

Urban Tango

A Novel by Regina Neequaye

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION
DATA HAS BEEN APPLIED FOR

ISBN 978-0971886001
LCCN 2015907358

Printed in the United States of America

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to give thanks to my creator. To my husband, Lamar Crowell, you are the best. I would like to thank my mother, Marjorie Renee Monnigan Reynolds, who gave me the gift of compassion. To my children, Reynolds, Jordan, and Monnighan, you guys have been my inspiration. To my sisters, Denise, Shela, and Vonetta your support and love is abounding

CHAPTER 1

I stand in front of the bathroom mirror in awe of Stacy's reflection. She lies on her stomach in the middle of my bed. Her full breasts are almost flat to the mattress. Her thick, black hair is haphazardly spread across the fluffy, down pillow. The covers have slid down exposing half of her rotund, firm chocolate bottom. I flush the used condom down the toilet and wash my hands. I am en route to her, holding my hard-on in my hand, ready for round two when her phone rings. She quickly leaves the bed and retrieves the phone from her purse. The curve of her hips, her toned, slightly bowed legs, and her firm, round breast turn me on. I stand close behind her and attempt to get her in the mood again. She moves my hand from between her legs and quickly grabs her robe.

"Shush," she places her index finger in front of pouty, succulent lips and whispers, "it's Ming Lee." I quickly move to the side fully out of view of the phone's camera. She accepts the request for a video connection and places the phone on the desk. The thin face Chinese woman with a British accent appears on the tiny display. She and Stacy trade a few niceties before quickly getting to business.

Mr. Ye is requesting an impromptu date with his personal companion. He has developed a strong affinity for his special young friend. He normally visits once per month; however, this will be the second for the month. I have never met Mr. Ye. I have never spoken to him. All communication is through Ming Lee and Stacy. Stacy informs me of the time and date of his arrivals, and I

coordinate the transportation with one of my drivers.

Mr. Ye is my favorite client. He receives special services. He transfers twenty-five thousand dollars to my offshore account in the Caymans every month to keep his companion personal. He is a top shelf client who pays for top shelf service. I immediately call Courtney. The phone rings three times and goes directly to her voicemail. I hang up and dial her cell. Again, the call goes straight to voicemail.

“Fucking bitch!”

“What’s wrong?” Stacy ends her call with Ming Lee, quickly strolls through her text messages, and places her phone back in her purse.

“We are going to have to do something about Courtney!”

“Besides you and me, who do you know is awake at 5:00 o’clock on a Saturday morning? She is probably asleep. Mr. Ye’s plane does not land until 8:00. He is not expecting Ashleigh until 9:00. That is five hours from now. We have a lot of time. Calm down.” She walks to the bathroom and stops in the middle of the threshold. “Do you want to join me?”

“You know I do not do romantic and mushy.” She laughs; she and I both know I am not joking. I have made it perfectly clear on more than one occasion this is a business with benefits arrangement. We both agree this works for us since we are together so much. Due to our line of business, we cannot afford serious outside relationships with people who will need accounts of our time. She sometimes forgets, but I have no problem reminding her and keeping her on track.

I lean back deep into the pillow. I am restless. My mind is occupied with Courtney. I replay Courtney’s behavior for the last month or so in my mind. My anger bounces between Courtney’s fuck ups and Stacy for not keeping her cousin in check.

The sound of the shower annoys me. She has the acupressure massage at full blast. The bathroom door is closed, but I can still hear the sound of the water hitting hard against the stone walls in the shower. I can only imagine what it is doing to her flesh. I dial Courtney’s number again. She does not answer. I throw the phone hard against the mattress and leave the bed.

“What are you doing?” I open the bathroom door and find Stacy squatting in front of the vanity.

“I am looking for shampoo. I need to wash my hair.”

"I don't have any!" I push her away, close the vanity door, and turn the shower off. "Don't go through my things!" I step over her wet body and walk to the toilet and relieve myself.

"I am not going through your things. I need to wash my hair." She pulls strands of her hair from the shower cap and brings them to her nose. "My hair smells like your sweat." She laughs. "I have a few days before my next salon visit."

"Don't go through my shit!"

"You are uptight. You should calm down. Call another driver."

"They are all tied up." Her nonchalance fuels my agitation. I flush the toilet and wash my hands. She follows me to the bedroom. She removes the shower cap from her head; a mass of thick, jet black hair falls out of the cap and down her back. She bends forward and gathers her hair to the top of her head and wraps a rubber band around it. The long, bouncy ponytail makes her look like a teenager. She loosens the towel; it falls to the floor. I expect to see bruising and discoloration from the massage jets, but her chocolate skin is flawless. The sight of perfect, firm melons on her chest makes my nature rise. I am too focused on Mr. Ye, his companion, and Courtney to do anything about it.

