

The Hill

By Brian Eldridge

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-Brian Eldridge

Chapter 1

The overhead light in the cab was very dim. At just past 8:00 the sun was down and nighttime was creeping over the city. Sitting alone in his cab, Reginald sang to himself.

"I think that a song... Should be something more than a beautiful melody..."

A knock on the window broke his concentration. Reginald rolled down the window and saw a white man in dark suit. "I need a ride. Open up," demanded the man. "No-can-do pal. I'm off duty," Reginald said. "Open the damn door. I will pay you double your normal fair," said the man.

Reginald pondered for a moment. "I could use the money," thought Reginald. "Get in man," he said as he unlocked the door. The man got into the car. "Where we headed," asked Reginald. "Image Records, 3rd Ave South. You know where that is right," asked the man. Butterflies built up in Reginald's stomach. "Yes, I know where that is," he said as he pulled off into the traffic.

"So what do you do at Image," asked Reginald. The man didn't say anything. He stared blankly out the window of the cab. "Hey man, are you alright," asked Reginald. "Can you just not talk to me? I'm thinking," said the man. "Dog, I'm not asking for taxi cab confessions or nothing. I'm just trying to find out what you do, that's it," laughed Reginald.

The man took a deep breath and looked down. Reginald's eyes bounced back and forth between the street and the rear-view mirror. "I'm an Artist and Repertoire guy for Image," he said mumbling. "You're an A&R guy for Image," Reginald asked excitedly. "Yeah, that's me," grumbled the man. "Shit dude, there's no way I'd be all down in the dumps with a gig like that," Reginald laughed.

The man looked irritated. He squinted as he stared at Reginald's eyes through the rear-view mirror. Reginald's smile quickly left his face. "Not that it's any of your business, but I'm on my last legs there," said the man. "What? You can't find talent in this city man," asked Reginald. "Look, not to toot my own horn, but I'm a singer and song-writer," continued Reginald. The man shook his head with disgust. "Do you know how many talentless sacks of shit I see every day? Everybody believes they can sing. Damn American Idol rejects," yelled the man.

"Look man, I know I can sing," replied Reginald. "As a matter of fact, I sing three nights a week with my band at The Hill," he continued. "My name is Reginald, but my folks call me Reggie or Reg," Reginald said as he reached back to shake the man's hand. The man reluctantly reached out and shook Reginald's hand. "I'm Craig Martin," said the man.

Craig seemed to go into deep thought. "So you sing at The Hill," asked Craig. "I hear that place is not good for your health," Craig finished.

"Listen man, it's a shit hole, that's the honest to God," said Reginald. "Me and the owner grew up together, so he gave me a job as a house act. They're open six nights a week and three nights a week they have some kind of drama going down," said Reginald. Craig snickered. "What about the other three nights," he asked. Reginald smiled slightly. "Those are the nights that I sing," said Reginald. Craig smiled at Reginald. "I like you kid," said Craig. "I don't know why, but you are the first person to make me laugh today," Craig said.

Reginald felt this might be his opportunity to make a connection. "Mister Martin, I'd be forever grateful if you would just come by Tuesday night and listen to us," said Reginald. "I promise you, we won't disappoint you," pleaded Reginald. Craig sat quietly for a moment. "Could this be my break," Craig asked himself. "Yeah, I'll be there. What time," asked Craig. "Hell yeah," exclaimed Reginald. "Umm, just come by around 8," said Reginald. "Don't waste my time kid. As a matter of fact, we've got a couple of minutes before we get to the studio. Sing me something, anything," asked Craig.

"Anything," asked Reginald. "Yeah, just sing, we don't have much time," said Craig.

Reginald thought for a moment. Then he cleared his throat.

"I see us in the park

Strolling the summer days

Of imaginings in my head.

And words from our hearts

Told only to the winds

Felt even without being said.

I don't want to bore you with my trouble

But there's something 'bout your love

That makes me weak and knocks me off my feet.

There's something 'bout your love

That makes me weak and knocks me off my feet

Knocks me off my feet.

I don't want to bore you with it

Oh but I love you

I love you

I love you.

I don't want to bore you with it

Oh but I love you

I love you

I love you more and more."

