

***WHITE LINES III:
ALL FALLS DOWN***

A WHITE LINES NOVEL

TRACY BROWN



ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN
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MOMENT OF TRUTH

Sunny looked around her cell helplessly. She sat in a small, dirty room with one tiny, grime-coated window, a filthy cement floor, a toilet that smelled and looked as if it had never been cleaned, and one old wooden bench upon which she sat now.

Sunny's tearstained face was set in a grimace. She had stopped crying long ago, but the tracks of her tears were still evident, colored in by streaks of her mascara. Her usually bright eyes were vacant, as she stared down at her hands and tried to wrap her mind around what had happened thirty-one hours ago. She had counted each one of those hours as she stared at the clock on the wall, its second hand ticking by like a bell tolling in her head.

She squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head in disbelief, fighting back the tears that threatened to rush forth once more. The reality of her situation was just too terrible. Sunny was in a Mexican prison cell, charged with cocaine possession. The baggie she had tucked into her purse when Malcolm surprised her on the seedy side of town had been discovered by customs agents at the airport. She cursed herself for forgetting about it. She had slipped. BIG time.

Sunny had been interrogated in hostile tones for hours. Like rapid fire, the police hurled questions and accusations at her in broken English, demanding to know where she had gotten the

drugs. They spoke amongst themselves in Spanish after questioning her nonstop all night. When she heard them discussing all of the American money they had discovered in her purse, she couldn't resist telling them in fluent Spanish that every penny of it was theirs to keep if they would only let her go. One of the rough-looking female guards had gotten pissed off instantly. Sunny wasn't sure if the woman was pissed off that she had offered a bribe or if it was the fact that her Spanish was better than theirs. But the next thing Sunny knew, the guard had snatched her by the collar of her shirt. Glaring, she had gotten in Sunny's face so close that Sunny could smell her hot, vile breath.

"*Pendeja!* It's already ours to keep and you're *still* going to jail!" The guard had spat on the floor in front of Sunny and then sealed it with a look of pure contempt. Since then, all of the guards had been speaking to Sunny rudely in Spanish, and watching what they said to one another while in her presence. They seemed to be convinced that she was part of some big cartel. They had accused her of attempting to smuggle the small amount of coke as some kind of trial run to test the customs agents' thoroughness. They wanted to know whose drugs they were, how long Sunny had been working for them, and what role Malcolm played in all of it.

Malcolm.

As her thoughts turned to him, Sunny closed her eyes once more to keep the tears at bay. She had really fucked up now. She wondered where they had taken him after separating the two of them immediately after they discovered the cocaine in her possession. She imagined that they must have interrogated him just as mercilessly as they had her. She prayed that he knew to keep his mouth shut and say absolutely nothing. Malcolm wasn't from her world. He didn't think like she did, wasn't as quick on his feet. She began to pick at her nails, absentmindedly, chipping away at her fill-in. She was tired, hungry, and scared to death.

She imagined that Malcolm must be, too. And then there was the issue of the man they'd left to bleed to death in a cab ride gone horribly wrong. She needed to get the fuck out of Mexico.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the door opening. One of the guards entered the room. He was accompanied by a stout Mexican man wearing a cheap suit and run-over shoes.

"*Abuego*," the scowling guard mumbled before leaving as suddenly as he had appeared, leaving Stubby behind. Sunny sized up the poorly dressed man standing before her, who would be acting as her attorney. She felt a pang of guilt as she thought about her *real* attorney—Malcolm—being detained in a room nearby.

The man introduced himself as Marcos Gomez. He sat down beside her on the wooden bench, and set his briefcase down on the floor in front of him. He smelled of unfamiliar cologne and hand sanitizer, an oddly comforting combination that put Sunny at ease. She felt optimistic. Hopefully, he could find a way for her and Malcolm to get out of this mess.

Sunny began talking animatedly to her makeshift attorney, telling him in anxious, hurried Spanish that she hadn't been given a chance to call anyone since her arrest. She thought that surely inmates were allowed one phone call here as they were in America. Anything else seemed inhumane.

Mr. Gomez tried to suppress a smirk at Sunny's audacious outrage. Here she was, under arrest for drug possession in a foreign country and indignant still. He asked her if she had ever been arrested before. Sunny shrugged, unsure how that was relevant. He read between the lines, and assumed that her shrug was a "yes."

"*Para drogas?*" he asked. For drugs?

Sunny hesitated before answering. "Once for marijuana. The other time was for driving with a suspended license." She watched him write that down.

"But, I was booked, given a phone call and released both

times. Nothing like this!” She hadn’t brushed her teeth nor been given an opportunity to shower since her arrest. She had no access to her luggage, and had sat in the same panties for far longer than she cared to. Sunny had barely been given anything to eat and she wondered how long she would be forced to endure this nightmare. She felt disgusting.

Mr. Gomez listed the charges against her.

“Drug smuggling, possession of narcotics, and conspiracy.”

“I wasn’t smuggling anything or conspiring with anybody! Those drugs are not mine!” Even though she was aware that she was lying, Sunny convinced herself that this was all just a misunderstanding. She hadn’t been smuggling *on purpose*, and the small amount of coke she had in her possession certainly didn’t warrant her being held for this long under these conditions.