"I am going to leave now. I have errands to run. I will catch you around noon at the Chicken Shack. You do not have to pick me up. I will drive myself." She squeezes her perfect body into tight jeans, pulls her T-shirt over her head, and throws her bra and panties in her purse. I grab my robe and walk downstairs with her. She hugs me; I am uncomfortable but reluctantly return the embrace. She gathers her shoes and leaves.

I call Courtney again as I crack two eggs and drop them in the hot skillet. The call goes to voicemail. She has no more times to fuck up. I get rid of trouble before trouble starts. According to the rumor mill, she is using street pharmaceuticals again. I started to take care of her when the rumors first surfaced, but Stacy pleaded her case and convinced me the rumors come from people who do not want to let go of the past. I agreed with Stacy for a while, but I could no longer ignore the rumors when she almost fucked up a thirty thousand dollar deal a couple of months ago. She was a no-show for a very wealthy new client who paid fifty percent down for a companion for a five-day Mediterranean cruise. Lucky for Courtney, Stacy found a replacement. The replacement was not an

exact match. The skin color was a half-shade darker than Courtney's. Her no-show cut into our profit, as I gave the customer a twenty percent discount for his inconvenience. This business thrives on repeat customers, and customer service is my number one priority.

My goal is to give our customers exactly what they want. I hired one of the best programmers in the world to build and maintain an encrypted website so secure, the government's best programmers cannot hack into it. With the exception of Mr. Ye, my first and favorite international client, our clients log in, enter the desired dates to meet with their companions. The client has the option of choosing from a variety of characteristics, including eye color, hair color, hair texture, and skin pigmentation. Profiles of available companions and their sexual specialties populate. The client chooses his companion and wires the money to my off-shore account in the Caymans.

I guarantee my services. I would have made Courtney disappear for fucking up, but she is Stacy's cousin. I gave her a second chance. I limit her job to transportation, and she is fucking that up. I run a tight ship. My staff knows I don't play. In this business, everyone has to be on their game one hundred percent. Drug addicts and alcoholics lack discipline and have no place in this business.

I check my text messages as I walk up the stairs. Lailah, my children's mother, thanks me for the extra five grand I deposited in her account yesterday. She texts a picture of Kaycee, our eight-year-old daughter, and Jonathan our four-year-old son. I stare at my children's pictures and sometimes allow myself to dream, for a moment, that one day I will share a home with Lailah and my children with the white picket fence, the two car garage, and a dog named Fido. In reality, I know I am not equipped to be a husband or father. I see them when time permits. Besides, Lailah is too special to be affiliated with this game. I don't want her or the kids exposed to this life.

I straighten the covers, sit on the bed, and catch the last of the morning news. I am restless and cannot sit still. I pick up Stacy's wet towel from the floor and make a mental note to remind her to pick up after herself. I stare at the phone and contemplate dialing Courtney's number again. She has my mind fucked up. She is a distraction. If she is using, she risks bringing unwanted attention to

our organization. Something has to be done before she fucks it up for everyone. We have a multimillion dollar business. If the business continues to grow, I project in a year or so we will have a billion dollars in sales. Several national and international players depend on our business to stay discreet. A drug addict is unpredictable and has no place in this type of business. I take a quick shower and slide into an old pair of jeans. I open the vanity, slide the fake backing to the side, open the safe, and remove a few bills from a stack of cash hidden under a small manila envelope.

I have been out of the street game for years, but I never gave up my pass. I drive to Buckhead and stop at an old acquaintance's house to make a quick purchase, then drive to the train station. I park my car at the Lindbergh station and ride one stop to the Buckhead Station. I exit the train with my sun visor pulled close to my head. My sunglasses cover my eyes. I stop at the neighborhood store and pick up bread, milk, eggs and enough canned goods to fill two grocery bags, and walk three blocks to her sky rise apartment. I walk towards the side of the building, careful to keep my face away from the cameras. I inconspicuously wait with the two bags filled with groceries in both of my arms for a resident to enter or exit the building. I have digital access, but I don't want this visit recorded. I walk the ten flights of stairs to her apartment with my head turned away from the security cameras. I knock on the wooden door, but she does not answer. I pull my sleeve over my finger and press the numbers on the keypad to unlock the door.