Craig's eyes bulged out of his head. "Jesus Christ kid, why are you singing at that hole in the wall," he asked. They pulled up in front of the studio. "Here, take my card. And how much do I owe you for the ride," asked Craig. "Man, you just paid me. We're even," said Reginald. "Tuesday night, 8 sharp," said Craig as he exited the cab. "I'll see you then Mister Martin, thank you," said Reginald.

Reginald pulled off and headed towards the cab depot. He couldn't wipe the smile from his face. As he pulled up to the stoplight, he felt a vibration on his hip. He reached down and checked the caller ID on his cell phone. "Brandie," Reginald said to himself. "Hey beautiful," he said. "Reg, what are you doing tonight," asked Brandie. "Celebrating! I've got some great news," Reginald exclaimed. "What's going on babe," asked Brandie. "An A&R guy from Image is coming to listen to the crew on Tuesday night," said Reginald with a huge grin on his face.

"Oh baby, that's wonderful, but don't get your hopes up," said Brandie. "You know what happened last time the talent scout came," Brandie said. "It's not going down that way this time, Brandie," said Reginald. "Them niggas can't play," said Brandie. "You sing so well a cappella, but they mess you up," said Brandie. "Brandie, they've been there for me for years. I've got to give them an opportunity," said Reginald. "You gave them a chance last time," said Brandie. "Do you want to make an impression on this guy," asked Brandie. "Of course," said Reginald. "Cut them bums loose," said Brandie.

Chapter 2

"Baby, I can't do that," Reginald replied. "We've been friends since yay high," he continued. "I understand that Reggie. But you have to think about your future," said Brandie. "Okay baby, I respect your opinion, but we have to let this go," Reginald replied. "I'll cross that bridge when I get to it."

"Okay love, I have to go to work. Call me in the morning, please," asked Brandie. "I will call first thing," Reginald replied. "Bye," she said, hanging up the phone.

Reginald pulled up at the cab depot. Carl his boss stepped out to check the meter. "Reggie, I'm impressed," he said. "You make us a pretty penny everyday," Carl continued. Carl handed Reginald his paycheck and shook his hand. "Thanks Carl, I'll catch you later," Reginald said as he walked out of the depot.

At 22, Reginald didn't own a car. He typically drove his cab wherever he needed to go. He took care of his business while on duty, and somehow he made it work. As he

walked, he always sang to himself and thought about lyrics for his own original songs. He didn't live far from the depot and The Hill was a quarter bus ride from the corner across from his apartment.

While he wasn't making it big, he never asked for help from anybody. He always wanted another opportunity to show his talents. His chance had finally reappeared.

"I've got to make the most of this one," Reginald said to himself as he walked. "Can't screw it up this time," he thought.

Reginald thought back to the last time there was a talent scout at The Hill to see him and The Crew.

It was raining like the great flood outside. The crowd was still buzzing. Everybody knew that Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays meant Reggie and The Crew would perform. Women and men felt that those were must see events for many different reasons.

The women who listened to Reggie loved his voice. He had great range. He didn't sing many of his own songs, but he would sing a couple of Luther Vandross cuts and bring the house down. Rumor has it that there's one drawer in the dressing room full of panties that have been thrown on stage during his performances.

The guys that came to hear Reginald wanted to see him make it big. They wanted to say that they "remember him when..." Most of all, they were there because the women were there. And when women heard him sing, they'd get hot. So while Reginald warmed the ladies up, the guys scooped them up.

This evening, Duane, the owner of the club, and one of Reginald's close friends sold all the drinks at half price. Everyone was having a great time. Duane wanted the place jumping because tonight was special. Claude Donaldson, a man with a lot of clout at Image, was in the crowd. Duane knew that Claude was there and he explained to Reginald and the Crew that this was their night to shine.

"Shit, this is fucking awesome," yelled Vance. "I can't believe that there's a guy from Image in the audience," he continued. "Calm down son," said Tommy. Tommy put his hand on Vance's shoulder and looked at Reginald. "Are you ready, because you know I'm ready and my sax is ready," said Tommy. "Yeah, he's ready, you know how Reggie focuses when it's a big show," Farley commented. Farley reached out and gave Reginald a fist pound. "Weee reeedy, weee reeedy, weee reeedy for y'aaaalll," yelled Vance while playing drums in the air. "Farley, get your brother. Light one up for him. He needs to calm down," Reginald laughed. Just then, the door opened.