Gomez nodded, seeming to understand her frustration.

Sunny sighed, heavily. She dragged her fingers through her hair in exasperation. “Who was I supposedly conspiring with?” she demanded. Her thoughts turned to Malcolm again. Oh, no! Did they think that *he* was her coconspirator in this imaginary drug-smuggling ring?

“Are you representing Malcolm, too?” she asked.

Gomez frowned, confused. “Who is *Malcolm*?”

Sunny looked at him like he was crazy. “My codefendant,” she said. “The guy I was with at the airport.”

Gomez, still looking bewildered, sifted through some papers in his briefcase. He seemed to find what he was looking for, paused on one page in particular, and slowly read a section of it. He shook his head.

Sunny cleared her throat, impatiently.

“*Señor* Dean, yes?” he asked.

“Yes!” Sunny was growing impatient with this man.

Gomez shook his head again. His expression was bleak, and she knew instantly that there was bad news.

“Malcolm Dean has already been released. He flew back to the U.S. yesterday.”

Sunny’s heartbeat quickened and her stomach turned. She heard a ringing in her ears. “*What?*” Suddenly she felt sick, bile rising in her throat and sweat pooling at her brow.

Gomez scanned the document in his hand once again. “He gave a statement. He *said* that the drugs belonged to you alone, and he had no idea about any of it. Since the drugs were found in *your* luggage and not in his, they allowed him to pay a sum and leave Mexico immediately.”

Sunny felt like she might pass out. “He gave a statement?” she repeated, incredulously.

“*Si*,” Gomez confirmed. He shook his head, and Sunny felt comforted by this gesture. Even he knew that Malcolm was a bitch for abandoning her this way.

“Apparently, he is an attorney in the States, and assured us that he had no knowledge of your drug-related activities. He has paid his way out.”

Sunny sat in stunned silence. *That muthafuckin’ bitchass bastard!* she thought. She was seething. But above all, she was hurt. She had fallen for Malcolm despite all of the alarm bells ringing in her head telling her not to. And now, here she was, crushed and abandoned. Locked up abroad. She should have known better than to trust him.

“Okay, so I need to do the same thing,” Sunny said, snapping her fingers to illustrate how quickly she needed this all to be dealt with. Malcolm was a coward, she decided, and she would deal with his punk ass when she got back to the States. But, right now, she needed to get the hell out of Mexico before someone connected her to more than that small amount of drugs in her bag. “How much do I need to get out of here?”

Gomez stared at her for a moment, silently. Finally, he responded.

“The price for *you* could be very high. Your friend is an attorney, and he did not have the drugs in his possession. He claimed that he barely knew you, and that he had no idea what your involvement is in the cocaine trade. His situation was different. Yours will be tougher.”

Sunny’s blood boiled. Malcolm was claiming that he hardly knew her when, just days ago, he’d had his face buried in her pussy. The two of them had children who played together. He had met her family. They were a couple. But, not anymore. Right now, she could just kill him.

Mr. Gomez snapped her back to the issue at hand.

“We can maybe work something out for you, *Señorita*.” He looked her in the eyes. His suggestive tone of voice conveyed the message loud and clear.

She dismissed her thoughts of Malcolm that instant. “How much?” she asked, anxiously.

Mr. Gomez shrugged. “Ten thousand U.S. should do the trick.” He rubbed his thumb against the rest of his fingertips in the universal symbol for cash.

“Are you crazy?” Sunny snapped. “I had \$100 worth of yayo and you muthafuckas want ten grand?” She was appalled.

Gomez suppressed a smirk. For someone who had been framed, she certainly knew the market price of the drugs she’d been carrying.

“You must think I’m crazy. You must be out of your mind!”

Gomez watched silently while she had her temper tantrum. Sunny was on her feet, pacing her tiny cell, muttering how ridiculous this was. She thought about Malcolm. Had his corny, dumb ass ponied up that much to get himself out of this hell? She shook her head at the thought.

“I don’t have that kind of money,” she said, lying.

Gomez held her gaze, unblinkingly. “It is no good lying to your lawyer, *Señorita Cruz*.” He pulled out a cigarette and lit it.

Exhaling the smoke, he leaned back against the wall. “The police at the airport discovered that you and your companion were traveling home with \$7,000 in cash—\$6,000 of which was in *your* bag. You have expensive jewelry, expensive clothes, and shoes. And your traveling companion told his interrogators that he was working with you, that you are scheduled to do a film. So you are a high-profile American woman. It is very easy to search your name on the Internet to find out exactly who you are and whether we can get more money from a tabloid instead.” He took another puff of his cigarette. The cost is \$10,000 or they Google.”

Sunny was snarling at him and he took notice. He softened his tone a bit.

“I am not your enemy,” he said.

“All you muthafuckas are my enemy,” Sunny snapped. “Somebody must have planted those drugs on me. I’m telling you it wasn’t mine.”

He looked at her doubtfully.

“What else did Mr. Dean say in his statement?” She figured that he hadn’t told about the incident with the driver because they never would have offered her a way out if they knew that she was a murderer. Still, she asked out of curiosity.