The smell of rotten food hits me like a ton of bricks as I enter the foyer. I am filled with anger when I notice a sink filled with dishes and a sea of empty takeout containers on the counter. I kick a plastic garbage bag half-filled with trash to the side as I make my way to the living room. I walk to the front of the leather sofa and find Courtney sprawled out in her bra and panties. Her hair is wet and slick to her head. Mascara is smudged around her puffy eyes. I look at my watch; it is 8:00. She should be dressed and ready for the day. I stand in front of her. She does not notice my presence until I raise her arm. Tiny black holes the size of a pin head mark the inside of her arm and the back of her hand.

"Jefferson" It takes several minutes for her to focus. She attempts to stand; she grabs the side of her head, then slowly sits down. "What's up baby?"

"You tell me; I had a job for you. I have been calling you all

fucking morning!”

“What time is it?” She uses her fingers to remove thick, crusty sleep from her puffy eyes. She struggles to focus on the crystal clock on the side of the table. “Damn, baby I am sorry. It won’t take me long to get ready.” She slowly stands and pulls her arms high over her head exposing unshaven armpits. I step back and away from her as the putrid smell of musk from her underarms mixed with the stench of unwashed ass assaults my nostrils. “You have a job for me?”

“Don’t worry about it baby. The client has been taken care of.”

“I am sorry, Jefferson. I had a late night. I hung out with some friends from Vegas I have not seen in a while.” Her apology is sincere, but much too late. “I will be on it next time.” She stands, stretches, and walks to the bathroom. She appears to not notice she is half-dressed; her only clothing is her bra and panties. I follow close behind. She opens the medicine cabinet, removes a white pill from a folded napkin, and pops it in her mouth. She grabs an open bottle of water from the shelf over the commode. “It’s a muscle relaxer.”

“You need something stronger? I got what you need right here.” I reach in my pocket and remove a baggie of uncut heroin and dangle it in front of her.

“Jefferson, you got me wrong.” Beads of perspiration congregate on her forehead. She scratches the inside of her arm incessantly. Thick saliva forms in the corners of her mouth. “You know I know better. I don’t do that shit anymore.” She is so focused on the baggie in my hand, it is as if she is talking to the baggie instead of me.

“That’s not what I heard. My Buckhead connection says you are a regular for heroin and ecstasy.” She turns away. Her nervous tics confirm she is a heavy user. “I hear you got fired from the nonprofit for not calling and not coming in for an entire week. Everyone has to keep a job to look on the up and up!” I look around at the upscale downtown condominium she rents on paper from my offshore corporation. “How will you explain your ability to pay this high ass rent if you are ever questioned?”

“You’re right, Jefferson, but it wasn’t my fault. Those people...” She cannot complete a thought or finish a sentence. “I don’t know what you heard, but I am not using.” I step closer to

her. The stench of metabolized heroin seeps through her pores. She steps back and away from me. She loses her balance and falls in the bath tub, landing with both feet in the air. I grab her feet and spread her toes. Black marks surrounded by puss-filled blisters sit in the cracks between her toes. "Courtney, you know better!" I throw her foot to the side. We are both startled by the loud echo as her feet hit the shower.

"I am so sorry, Jefferson." She puts her hands together as if she is praying. "Shit got so hard. You know my mother will not allow me to visit my kids and..."

"It is okay; don't worry about it. Has anyone been here?" I look around for evidence of lowlife drug dealers and desperate drug addicts. I open the bathroom closet and find size 12 men's Timberland boots. I look under the cabinet and find two different bottles of male cologne. An oversized men's Obey sweat shirt and a dingy pair of hi-end designer jeans lay unfolded on top of the hamper.

"I swear on everything, I am sorry, Jefferson!" Her lips quiver as she speaks. Her carotid artery beats so hard, it looks as if there is a jumping bean in her neck. "I will pull it together; ain't nobody been here but my brother. I never cop here." I feel like smacking her across the face for insulting my intelligence. Her only brother is locked up, doing a ten-year bid for stupid shit.

She grabs the handle on the side of the bathtub and attempts to pull herself out. I stand and watch her struggle. After several unsuccessful attempts, she lets go of the handle and falls back in the tub. I offer my hand; she takes it. I pull her out. She stands close in front of me. "I am really sorry." She flirtatiously bats her eyes. "Let me make it up to you." She smiles, showing yellow, decaying teeth as she rubs her thin body against me. She takes my hand and leads me to the bedroom. I grab the open bottle of water and willingly follow. She grabs what looks like a month of dirty clothes from the bed and throws them on the floor. The drugs have made her lose her mind. She knows, and everyone who works for me knows, with the exception of Stacy, I don't get down with employees.