"Did somebody say something about some smoke," asked Hank, one of Duane's bouncers. "What y'all got on the fifty," he asked laughing. "Nothing right now, let's get

out there," said Farley. They all slowly get up and stand in a circle. "Fists in the middle," Vance said. They all put their fists in the circle. "We crew," yelled the men.

"We're starting off with 'A House is Not a Home,'" said Reginald. "After that, I want to try 'Crazy Love' and 'Charlene'. We'll take a break and then do requests after that. Dig it," asked Reginald. "Let's do it," said Farley.

The Crew came out to a standing applause. "Show some love for The Crew," yelled the DJ into the mic over the applauding masses. "You've got my nigga Vance on percussion! Tommy on the alto-sax! Farley is back there banging the ivory! And finally, the man, Reggie Morgan," announced the DJ. The applause was deafening. Even Claude was on his feet. Duane sat just to the side of the stage next to Claude.

As the show went on, the crowd remained on their feet. The place was packed to the rafters. They must have broken the fire code laws that night.

During the show, Duane was in Claude's ear. "Do you see what we've got here, my brotha," whispered Duane in his deep southern drawl. "They got talent, they just need a break," he continued. "Why do you care? What is it to you," asked Claude. Duane sat back in his seat and lit a cigar. "These my boys, and you discovering them here makes The Hill look good," he said with a smile, his gold fronts shining.

"Son, an extreme makeover couldn't make this place look *good*," laughed Claude. "But it is impressive that you've got this kind of talent as a house act," Claude continued. "I like him and I'd like to meet with Reggie after the show," said Claude. "*Him*? What about the others," asked Duane. "They are an average house band, nothing special," Claude remarked. "That Reggie kid is special," he finished.

Duane put out his cigar and put his hands over his face. "How am I supposed to tell them that," he asked. "That's not my problem," said Claude. Duane shook his head as he stood up and headed back stage.

At the end of the show, the group received a standing ovation. "We love you, much love to The Hill," Reginald said into the mic. They all waved to the crowd as they left the stage. "I'm gonna get some ass tonight buddy," exclaimed Vance. "Did you see the honey in the pink by the bar," he asked. "She called my name all the way through the show and she's gonna call it more tonight," laughed Vance. The guys laughed at Vance as they walked into the dressing room.

They saw a stone-faced Duane standing there, arms crossed. "What's up D," asked Farley. "Nothing," said Duane. "Reggie, go see Claude, he's waiting for you," he said. "Oh, so he's our negotiator now," laughed Tommy. Duane didn't smile as he watched Reginald walk out to the front.

Reginald shook hands and greeted several people on the way to Claude's table. He saw Claude sitting, smoking a cigarette and talking to a waitress. When Reginald sat

down, the waitress stood up. "Give us a minute sweetheart," Claude said to the waitress as she walked away. Reginald reached out and shook Claude's hand. "Mister Donaldson, it's an honor. We really appreciate you taking time to listen to me and The Crew," said Reginald.

"Let's get down to it Reg," interrupted Claude. "I want to sign you to a two record deal with an option for a third after we see the numbers on the first," he said. "How does that sound," asked Claude. "It sounds great Mister Donaldson, but can I get the guys. They should be involved in this decision," Reginald replied. "Hell, I don't want them. I just want you," said Claude.

"No offense Mister Donaldson, but I don't go any further without the guys who helped me get here," Reginald responded sharply. "They have to be a part of this," he finished. "No deal son," said Claude. "This could be your last opportunity," he said. "What do you do for a living Reggie," asked Claude. Reginald looked at Claude curiously. "I sing here and I drive a cab," said Reginald. "Is that how you want to spend the rest of your life? Because if I walk out these doors, I'm never parting them again," Claude said as he stood. Reginald looked Claude in the eyes and he stood as well. "Thanks for coming," Reginald said as he turned and walked back to the dressing room.