“He said basically that the two of you met recently. That he was your attorney, maybe sometimes more than that. But that he doesn’t really know *who* you are.”

“He’s lying.” Sunny fought the emotions that she was truly feeling, and looked Gomez squarely in the eyes. “All of that’s a lie.”

Gomez stared back at her silently. He pondered what would be the best route to take in order to convey his message to his fiery client. The lovely lady before him had all the markings of a chameleon. Sunny slipped between Spanish and English so easily, and switched demeanors at will. Her duality was evident, as she looked lost and sad one moment, then angry and defiant the

next. Gomez wondered what her story was, how she had learned to be two people at the same time. Even though he was a stranger to her, it was easy even for him to ascertain that Sunny was into something, and she was in way over her head.

Sunny felt trapped between a rock and a hard place. She was being extorted. “I don’t have that amount of money.” She spoke slowly, emphasizing every word. “You said yourself that I only have six grand with me. I don’t have ten.”

Gomez balanced his cigarette between his lips, and began to pack away his paperwork. “That six grand has already been taken as evidence,” he said, calmly. “You will need to produce an additional \$10,000.”

Sunny was furious, but she kept her mouth shut. She was aware that it was futile to try to reason with these people. Involuntary tears flooded her eyes. As Gomez zipped his briefcase, Sunny faced the facts. Either she was going to see her reputation publicly torn into pieces, or she would have to call someone close to her and explain her predicament. Someone would have to bring the money—and fast! Her carefully guarded secret was now being exposed, and she had never felt like such a failure in her whole life.

“You do not want to remain in jail here in *Mexico*. Nothing nice about it.” Gomez gestured at her surroundings. “The real thing is far worse than this.” He hoped he was getting through to her.

Sunny was trembling. She knew better than anybody that she had to get the hell out of Mexico immediately. Malcolm had left her with a dead body and a bag of cocaine on her hands in a foreign country. She had to figure out who she could turn to for help. For the first time, she was the one who needed a lifeline. Sunny cried in silence.

Gomez took pity on her as he rose to leave. “I will see to it

that you get a shower, a decent meal, and a phone call home.” He offered a weak smile. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

And then Sunny was alone again.

Jada and Sheldon sat together eating dinner quietly at the dining room table. The silence was eerily familiar. It had been three days since Sheldon’s release from the psych ward of Staten Island University Hospital. Three days of awkward conversations and unspoken tension. Both Jada and Sheldon had found comfort in the silence that continually fell between them. In that silence, each of them was able to think things that would have been too dreadful to give voice to.

Jada blamed her son for the fact that her relationship with Born was in ruins. She hadn’t spoken to the man she loved since the day she’d walked away from him at the hospital weeks ago. He texted her from time to time to see how she was holding up. She would respond and let him know that she was hanging in there, that she needed some time alone with her son to sort things out. Sheldon had made it clear through his suicide attempt that he was not happy with his mother and Born’s relationship. Jada had martyred herself in the weeks since then, depriving herself of Born’s love as a way to make up for all the damage she had done to her only child. But the truth was that a large part of Jada hated Sheldon for forcing her and Born apart. It felt as if Sheldon’s father, Jamari, was torturing her all over again from the grave. She hated it so intensely that she had to make a conscious effort to be kind to her son. She reminded herself that she had no one to blame but herself for Sheldon’s struggles. Still, it was hard not to think negatively about the young man who had taken such control of her life.

Sheldon, on the other hand, was having his own sinister

thoughts. He was glad that Born was gone, gladder that Jada was clearly upset about it. *Good for her!* he thought. She deserved to suffer for being a crackhead, for making him so different from other kids his age. She was to blame for the urges he felt to lash out and misbehave. All the doctors at the psychiatric center pointed to his being born a crack baby as an explanation for his imbalance. He had heard them discussing his problems and their roots in Jada's drug use. Toward the end of his stay at the hospital, Sheldon had reduced his own medication. He didn't like the way it made him feel—all loopy and lethargic. He had no energy when his meds kicked in. Even his thoughts slowed to a crawl. He didn't like it. So, he began to find ways to avoid taking it. He couldn't get away with it all the time. The aides were usually extremely vigilant. But, at times, while one of the lazier aides waited and watched to ensure that he swallowed his pill, he'd create a distraction—sometimes sneezing and spitting it into his palm, other times dropping something on the floor so that he could stash the pill while the aide bent down to pick up the dropped item. Each time he would dutifully open his mouth and lift his tongue to prove that he had swallowed his meds. And once the aide was gone, Sheldon observed what was being said and done around him. Without the medication, he felt more like himself. He had perfected his listless gaze and would stare off into space as the doctors discussed his medical history. It was during one such conversation that he overheard a discussion about his parents' battle for custody of him. As he sat staring blankly at the bare white wall, Sheldon listened closely.

His father had been killed, he learned, in the midst of his parents' custody war. It was something his mother had never told him. She hadn't told him much of anything, in fact—not about his father, not about her drug use.

As they sat in silence now, eating curry chicken, yellow rice,

and asparagus, Sheldon watched her. Her eyes were focused on her plate as she seemed lost in thought. *Probably thinking about Born*, Sheldon thought bitterly. He cleared his throat.