"Don't worry about it, Courtney; everything is cool." Dark circles surround her eyes. Stress lines cover a prematurely aging face that was flawless two months ago. "I am going to make you feel good; take your mind off of everything." She lies on the bed

and leans back on two oversized pillows. I sit next to her and open the small baggie filled with uncut heroin. She quickly opens the night stand and pulls out her gear. She is so anxious she doesn't notice the thick black leather gloves that cover my hands. Her hand trembles as if she has a neurological disorder. She struggles to get the rubber band around her arm.

"Let me help you, baby." I take the rubber band and tie it as tight as I can. I remove the syringe and metal spoon from my pocket. I place the heroin on a spoon, mix in a couple of drops of water, melt it with a lighter, and fill the syringe with as much of the warm, bubbly liquid it can hold. I rub my thumbs over her desecrated veins, find a good injection spot, and insert the needle.

"Slow, baby, you got to do it slow." I ignore her and quickly push all of the poison in her arm. She leans back against the upholstered leather headboard. Her eyelids flutter and slowly close. A euphoric smile stretches across her face. After several minutes, she slowly opens her eyes and stares at the wall. I almost pity her. She was never smart, but she had a perfect body and a beautiful face. Small craters now cover her honey brown cheeks. She lost a lot of weight much too quickly, causing the elasticity in her skin to diminish. Courtney very much needed her good looks to make up for her lack of intelligence and common sense. She has no self-confidence and is a magnet to losers.

Her head falls to the side. She struggles to hold meaningful conversation. The heroin that flows through her veins is pure and uncut. Her eyes slowly roll back in her head. Her gaze is peaceful. She mumbles, but her words are inaudible. I sit in the chair next to her bed and watch the clock.

"This is some good shit! You got a little more?" The high is wearing off. Her speech is still slurred and labored; it is as if the space in her mouth is too small to accommodate her tongue.

"Sure, baby, anything for you." I sit on the side of the bed, tighten the rubber band around her limp arm, empty last of the poison from the baggie onto the spoon, and melt it. I siphon the liquid in the syringe and stick the needle in her arm. Her mouth curves into a slight smile. Her head slowly falls back against the headboard. Her breathing is soft and slow, almost like a sleeping baby. I look at my watch. Five minutes have passed. Her body jolts forward and begins to shake uncontrollably. She is stiff as a board. Spittle, thick like milk, flows from her mouth. Her head falls

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forward; her chin sits awkwardly on her chest. Her eyes are wide open; I take my glove covered hand and close her eyes. I leave the needle stuck in her arms and turn off the lights. I grab the empty baggie and cigarette lighter and place them in a pocket of the jeans that lay on the hamper. I wipe down everything my hands touched and leave with plenty of time to transport the companion to my favorite client.

Chapter 2

It is 4:30. I have completed five of the ten tasks on my “Things To Do” list. Osei hates when I bring work home, but I have to do what I have to do. He used to be my biggest supporter and number one fan. He has changed and become resentful of the time and energy I spend advancing my career. I reluctantly shut down my computer and shove files in my briefcase. My cell rings. I ignore it and organize my desk for next week. It has been ringing off and on for the last hour. The constant ringing is annoying. I grab the phone, change the setting to vibrate, and drop it in my pocket, but the caller is persistent. The vibration from the phone drives me crazy. I reach into my pocket, feel for the decline button, and forward the call to voicemail. It is killing me not to answer. It’s Friday; I meet Osei and the kids for dinner every Friday after work. I should have left thirty minutes ago to avoid rush hour traffic. I lock my file cabinet, grab my things, and walk to the elevator. I reach the parking deck, and the phone begins to vibrate again. I remove it from my pocket and look at the display. It is Detective Davis. I throw my things in the backseat of my car, sit in the driver’s seat, and reluctantly return the call.

“Detective Davis,” he answers after the first ring.

“Why are you blowing up my phone? It’s Friday, and it is almost five o’clock.” I glance at my watch. I should not have returned the call. Time is quickly passing, and there is a pit bull waiting for me with my children at Benihana’s.

“Ayanna,” he chuckles. “You are just as married to that chair in the District Attorney’s office as I am to mine at Precinct East.” Unfortunately, my husband will probably agree with him, but the truth is that chair in the District Attorney’s office will lead to greater opportunities.

“Quiet as it’s kept, Detective Davis, I have a life, and it is waiting for me at Benihana’s.”