His friends sat in silent disappointment as Reginald walked through the doors. It was obvious that Duane had informed them about Claude's proposition. "So what happened, did you agree to anything," asked Farley. "Fuck'um! I'm not going anywhere without my boys," Reginald replied with a troubled smile. "Good looking out dude," said Tommy. Vance stood up and hugged Reginald. "You're like a brother man, you get mad respect for being loyal to your friends," said Vance.

Reginald was startled back into the present by the sound of a car horn. He realized he was standing in the middle of a crosswalk. He waved to the driver as he continued his walk home.

"Could I give up my dream for my friends again," he asked himself as he approached his apartment. "Maybe this time I won't have to worry about it," he finished.

Chapter 3

Reginald walked up the stairs in front of his apartment. His building was almost completely silent. There were mostly quiet people who lived there. He preferred the relaxed nature of his home to the utter chaos of Brandie's apartment a few miles away.

He enjoyed his free time and his relaxation. The Hill was out of control most of the time, with the combination of music, dancing, drinking and even drugs. So when he had a chance to kick back, he took advantage. While he did crave the life of a star, he wanted to keep it as simple as possible. He thought of surrounding himself with his friends and giving back to his community.

As he entered his home, he turned on his stereo and put in an old Maxwell CD. He went into the kitchen and grabbed a Corona from his fridge. He took a few sips of his drink as he sat back on his couch. His mind wandered back and forth over the way he met with Mister Martin today.

He was supposed to pick up Duane at a restaurant and that didn't materialize as he expected. "I wonder what happened to Duane," he asked himself.

Reginald wasn't aware that Duane never intended on being there.

Duane sat in his office. He waited patiently for Gerald to arrive with some information on a shipment. Not only was Duane a club owner, but he was also selling dope out of his club. The Hill was mostly a front. Duane was actually more of a drug dealer than a club owner. He sold everything from weed to ecstasy to crack. He was also about his money. If you owe him money, he either gets paid or he takes it out on you, physically and mentally.

While Duane and Reginald grew up in the same neighborhood, Duane was a couple years older and grew up harder. Most people saw him as a bully in his teenage years. He was already pushing major weight for the local dealers and at 16 he dropped out of school and started selling for them full time. At only 18, he bought his own house, and a Lincoln Navigator, fully loaded, and paid it all in cash. Of course, with the line of work he's in, he had someone he considered legitimate complete the transactions.

Even though he was seen as cold-hearted, he would look out for the younger kids in the area. One of those kids was Reginald. Reginald viewed Duane as an older brother in a lot of ways, but knowing what kind of life he lived, he kept his distance until they got a little older.

Reginald had always been a great singer. He started singing in his church choir and in school productions. Everybody thought his voice was great for his age. When he turned 21, he and some of his friends began performing at The Hill, a club that Duane had recently purchased. Duane always said that he would help Reginald fulfill his potential so he wouldn't wind up slinging dope like him.

Duane wasn't pleased that Reginald didn't sign with Claude the first time, though he understood why. Reginald was very loyal to his friends. They had always been supportive and he felt that leaving them would be a betrayal of that friendship. Duane respected that, but he feared that The Crew was really holding him back. He thought that might have been Reginald's only opportunity.

When Claude Donaldson called Duane's office this day, it seemed rather odd. "Duane Clemons," asked Claude over the phone. "Yeah, this is Duane, who is this," Duane replied. "This is Claude Donaldson, from Image," said Claude. "Look, I remember your friend Reggie was looking for a record deal. Is that still the case," asked Claude. "Yeah, so," Duane said. "There's a talent scout who needs a break too. His name is Craig Martin. He's at Italiano's on Washington," said Claude. "You know that this kid won't go without his band, so you get him down there without them," Claude continued. "Reg needs to be there before 8, because that's when Craig's meeting with the executives ends," said Claude. This place is top quality, nothing but valet parking. But Martin rode in with one of the execs. After what they are going to tell him, he won't be riding back with them," Claude finished. "Craig might give him a break, because he needs one. Just get him to bring his cab down there," said Claude.

Duane hung up the phone. He thought for a moment. "How am I going to get him down there," he said to himself. "He won't go for it, if he knows what's going on. Maybe I should trick him into getting down there," said Duane.