Jada seemed to snap out of her trance and she looked up at him. Their eyes locked for several seconds.

“What’s wrong?” Jada asked. *What’s wrong NOW?* she thought.

Sheldon set down his fork and sat back in his chair, looking his mother in the eye. “I want to know everything,” he said. Seeing a look of confusion flash across her face, he explained. “About my father. And about you. And how I got here.”

Jada’s jaw clenched. For Sheldon’s whole life, she had avoided talking about his father or about the ugly and traumatic things that transpired between them. But her policy of “don’t ask, don’t tell” clearly hadn’t worked. Born was not around for her to seek his strength and reassurance. Alone with her son, Jada took a deep breath, sat back in her seat, and threw up her hands.

“What do you want to know, Sheldon? I already told you . . . I was addicted to coke . . . cocaine. Your father accepted that. He gave me crack to smoke. He lied to me—

“Lied to you about what?”

Jada sighed. “A lot of things. He hated Born.”

Sheldon frowned. “Why?”

Jada shrugged. She shook her head. Sheldon was so young, too young to fully understand. But she forged ahead. “Your father was jealous of Born.” She ignored Sheldon, who sucked his teeth in disbelief. “Born and Jamari grew up together. They were close friends. Jamari’s mother was addicted to drugs. So was Born’s father. So, Jamari and Born bonded since they had that in common.” Jada could tell that she had Sheldon’s undivided attention. She went on.

“Jamari’s mom told him that he and Born had the same father. She claimed that Born’s father, Leo, had never acknowledged Jamari because Leo was married to Miss Ingrid.”

Sheldon's brow furrowed as his young mind tried to process all of this information. "My father and Born were brothers?"

Jada shook her head. "We don't know that for sure. That was what Jamari's mother told him. But she died, and Leo never mentioned anything about it before he died, too. So, we'll never really know for sure."

"Why would my grandmother lie about that? If she said it, I believe her."

Jada noticed Sheldon's choice of words. *My grandmother*. He said it with such conviction that she was slightly taken aback by how he had aligned himself with his father's side of the family so instantaneously. He had never met his paternal grandmother and couldn't even remember his father. Yet, he had such faith in their truthfulness. Jada didn't address it, opting to continue instead.

"Jamari was jealous because Born's father gave him everything. Meanwhile, Jamari and his mother struggled. So, all the time that he was friends with Born, he wanted what Born had. And then Jamari stole money from Born."

Sheldon blinked a couple of times. "He *prolly* needed it since him and his mother were broke," he suggested.

Jada's jaw clenched again. Clearly, Sheldon refused to believe the worst about his father. She wanted to end the conversation, but she pressed on. "When Born realized that Jamari stole the money—"

"How much money was it?" Sheldon interjected. *Bet it was like \$20!* Born seemed like the type to make a big deal out of nothing.

"Five thousand dollars."

Jada waited for a reaction from her son but got nothing.

"Anyway, Born cut him off. He stopped being friends with him and I never knew the whole story between them until years later. All I knew was that Born didn't like him, didn't trust him. And Jamari didn't like Born either."

She took a sip of water and swallowed slowly before continuing.

“After Born found out that I had started getting high again, he broke up with me and I had no place to go. I had a bad drug problem, and my family had abandoned me. Jamari and I got closer and . . . we started a relationship.”

“Did you love each other?” Sheldon asked.

Jada wished she could self-destruct. She knew what Sheldon wanted to hear. Every kid wanted to believe that they were conceived in love. But the truth was far uglier. She recalled Jamari’s lies, the way he had manipulated her. She could still picture his outstretched hand with the crack vial in it.

“Go ahead and take it. I’m not gonna judge you. I understand.”

She could hear Jamari’s voice as clearly now as she had all those years ago.

“Sheldon,” she explained. “I was so addicted to drugs that I couldn’t love anybody. Not even myself.”

“Did he love you?”

She shook her head no. Seeing the hopeful expression on Sheldon’s face melt into dejectedness, she lied a little. “He did at first,” she said. “But my addiction made him turn against me eventually.” Jada knew that, in truth, Jamari had never loved her. He only saw her as a pawn in his sick game against Born. His control over every aspect of her life was all in an effort to flaunt his “trophy” in Born’s face.

“Why did y’all break up?” Sheldon asked.

Jada sipped her water again and swallowed hard. She fought the urge to smile at the memory of stealing Jamari’s re-up and exiting his life for good. Revenge had been sweet. Still, she couldn’t tell Sheldon the truth—she had stolen his father’s crack, sold it, and binged. She had to find a way to cushion the truth.

“When you were born, and I had made up my mind that it was time to get clean . . . I started seeing things differently. Once

I was out of the fog, I realized that Jamari had manipulated the whole situation. I felt like he used me to make Born jealous. So I ended our relationship, and I focused on doing everything I could to be a good mother for you.”

Jada sat back in her chair and looked into Sheldon’s eyes. She had given him the abridged version, but it was the truth nonetheless. She prayed that Sheldon would stop seeing her as his enemy.