“I know; but give me a few minutes. I have a surprise for you. I will be at the detention center in two minutes. Meet me in front of the Intake Desk at the female entrance. You will not believe who is sitting handcuffed in the back of my car.”

“Who is it?” I turn my wrist inward and glance at my watch again. Time is quickly passing.

“It is a surprise, a big one; I will see you in two minutes.” If I am late for dinner, there will be hell to pay, but business is business. I leave my car in the garage, grab my purse and clipboard, and jaywalk across the street to the detention center. Davis is at the Intake Desk when I arrive. A handcuffed female dressed in high end fashion stumbles in front of him. She looks out of place amongst the other female detainees waiting in line to be processed into the jail. “This is one of my presents to you.” A female detention officer escorts Davis’ prisoner through the X-ray check point. Detective Davis instructs the detention officer to pat her down and take her to an interrogation room on the female side of the jail.

“Who is she?” I don’t know where he is going with this and wonder why he believes his detainee is a present to me. “Where did you find her?” The handcuffed female with blue eye shadow and two shades too light pink lipstick smudged on her lips looks more like a child than a woman. Her body looks out of place in the high end Gucci Stilettos and the body fitting black dress. I can’t think of the designer, but I have seen this dress in one of the high-end fashion magazines I subscribe to.

“We detained her during a prostitution sting at one of the five star hotels in midtown; an undercover officer saw her leave the hotel with a suspicious, middle-aged Asian male before getting into a white Range Rover.”

“She does not look like a typical streetwalker.” I inconspicuously glance at her shoes and examine the intricate stitching and the logo; they are authentic. Her high end, sexy and classy attire is not usually worn by common prostitutes. “I hope you arrested the men as well.”

“We arrested the man in the white Range Rover.”

“Only one of them?”

“We tried to detain and arrest both men.” I look over my glasses. Davis looks over his. “The Asian gentleman is a foreign diplomat. He refused to answer questions. Within minutes of

detaining him, a representative from the Chinese embassy was on the scene. After he flashed his credentials and requested diplomatic immunity, we had to release him to his embassy. We believe the white Range Rover belongs to her pimp.”

“Oh.” I try not to be rude, but I hope like hell he has not interrupted my evening to inform me of a pimp and his hooker’s arrest. The pit bull and my kids are waiting for me. I am in no mood for confrontation. Last Friday, Osei blew a fuse because I was 15 minutes late.

“And guess who the pimp is?” I balance my weight on one leg, fold my arms across my chest, and wait for disclosure. “Jefferson Thomas.” My thoughts travel from zero to a hundred in minus two seconds. I quickly glance at my watch. Osei and the kids are expecting me in less than ten minutes, but this is the best news I have had all day. Jefferson Thomas, as he is now known, is one of the cockiest, ruthless criminals that have crossed my path. He seduced many of the occupants in City Hall with campaign funds and monetary bribes. He is Ivy League educated with a thuggish modus operandi.

He, along with his suit wearing crew of thugs, turned Mason Hills, Dixie Falls, and half of the Fourth Ward into a zombie land of oxycodone, crack, and meth addicts. He and his cohorts single handedly destroyed what was once a strong and affluent, upper middle class, African American community. Most of the businesses in the communities were owned by black people who actually resided in the community. The community was home to the largest concentration of educated blacks in the nation; however, education and affluence could not compete with residents who became the dope fiends that lived in the community or the fiends that came into the community from the suburbs to purchase illegal drugs. The dope fiends ran customers of once thriving businesses away. Jefferson and his cohorts used politicians he bribed with campaign contributions and City Hall staff on his payroll to change zoning codes. Locally owned boutiques, bookstores, and flower shops were replaced with pawn shops, liquor stores, and other cash-based businesses that were fronts to funnel proceeds from illegal activities. Between the constant thievery and the turf shootouts, many family-owned businesses that were part of the community landscape for decades were forced to board up and close shop. The demographics of the community quickly changed. Residents who

could afford to leave left in droves. Many high-priced homes were boarded up and abandoned. Those that remained lived in self-made prisons. Security firms made a fortune. Windows covered with burglar bars and steel doors became the norm. Because of his connections, Jefferson got away with his illegal enterprises for many years.