Duane picked up his cell phone and dialed Reginald. "Reg, I need you to bring your cab down to Italiano's on Washington Boulevard and just park in front," said Duane. "Why, what's going on," asked Reginald. "Nothing, I've got a meeting over there that should be over around 8 o'clock," said Duane. "If I'm not out by 8, then you can roll. I don't want you to have to hang around too long," said Duane. "Okay, I'll be there, but why aren't you driving," asked Reginald. "Negro, just be there," snickered Duane.

Reginald sat in his cab, in deep thought. "I hope Duane isn't pulling me into some shit," Reginald said to himself. Reginald put the cab into drive and headed to Washington Boulevard. When he finally arrived, it was five minutes before eight.

Reginald turned off the engine and took in his surroundings. "This place is mad expensive," he thought. "I can't imagine Duane doing business in here, unless he's moving up the food chain a little," he continued. Reginald watched the valet attendants bringing cars to several different people. He watched them all drive away one by one.

Reginald looked at the clock. It was 8:02. Duane hadn't come out yet. "I'll give him another minute and I'm out," he said to himself. Reginald began to sing to himself. Just then, he was started by a knock at his window. It was Craig Martin.

As Reginald came back into the present, he laughed to himself. "It's funny how things work out," he said softly.

Chapter 4

Reginald was elated with his newfound opportunity to launch his career. He was so excited, in fact, that he had completely forgotten to tell Duane and his band mates about Craig.

He dialed Duane. "Duane's gonna shit," laughed Reginald as he listened to the phone ring.

"What up Reg," Duane answered. "Duane, you'll never guess what happened when I was waiting for you," Reginald said excitedly. "I met this guy from Image Records. He came out of Italiano's and needed a ride back to his office," Reginald explained. Duane just sat in his chair and listened with a smile. "He took the bait and he's completely clueless," Duane thought. "I sang for him and he's coming by on Tuesday night to listen to me and the guys," Reginald said.

Duane laughed. "Reg, that's good news. You should get the guys together and practice," Duane said through a toothy grin. "Most definitely. I'll call them and get back to you about coming by," Reginald said. "Do that. Just hit my cell," Duane said before hanging up the phone.

The next couple of days were a blur. Reginald balanced his cab driving with numerous practice sessions. The Crew had no problems practicing at any time Duane would let them come in. They didn't have jobs aside from the club and the three of them lived together, so they split the bills. The three of them shared the responsibility of one person.

Reginald was the most responsible of the four. He worked his day job driving the cab eight or more hours a day, balanced a relationship with Brandie and worked at the club three nights a week. He did all of these things well, because he put his heart into it. Effort wasn't always the strong point of his band mates, under most circumstances. But this time, they put out maximum effort.

When Tuesday night finally came about, the guys were prepared,

"What's the play list tonight gentlemen," asked Farley. "We're singing 'You Send Me Swinging' by Mint Condition, 'Spread My Wings' by Troop and we'll do 'Love' by Musiq," said Reginald. "Any other suggestions," continued Reginald. "Sounds good, let's do it," said Tommy. "Hands in fellas," Vance said. The guys put their fists together. "We crew," they yelled in unison.

As they walked out of the dressing room, each of them felt their own kind of pressure building deep down. For The Crew, this was an opportunity to prove the previous scout wrong. They had a chance to show that they were professionals and that they could play anything for anybody. Reginald knew that this could be the last chance he had to keep his dream alive. An average performance wasn't good enough. Even a good performance wasn't enough. Reginald knew that they would have to blow Mister Martin away.

The place was packed from the front door to the back door. The crowd was on fire tonight. Excitement filled the room like the smoke from the numerous people smoking cigarettes, cigars and weed. There were more waitresses than normal tonight, for a Tuesday. The bartenders couldn't keep up with the demand of drinks. The Hill was truly a mad house tonight.

As they stepped on stage for their introductions, Reginald peered off to his left. He noticed a familiar face. It was Craig Martin. He was there with a well-dressed, bald, black guy in shades. "Who's that," Reginald asked himself. Craig waved to Reginald and Reginald returned the wave. Duane noticed the Reginald's wave to the two gentlemen and walked over to them as the show started.