“Sheldon . . . I love you,” she said, sincerely. “I’ve loved you from the first moment I laid eyes on you. I *fought* for you. When you were born, your father was mad at me. He was angry because I had been selfish, and he had every right to feel the way that he did. But I was sorry, and I had made up my mind to stop using drugs. He didn’t believe me. He hated me. And to be honest with you, I hated myself. I felt like dying.”

Sheldon watched his mother closely, saw the tears that welled up in her eyes. He heard the emotion in her voice and he believed her. He realized, maybe for the first time, how sorry Jada was—how much she cared for him.

“But then Sunny would bring me pictures of you. Every time I saw those pictures, I felt stronger, more determined to fight for the right to be your mom. When I got out of jail, I was in court just about every week to get visitation rights and trying to get custody. You were the only thing I had to live for anymore. Your father did everything he could to keep me from seeing you. But the judge slowly made it possible for you and I to build a relationship. And then your father was killed.” Jada said that last part flatly. She felt no remorse that she and Sunny had left Jamari to die alone in that parking lot in the dead of winter.

“Once he wasn’t around to fight me anymore, I was finally able to be your mom.”

Sheldon stared at his hands, letting it all sink in. He wondered how his life would be different if his father hadn’t been killed.

He knew that Jamari had loved him. Somehow, he had always known that in his heart. But now Jada had confirmed it for him. His father had loved him so much that he had fought to keep his drug-addicted mother out of his life. Sheldon watched Jada wiping the tears from her eyes. He replayed her words in his mind.

“Sheldon, I love you.”

He looked at his mother, thought to himself about how pretty she was. She wasn't a terrible person. He had seen some of his classmates' mothers, so he knew that horrible parents existed. The kind who talked loud and cussed all the time. The ones who wore scarves on their head in public, and barked orders at their kids. Jada was nothing like that. Whatever she had been in the past was far behind her now. He decided that maybe it was time to forgive Jada. Clearly, she was sorry and had already paid dearly for her transgressions. Sheldon would turn over a new leaf with his mother. But Born was a different story.

“Why did you name me Sheldon Marquis? Why don't I have my father's name instead of Born's?”

Jada's eyes narrowed. *What an odd question!* she thought. After all of what she had just told him, after hearing how determined Jamari had been to keep her away from her child, after hearing about his jealousy towards Born . . . all Sheldon had to ask was what had inspired his name?

“I named you after the two men who had been most important in my life. My father and Born.”

“Did you wish that Born was my father?”

Jada hesitated before answering. “I did,” she admitted.

Silence engulfed them again.

Finally, Sheldon spoke. “I bet my dad didn't like my name.” He toyed with his napkin.

Jada didn't know how to respond, so she said nothing; instead, allowing his words to float unanswered.

“Thank you for telling me the truth,” Sheldon said softly. “You

coulda lied about a lot of stuff. But you didn't. I'm glad that I know the whole story now." He set down his napkin, pushed his chair away from the table, stood up, and looked his mother in the eye.

"I love you, too," he said.

And, with that, he walked out and went upstairs to his room.

Jada sat there alone, wondering if she should get her hopes up. She couldn't help but pray that this signaled a light at the end of what had been a very long and dark tunnel. Only time would tell.

BIG DREAMS

“Go, DJ!” the crowd yelled. Glasses clinked, congratulations abounded, and the music resumed its pulsing beat through the speakers. DJ was all smiles as people crowded around him to offer their well wishes and praise for his latest CD—one that was sure to be labeled a classic in years to come. Tonight’s event was in DJ’s honor, a party to celebrate his album debuting at number one on the Billboard charts. His career was at an all-time high, and Born looked like a proud father as he watched DJ soaking up all the accolades. Not one to get easily emotional, Born felt himself getting choked up and, quickly, covertly wiped a tear from his eye.

“I saw that,” Dominique said, smiling at Born as she appeared at his side. “Don’t try to hide it. It’s okay to get choked up seeing your boy succeed the way that he is.” She clinked glasses with Born and watched a shy smile creep across his sexy lips.

“I was just thinking about his father,” Born explained. “I wish Dorian was alive to see this. He’d be so proud of his son.”

Dominique nodded. “I know the feeling. Whenever I reach a milestone in my career, I wish my dad was still around to witness it. But I believe that he looks down on me and sees the strides I’m making. I’m sure the same is true for DJ’s father. He *must* have a guardian angel watching over him, because the first-week

sales he's gotten are unbelievable in this day and age. Almost a million records sold in an industry that is struggling. . . . I'd say that's divine intervention mixed with some incredible talent. This young man is at the top of his game!"

Born agreed. "The kid is good."

A photographer approached the pair, and gestured for the two of them to stand closer together for a picture. Born held Dominique around the waist and drew her closer to him. Dominique felt a chill up her spine. The two of them smiled brightly as the camera flashed. The photographer thanked them and walked off to capture other partygoers.

Dominique wasn't sure if it was the wine or Born's close proximity that had her feeling lightheaded. She noticed that he still held her waist even though the moment had passed.

The deejay was excellent, and the dance floor was so packed that the floor beneath them shook from all of the movement. Born was feeling good. "Wanna dance?" he asked.