He travels in the right circles amongst politicians, bankers, and big money investors. He inconspicuously slithered his way onto many civic boards and charitable organizations. He is able to disguise his nefarious ways by sponsoring events for underprivileged youth and the elderly in the community. His enterprise would have continued to thrive until the neighborhood was zoned a weed and seed community. An influx of mostly white, upper middle class to wealthy homeowners desiring quick and easy access to downtown purchased properties and became active in the community and eventually voted the old guards out of political office. The politicians that remained realigned themselves with the new guard and were forced to act as he expanded his enterprise and drug addicts started showing up in classrooms in some of the most prestigious, private schools in town.

The District Attorney's office worked with the police department and spent hundreds of thousands of dollars trying to build a case against him. When we finally had enough evidence to get an indictment, the witnesses began dropping like flies. Those he did not manage to kill or have killed were so afraid that even under the threat of racketeering charges and possible federal indictments, they refused to testify. Without crucial testimonies, there was no choice but to withdraw the indictment.

I was crushed. Jefferson Thomas was my first unsuccessful prosecution. He became an instant celebrity. He slandered the District Attorney's office and the police department in the many media interviews after the dismissal. His lawyer filed over two hundred ethics complaints against me and the District Attorney's office. Answering each complaint was extremely time consuming and stressful. The grueling hours of interrogation from the ethics boards were so overwhelming that I was prescribed three different medications to deal with the stress.

"So we get another shot?" I glance at my watch as I walk down the hall to the interrogation room. At this point, I am ten minutes late to dinner. Ten minutes or an hour will not make a

difference. Osei has very little tolerance for tardiness. I am going to get the cold shoulder regardless; it might as well be worth it.

“Hey, Ms. Sexy Prosecutor you’re still looking good girl. It has been a long time since we last tangoed.” He licks his lips and scans my body from head to toe as I enter the bright interrogation room. His cold, dark eyes make me uncomfortable. “I thought that African would have you on lockdown, barefoot and pregnant again. I haven’t seen you in years. How is the family?” His slick smile makes me want to throw up. “How is that pretty little girl? If my calculations are correct, she should be about eight. Am I right?” He attempts to stand; the officer shoves him back in his seat. “Watch yourself, man!” Jefferson is sitting, yet his head and the standing detention officer’s head are almost level.

“Don’t get up again!” The officer is unthreatened and unmoved by Jefferson’s tall and muscular physique, as he knows cadres of his fellow detention officers are on guard outside with batons and Tasers, ready to invade the tiny interrogation room at a moment’s notice.

“Motherfucker!” He brushes his shoulders and stares intensely at the detention officer. “This cost more than your monthly salary.”

“Donate it to charity; you won’t need that suit where you are going.” The detention officer continues to stand at attention and is completely unmoved by Jefferson’s antics and attempt to intimidate.

“Where are we going, Ayanna?” He ignores the detention officer.

“Mr. Thomas, please address me as Ms. Williams. We are not personal acquaintances.”

“Oh, it’s like that?” His eyes are lifeless, cold, and void of all emotion; his fake smile disappears. “You cost me a fortune in legal fees. You have made several attempts to ruin my good name. The way I see it, we are connected like family. Fuck the formalities!” His mouth widens into a smile, but his eyes are blank and remain dark and deadly. He looks at the clock on the wall, then at the Rolex on his toned, muscular arms. “You should check that clock; it is off a few seconds. Why am I here? Where is that young lady I picked up? Is she okay?” A disingenuous expression of concern designed to mock is plastered on his dark, chiseled face. “I don’t remember exactly what she said, but she said something about someone harassing her and needing a ride. Did she get to her

destination?”

“You are funny.” I wrap my arms around my clipboard and hold it tight against my chest. “I believe she will testify you are her pimp. Mr. Thomas, this is low even for you. She is 14, maybe 15? You may be looking at other charges as well. We don’t play the pimp game in this city! We’re especially tough on lowlife thugs who pimp children.”

“Ayanna, oh, I forgot. Excuse me. Ms. Williams, you are funny. Pimp? Please don’t insult me. Do I look like a pimp?” He laughs as he extends his arm outward revealing a diamond ring so big, it had to be custom made. “I am a self-made businessman. You tried to destroy me, yet I am still successful. Pimp? Ask her she will tell you; she said something about someone harassing her or something. Hell, I really can’t remember. I was simply doing my civic duty assisting a young lady in distress. I am just a concerned citizen trying to help a fellow citizen in need.”

“Mr. Thomas, that’s your story; stick to it. I hope that works out for you, but I have every intention of ripping that story to shreds, just as I plan to rip you to shreds.”

