada looked at Born with genuine concern in her eyes. She wished that they hadn't been interrupted. She wanted to tell Born that she thought about him all the time. That she missed him. He was her warrior. Seeing him lying there so helplessly was killing her softly.

He cleared his throat again. "I was home, and the doorbell rang. I went and looked through the peephole and I didn't see anybody. I just got this feeling that something wasn't right. I wasn't expecting nobody. So I went to the closet to get that thing." He looked at his mother as he said it, because Ingrid knew better than anybody what her son was into. "Next thing I knew ... it was just a big-ass blast. The door flew off the frame, and the whole front of the house is blown apart. I'm lucky to be alive, for real."

"Oh, my God," Jada said. She thought of who might be responsible, but came up empty.

Ingrid didn't like it one bit. "I called Zion and he's sending some of his friends down here to keep an eye on your room around the clock."

"Ma—" Born protested.

"Ma, nothing. We don't know who rang that doorbell. I heard the detectives talking about a black suitcase. Until we know what's going on, I want you protected. And like it or not, you're not in the position to protect yourself." Her tone of voice made it clear that the subject was not up for debate. "And what about that thing you keep in the closet? You know they're gonna mess with you about that now." Ingrid didn't miss a thing.

Born smirked at her. "You worry too much."

"We're all worried about you," Anisa said, as she stepped back into the room. She was tired of standing in the hallway.

Jada scowled at her, and Anisa pretended not to notice. D.J. stepped into the room, too, and stood quietly in the corner.

Anisa filled Born in. "The doctor said you can have more painkillers soon. I told him the last dose was wearing off." Anisa walked over to Ethan and stroked his well-groomed head affectionately.

Jada was pissed. All of a sudden Anisa was the one speaking to Born's doctors and acquainting herself with the staff. She reminded herself that Ethan was present, that Anisa was his mother. Jada didn't want to make a scene. But she needed this bitch to know that Born was not hers for the taking. "Thanks for filling us in," she

said, her eyes boring into Anisa's. "I'm here now. I'll take it from here."



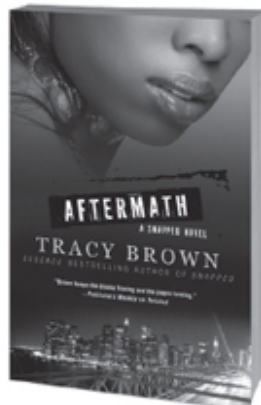
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Tracy Brown is the author of eight acclaimed novels – *Black*, *Dime Piece*, *Criminal Minded*, *White Lines*, *White Lines II: Sunny*, *Twisted*, *Snapped* and *Aftermath*. She’s also contributed to two anthologies – *The Game* and *Flirt*. She lives in Staten Island, New York, where she is hard at work on her next novel.

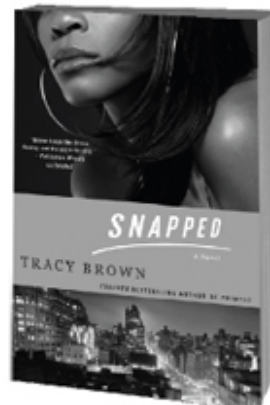
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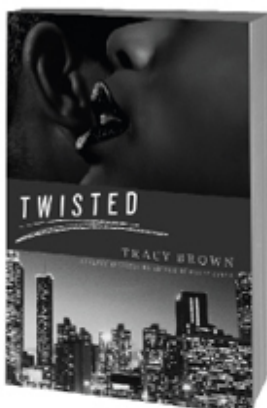
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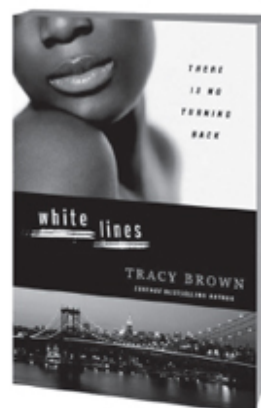
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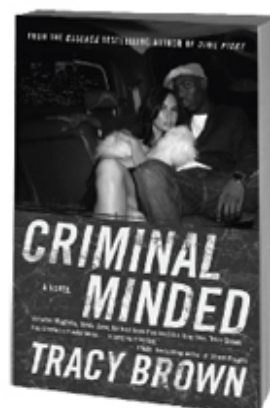
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www.stmartins.com

Cover design by Ervin Serrano

e-ISBN 9781466868632

Originally published in print format by St. Martin's Griffin as part of the paperback title *White Lines*

First Edition: October 2014

eBooks may be purchased for business or promotional use. For information on bulk purchases, please contact Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department by writing to MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.