Dominique beamed. "Sure."

They set down their glasses on a nearby table and headed to the dance floor to join the crowd. As they danced, Dominique laughed as Born did "The Wop," a throwback to their heyday. She pop-locked to show him that she had some old-school moves in her arsenal as well. Born cracked up and they moved together happily, enjoying themselves for several more songs.

DJ watched from across the room where he was surrounded by a group of friends and fellow entertainers. He smiled, happy to see Born enjoying himself. It was the first time he'd seen him laugh in weeks, since Jada had pushed him away. DJ knew that Born was hurt by it, but he had put on a brave face and helped promote DJ's newest release full time.

DJ had mixed feelings about Jada. On one hand, it was clear to him that she made Born happy. Never was his smile as broad

or his laughter as hearty as when Jada was near. Born came alive in her presence. Even a stranger could observe them for mere minutes and surmise that they shared a long history together, one full of private jokes, happy memories, and fun. The love between the two of them was unmistakable. Jada had always been kind to DJ, especially after his father was killed and Born became a constant presence in the young man's life. Once DJ expressed an interest in rapping as opposed to the street life his uncles were grooming him for, Born had become like a father to him. Finding the right beats for DJ to rhyme to, accompanying him to studio sessions that lasted all night, eventually tours that took them to the far reaches of the world—Born had been there through it all from the very start. Whenever things seemed grim or challenging, Born reminded the young man that anything worth having is worth fighting for. He gave him advice about girls, taught him how to make his money work for him, showed him the ropes of grown-man games like chess. Born was the closest thing to a dad that DJ had known since Dorian's demise. And, eventually, once Jada and Born reunited, DJ had grown close to her, too.

But this situation with Sheldon had changed everything. All of a sudden, Sheldon seemed to be in control of everything, and it was clear to everybody that he wasn't feeling Born and Jada's relationship. So for weeks Jada had kept Born at bay. For weeks, Born had been walking around nursing a broken heart while doing his best to keep his poker face on. DJ didn't appreciate the pain his father figure was enduring. And he wasn't sure if he was pissed at Jada about it or if Sheldon alone was to blame.

Tonight, though, Born was having a good time. And so was Dominique. DJ had always taken note of her beauty, her swag. She seemed like the kind of lady who could make Born forget about Jada.

For tonight, at least, DJ hoped that was exactly what Born would do. From across the room, he caught Born's eye. They raised their glasses in a silent toast, and partied the night away.

Olivia was in a late meeting with buyers for Vintage, her clothing line. In a conference room on the top floor of the Solomon Bryan building, she sold them on the luxe fabrics and cutting-edge designs set before them. Solomon Bryan was a media conglomerate that was fast becoming known as "the black Condé Nast." They published just about every major magazine that appealed to the black and Latino demographic, which was quickly growing. Tonight's meeting was being held in the mega-company's flagship building in the fashion district, in office space that the buyers leased. Being in such close proximity to fashion's elite was a reality not lost on Olivia. These buyers worked for reputable department stores, major stylists, boutiques, and clothiers. This long running meeting was one of the most important of her career, and Olivia knew it. She had dressed the part today, wearing a Vintage electric-blue jumpsuit with a pair of nude Jimmy Choos and subtle jewelry. The look had been edgy and fashion-forward by day. But their meeting had gone on far longer than she planned, and at this late hour she was beginning to wish that she had opted for something that translated better from day to evening. In fact, she had spent so much of the past four hours second-guessing everything from the fabrics she had chosen to use for her line to the color palette she had chosen to present for the buyers today. She was high off a mixture of adrenaline and angst.

Her cell phone buzzed, and a crazy international number displayed on her caller ID. She sent it to voice mail, unaware that it was Sunny calling. She turned off her phone and tossed it into

her Bottega Veneta bag. Whirling around to face the buyers, she flashed them her most alluring smile.

“So, guys, is it a yes?”

Malcolm stifled a yawn and glanced at his watch. He had sent his secretary home hours ago, and now it was so late that even the associates and paralegals had gone home for the night. It was nearly nine o'clock, and he had been working since seven o'clock that morning. In an effort to get Sunny off his mind, he had worked the whole day as if his life depended on it. It was the only way to distract himself from the feelings of self-loathing that crept up on him whenever he was idle. He had left her, the woman he loved, in Mexico with no one to help her. He felt terrible, having allowed his fear to take over. While he had been there in Mexico, being questioned mercilessly and threatened with jail time, all he had been able to think about was his career; how he could lose everything because of Sunny's crazy ass. She had deceived him into thinking that she was clean. But the truth was that even as they vacationed—a trip that Malcolm had imagined as a precursor to the honeymoon he imagined they would enjoy someday—Sunny had been getting high the whole time. Now there was a dead man on the side of some Mexican dirt road, and Sunny was under arrest for cocaine possession. He had gotten the hell out of there as fast as he could.