“Still a tiger, I see.” He roars like a vicious feline and puckers his lips. “I look forward to it, Ayanna. I look forward to this second dance.” His cold, dark eyes are piercing. They emanate an evil so powerful, I cannot maintain contact. “Just make sure you follow the rules this time. We don’t want another scandal in the District Attorney’s office. I am sure you do not need another ethics investigation.” The smirk on his face is nauseating. “I was speaking with one of the city council members the other day. I hear, in spite of the number of cases you have lost lately, City Hall still has big plans for you. You don’t want to ruin that.” I glance at my watch to avoid eye contact. I hold my clipboard close with one hand and open the door with the other. I take a quick look at my nemesis and exit the interrogation room.

Osei is going to be pissed. I should call and explain my tardiness, but at this point, it is useless. I walk down the musty hall to the female interrogation room on the other side of the building. The child dressed like a celebrity at a red carpet premiere looks out of place sitting in a brown, lopsided, wooden, hard back chair. Her expensive stilettos lie recklessly on the stained concrete floor. Her skinny legs dangle under the grey, metal, graffiti covered table.

“Hello, I am Mrs. Williams. I work for the District Attorney’s

office. If you don't mind, I need to ask you a few questions." I place my clipboard on the table and slowly move the wooden chair next to her away from the table. I discretely take in her facial features as I sit in the chair. Up close, she looks about twelve, and no older than thirteen. She still has those last stubborn remnants of baby fat in her cheeks.

"Look bitch, I ain't got shit to say!" She crosses her legs and leans back in the chair. "Take my ass to juvenile hall!" Her voice has the pitch of a child much younger than the seventeen she is claiming to be.

"Well, it's not that simple. Since you say you are seventeen, we will have to put you in the adult population."

"Bitch, please!" She stands, pops her neck back and forth while making various designs in the air with her finger. "I know my fucking rights. Get your ass to a fucking phone, call juvi, and tell them to pick my ass up!" She pops her neck and waves her index finger back and forth with each syllable. "I am a damned minor! Y'all mother fuckers need to stop fucking asking me so many damn questions! I need to see my damn lawyer!"

"What is your lawyer's name? I will call him for you." I remove my phone from my pocket. My eyes are glued to my clipboard as I wait for her to provide the phone number. Her antics are so hilarious, it is hard for me to contain my laughter.

"Fuck, I don't know, that's why I got a damn lawyer!"

"I don't understand why you guys have this baby behind the glass! You should have the pimp and the John behind this damn glass!" Miss Thing and I both jump in our seats as Mary, the bohemian county social worker, abruptly enters the interrogating room in her signature flowing dashiki. She has worked for the county much too long and really needs to consider retirement. A new crop of juveniles have entered the system, yet she behaves as if we are living in the time when kids came in the system for stealing from the grocery store, truancy, or running away from home. This new crop are gun toting, dope dealing, and angry as hell. "This city is a hub for human trafficking. We should be looking her up in the system, trying to figure out where she belongs." She folds her arms across her chest. "Mrs. Williams, you are out of order! You are aware it is against regulations to question a minor without a representative from child services present."

"The minor states she is 17."

“Well, it is obvious she is not.”

“About time someone with some fucking sense!” Little Ms. Thing sits down, pops her neck one last time, folds her little arms across her not so developed chest, and rolls her eyes so far back in her head, her eyeballs almost disappear.

“We arrested Jefferson, your pimp.” I ignore Mary’s diatribe and continue the interview.

“Pimp?” She slowly slides to the back of her chair; her demeanor changes. She appears genuinely confused. “Who is Jefferson?”

“I am not someone for you to play with! You and your pimp were arrested together! You are well acquainted with Jefferson Thompson!” I move closer; our faces almost touch. “I am going to have him released, and he is going to be angry. I am going to make him think you talked.”

“Do you, bitch, I don’t know anyone named Jefferson Thompson.” She tries hard to maintain the strong, hard persona, but I sense fear seeping through her cracking armor.

“What will Jefferson do when he thinks you talked?” Her acting skills are superb. Her denial of Jefferson is almost believable. I stand and leave her sitting to mull over Jefferson’s anger and the consequences of thinking she talked.

“Don’t worry, honey; we are going to get you home.” Mary behaves as if I am invisible. She sits in the chair on the other side of Little Miss Thing and gently wraps one arm around her shoulder. Her motherly affection to this wayward child annoys me. I am surprised Davis called child services so soon. If he wanted to give me an opportunity to have a productive interview with the child, he should have waited at least two hours before calling child services.