But now guilt had set in. Malcolm couldn't face himself. It didn't help that she had called the office three times that day for assistance—surely desperate for answers—as she faced the music all alone in Mexico. He hadn't answered any of the calls from the international number, knowing that an angry Sunny was on the other end. Malcolm felt torn. Part of him believed that whatever happened to her would be justified. After all, she had killed

a man. She had been buying and using cocaine while he had been oblivious. She had lied to him. She deserved to pay for those things. But, the other part felt horrible for abandoning her. He loved her. And instead of sticking around to help her, he had fled as soon as they said that he was free to leave.

He had turned off his cell phone hours ago, after Sunny's third call. He glanced at it now, made up his mind that tomorrow he would change the number. He stuck it in the top drawer of his desk, turned off the desktop lamp, and pushed back his chair. He stood up, stretched, and willed himself to think of anything but her. Malcolm grabbed his briefcase, and headed home for the night, telling himself that he had done the only thing he could. He had saved himself.

Jada lay in bed, not sleeping, but only half awake. She had tried everything from meditating to masturbating, and nothing seemed to bring her enough relief from her thoughts of Born. She thought about calling him, but worried that Sheldon might overhear her. She resented Sheldon for the distance she had been forced to put between her and the man she loved. Each night after dinner, Jada turned off the ringers on all the phones so that the noise wouldn't disturb Sheldon while he slept. If Born tried calling her late at night after studio sessions with DJ, Jada usually missed the calls as a result. She hated this. Still, she didn't dare to risk upsetting the calm that had finally settled in her home. Jada wanted her son to be happy, even if it meant sacrificing her own joy.

She tried, for the thousandth time, to think of a way that they could all be a family. She kept coming up empty. The thought of it made her weary. It seemed that no matter how badly she wanted things to work out, there was no way. Through his suicide attempt, Sheldon had presented Jada with an ultimatum—him or

Born. She couldn't have both. Exhausted, she yawned several times, snuggling into the pillow. She glanced at her cell phone to ensure that she hadn't missed any calls or texts. There was nothing. She set the phone back on the nightstand and settled back into her cozy spot. She wondered where Born was and what he was doing. She yawned again, and this time, shut her eyes and settled into perfect relaxation. As sleep finally overtook Jada, her cell phone screen lit up with an incoming call. Tonight, it wasn't Born calling.

Sunny muttered under her breath with each ring. "Please, be there, Jada."

But Jada was already gone, blissfully dreaming of the happily-ever-after that seemed to elude her in her waking hours.

It was after three in the morning when Born walked Dominique to the parking garage at the end of the block. It was a warm, June evening and the two of them were grateful for the fresh spring breeze on their faces. The party venue had been packed, and both of them had sweated considerably as they danced, mixed, and mingled while celebrating DJ's success. Dominique's curls had all fallen, and she self-consciously raked her fingers through her hair in an attempt to make herself more presentable. Born noticed.

"Cut it out," he said, smiling and showcasing his irresistible dimples. "You look beautiful."

Dominique blushed, and felt her pulse quicken. Despite the breeze, she fanned herself with her hand, suddenly hotter than ever. "Thanks," she managed.

The pair walked on in awkward silence for several paces, both of them deluged with thoughts. Born realized just how much he dreaded saying good-bye to Dominique now that the fresh air was helping to clear his mind. He had spent the past couple of

hours intoxicated by the scent of Dominique's perfume and by her disarming smile. Now, as they neared the parking garage, he hated for the night to end.

Dominique was dreading saying good night to Born as well. She stole a glance at him as they walked.

"Where's Jada?" she found herself asking. "I expected to see her tonight, toasting it up with you and DJ."

Born shook his head. "I'm not sure where she is." Noticing Dominique's confused expression, he elaborated. "We're not together anymore." Saying it aloud for the first time; Born felt an incredible sadness wash over him. He had been in denial about it, but there it was. There was no sense avoiding the truth any longer. Things had come to a standstill between him and Jada. Ever since Sheldon had regained consciousness after his suicide attempt, Jada had refused to see him. They still talked from time to time, but things were not the same. Three months had passed without any real contact with her. In Born's opinion, Jada had let Sheldon win. And, truth be told, he was hurt by it.

Dominique was surprised by the revelation. The couple had seemed unbreakable. "I'm sorry to hear that," she said.

Born shrugged. "Shit happens," he said. He pushed the pain of his failed relationship deep down inside of him, and forced a weak smile.

They reached the parking garage, and Dominique gave the ticket to the attendant, who then left to retrieve her car.

"How about you?" Born asked. "You still in love with ole boy?" Born had met Archie on a number of occasions when he had accompanied Dominique to events. He had always felt that the guy was lucky to be with her, and had never really warmed up to him as a result.

Dominique shook her head and sighed. "Nope. He got himself in some legal trouble, and I decided that I didn't need those

kinds of complications in my life. Been there, done that, you know?”

Born nodded. He understood completely. Having grown beyond his hustling days, he appreciated that Dominique had outgrown her attraction to that lifestyle as well.

“Well . . . a beautiful woman like you won’t be single long.”

Dominique smiled. The sexual tension between the two of them was palpable. Born felt emboldened by the Hennessy coursing through his system. He brushed his hand across her cheek, then caressed her pouty lips with the pad of his thumb. Dominique swooned, completely swept up in the moment. Before she could formulate a thought, Born leaned in and kissed her passionately, drawing her close to him by her small waist. Her hands instinctively cupped his face, their tongues moving together erotically. They both lost themselves in the kiss, until the sound of the attendant pulling up in Dominique’s car snapped them out of their trance.