I leave and allow Mary her motherly moment. I rush out of the building and sprint across the street to my car, praying they are still at the restaurant. I am always late. I hate it, but I have to do what I have to do. My next career move is District Attorney, a move that will take me to the State, then Federal bench. Although I have lost my last three cases, the county and state brass continues to vet me for District Attorney upon D.A. Leslie’s retirement. They still have faith in my ability to lead the District Attorney’s office. I will not get there doing mediocre work. The last three not guilty verdicts surprised me. I can usually get the defendants to take a

plea deal. The meanest thug will cry, beg, and plead for mercy when faced with a fifty-year sentence and will jump over backwards for a ten-year deal instead. Somehow, these last three defendants were able to retain lawyers. They were basic street thugs nickeling and diming marijuana and oxycodone pills. Two lived at home with their mothers, and one lived with his girlfriend.

They had 'hood money; but in real world economics, they were poor. Where they got the money for legal representation is a mystery; as long as the lawyers get paid, they could care less where the money comes from. I work hard to present good cases on behalf of the citizens of the county. If it takes working twenty-hour days, I will work twenty-one. My career path takes a lot of time away from the kids which is why I was surprised when Osei, who grew up with many nannies and housekeepers, refused my request for a nanny to help with the children. I understand his desire to be a hands-on parent, but when you can afford help, why not use it?

I glance at my watch. A burning sensation travels from my stomach to my throat. I reach in my purse for an antacid pill. My underarms are drenched with perspiration. The thought of dealing with Osei's attitude makes me anxious. I drive so fast that I hit the curve turning into the restaurant's parking lot. I quickly shift the transmission to park. I do not wait for the valet to come to the car. I jump out of the car, give the keys to the valet, and walk briskly inside. They are finishing dessert when I arrive.

"I am sorry. I got stuck at the office." He does not acknowledge me; I bend forward to kiss Osei on the lips. He turns away; my lips brush against his clean shaven cheek instead.

"Hey Mommy" OJ, as usual, is warm and happy to see me.

"Hi, Mom," Che' takes a queue from Osei and painstakingly greets me. Her greeting is dry and sounds as if it has taken every molecule in her body to get it out. Unfortunately, her demeanor is usual as well.

"You could have called." He makes no eye contact as he reads messages on his phone.

"I know; I lost track of time. I had to sit in on a very important interrogation and..."

"Are you going to order?" His tone is firm. He interrupts me as if I am one of his subordinates. I am not surprised; I expected his rudeness. Lately, I am surprised when he is cordial.

"I will have my meal to go." I scan the dinner menu for a

seafood entre. I feel guilty for missing dinner, but in this case it was worth it. Osei will have to understand that my career is flourishing and requires a lot of time away, but I will try to do better at managing my time. “How was work today?” I quickly change the subject in a futile attempt to change his ill mood.

“I thought we agreed to stop talking about work when we are spending family time with the kids.” He finally makes eye contact, but instead of love in his eyes, I see contempt.

“Apologies.” I take a sip of the warm wine in front of me. “Che’, how was school?”

“Good” she answers never taking her eyes away from the smart phone Osei purchased for her against my wishes. Her directness is disrespectful. Osei usually corrects her, but he behaves as if he does not hear her. This child is only eight-years-old. I thought the “I hate my mom” thing starts at puberty. “I already told Daddy about school, but as usual, you were not around.” Her wit and sarcasm is that of an adult. Osei can take full credit for the way Che’ behaves, as she is often present when he puts me down. His insults are subtle, but Che’ is smart and has picked up on the cracks in our once united front.

“I’ll tell you about my day Mommy.”

“Okay, baby, tell Mommy about your day.” If it were not for OJ, I would not feel part of this family.

“It’s time to go” Osei rudely interrupts OJ as he glances at his watch. He calls the waitress for the check. “You have a soccer game tomorrow. You need to get a good night sleep so you can kick a few goalies.”

“OJ, you can ride with Mommy and tell me about it in the car on the way home.”

Osei pays the check, takes both of the children’s hands and leaves the table. “Daddy, I want to ride with Mommy.” OJ attempts to pull away from his father; Osei tightens his grip. He exits the restaurant and walks towards the valet, dragging a resistant OJ behind him.

“Not tonight, your seat is in my car.”

“Mommy has a seat in her car.” Osei holds tight to OJ’s hand, and ignores his protest as they stand in front of the restaurant and wait for the valet to bring his car.

“It’s okay, OJ; tell me about your day on the way to soccer tomorrow.”

“Hopefully, she can make it on time.” Osei takes the keys from the valet. He secures the children in his car and leaves me standing alone at the entrance as I wait for mine.