Pulling away from Born, Dominique cursed under her breath. “Shit!” She shook her head, silently berating herself. “This is not cool. I’m DJ’s rep at the label. I can’t do this with . . . you’re his manager . . .”

Born stepped back, the spell broken.

The attendant approached, and Dominique fished around in her clutch bag for some cash to pay him. Born placed his hand over hers, stopping her.

“I got it,” he said. “Don’t worry about it. He handed the attendant a crisp fifty and looked at Dominique, apologetically. “Sorry about that,” he said. “You’re right. I crossed the line.”

Dominique felt bad. She had wanted that kiss as much as he had. But she had worked hard to climb to where she was in her career. The last thing she wanted was to allow her horniness to screw it all up.

“It’s not your fault,” she said. “I kissed you too. I held on to you so tight that you couldn’t escape.”

Born laughed at that, and she did, too. The tension dissolved.

“Let’s chalk this up to too much alcohol and pretend it didn’t happen.” Born held out his hand.

Dominique took it, and shook it firmly. She chuckled. “Deal.”

Born held open her car door while she climbed inside. “Drive safe,” he said. “We’ll talk tomorrow.”

Dominique winked at him, fastened her seat belt, and sped off before she threw caution to the wind and invited Born home with her.

Born headed off in the direction of his own car. Checking his watch, he saw that it was much later than he thought. He considered calling Jada, but decided against it. She seldom answered his calls anymore, and he was sick of the rejection. He reached his truck, climbed inside, and instinctively headed straight to Anisa’s house instead.

He turned up the music in his truck, the bass pounding throughout the vehicle. He thought about Anisa as he headed to her house. For years now, their relationship had been restricted to co-parenting Ethan. But Born was noticing that Ethan liked having him around on a daily basis. Truth be told, Born liked being in the family atmosphere with his son and with Anisa. It felt good. Especially with Jada giving him the cold shoulder the way that she was. He was beginning to wonder if he had played his cards right all those years ago when he ended things with Anisa in order to give his heart to Jada once again.

Lately, Born had been spending more time than ever at the home he provided for Anisa and Ethan. Though he had a place of his own, he was comfortable falling asleep in Ethan’s room, or in the home’s spare bedroom. He even held meetings with DJ and

his management team there. Those meetings used to take place at Jada's home, but Jada had abandoned Born in favor of her son.

Born had also taken notice of Anisa's new outlook on life. She had once been very superficial, and it was for that very reason that his mother still didn't like her, even after all these years. Ingrid thought Anisa was stuck up, self-absorbed, and a gold digger. After all, she had abandoned Born when he was locked up. Wisely, she had secured her position in Born's life forever by having his son almost immediately after his release.

But this new and improved Anisa seemed changed somehow. She still enjoyed the finer things in life. However, motherhood had settled her in ways that Born found endearing. Anisa was a great mother. Attentive and caring. The more he was around her, the more he realized that she had grown a great deal over the years. He found himself actually listening when she talked to him about the things that piqued her interest. There had been a time when he instinctively tuned her out. Both of them had matured in the years since their split, and at the very least Anisa and Born had developed a close friendship in the time since Jada had gone MIA.

He arrived, parked his car in the driveway, and saw a light burning dimly in the living room. He opened the door with his key and saw Anisa sitting on the chaise, a pair of glasses perched on the tip of her nose as she read a book. She seemed surprised to see him.

"Hey," she said, smiling at him.

"Hey," he replied. "Ethan's asleep?" As soon as the words left his mouth, he realized what a silly question it was.

"Yeah," Anisa said. "It's late."

He nodded. "Yeah. You're still up."

She nodded.

"I just left DJ's party. I was . . . I know it's late." He realized

that he was practically stuttering. He cleared his throat. “I was thinking about you, so I thought I’d stop by . . . see if you were still awake.”

Anisa’s heart skipped. Her pulse started to pound so hard that she could feel it in her temples.

He was here to see *her*! She had been on his mind. All the time he’d been spending there over the past several weeks had seemed to be for Ethan’s benefit. But here he was. Ethan was fast asleep, and Born had come over anyway. She took off her glasses, set them and the book down on the table beside her, and slowly stood to her feet. She wondered what this was all about, what he had to say to her.

“You want to talk?” she asked.

Born shook his head no. He walked over to where she stood. Their faces were inches apart, he leaned down and kissed her softly. He saw the shocked expression on her face, and felt an unexpected fury overtake him. In that moment, he hated Jada for rejecting him. He had never been unfaithful to her—not once in all their years together. He was tired of being pushed aside. And he was well aware that Anisa would give anything for even one night in his arms. It made him feel good, knowing that someone still wanted him, even if it wasn’t the woman he truly loved.

He gripped her face in his large and powerful hands and kissed her like he meant it; his other hand fisted a handful of her hair and tugged at it roughly. Anisa didn’t mutter a protest. Instead, she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back with equal fervor. Her prayers had been answered at last.