In the standing room only crowd, Duane had a hard time making his way over to Craig, but he felt it was worth it to help make a good impression for Reginald. As he reached Craig and his friend, he reached out to shake hands with Craig.

"You must be Mister Martin," said Duane. "Yes, I'm Craig Martin," said Craig as they shook hands. "This is a friend of mine, Sonny Benson," Craig continued. Duane reached out to shake Sonny's hand. Sonny looked down at Duane's hand through his expensive shades and then returned his attention to the show. "It's okay brother," Duane said with a slightly embarrassed laugh. "I'm Duane Clemons. This is my club," Duane said. "Let me find you boys a suitable seat for the show," Duane continued. Duane cleared a path to a booth closer to the stage where they had a better view. As they walked by, Duane noticed Brandie standing by the bar with a small group of women.

"Brandie," Duane yelled. It was almost inaudible as Reginald sang a verse of 'You Send Me Swinging'. Once he finally got her attention, he waved her over. "Brandie, this is Mister Craig Martin and Mister Sonny Collins. These are the gentlemen here to listen to Reg," said Duane. Brandie stared at Duane for a moment. "Why is this negro being so hospitable to strangers," she thought. "It's nice to meet you both, I'm Brandie Lloyd, Reginald's girlfriend," she said as she smiled at the two men. Craig reached out and shook her hand. "It's good to meet you Miss Lloyd," said Craig. Sonny only nodded his head and turned his attention back to the show. "Well, I gotta get back to my friends. I hope you all enjoy the music," said Brandie as she walked away.

"So Mister Martin, what's your vice," Duane asked. "What you sippin' on," he asked. "Could I just get a club soda," asked Craig. "You've got it, and what about you Mister Benson," asked Duane. Sonny didn't respond. Irritated, Duane got up. "Okay, that's one club soda," Duane said. He walked over to a passing waitress and put in his request. As she walked away from him, Duane smacked her on the butt.

Sonny leaned over and whispered into Craig's ear. Duane sat back down just as Sonny finished. "Mister Martin, Craig, you've heard Reggie sing before," said Duane. "With the Crew, he's unbelievable. Their chemistry and the way they handle the crowd, they are unstoppable," Duane said as he lit a cigar. The waitress returned with a club soda

and a shot of cognac for Duane. "These people love them. Don't you believe they deserve a shot," asked Duane. Craig took a sip of his club soda. "Duane, I think the band is solid, but nothing special," Craig said. "I'm here specifically for Reginald," Craig continued. "There are infinite numbers of people who have voices, but the great ones have stage presence," Craig said as he pointed up to Reginald. Duane looked up at the stage as an over-eager fan tried to climb on stage with Reginald.

Duane chuckled. "It's a wonder that he stays faithful to Brandie with all this scattered ass around here," Duane said. "Mister Clemons, Reggie has something special. I want to give him a chance to show it. I'm not taking the band at this time," said Craig. "And even if I can't sign him because of some red tape from my bosses, my friend Mister Benson will take him on as a client and find him a label," Craig said. Duane shook his head and threw back the shot of cognac. "Shit, here we go again," said Duane. "Craig, with all due respect, these guys are a team," Duane said. "Reginald will never leave his friends," Duane said. "He will have to eventually, if he wants to make it," Craig said. Sonny took off his shades and put them in the inside pocket of his jacket. "We want *Reginald*," Sonny said with his eyes piercing Duane.

As Reginald finished his last song, he decided to speak to the audience.

"Thank you, thank you all," said Reginald over the cheers and claps. "I just want to thank you all for coming out tonight. I especially want to thank Mister Craig Martin, from Image Records for taking time out of his busy schedule to hear us," said Reginald with a big grin. "God bless you all," he said before taking a bow and exiting the stage.

When the guys made it back to the dressing room, they saw Brandie standing at the door. She greeted Reginald with a long passionate kiss. "Baby, you were wonderful tonight," said Brandie with a smile. She pulled Reginald off to the side. "If this guy offers *you* and only *you* a shot, you've got to take it," said Brandie. Reginald scoffed and looked away. "Baby, I'm serious, you have to look out for yourself," she said. "I'm not saying this for me or for anybody," she continued. "I just want to see you succeed in reaching your goal. Sometimes you have to make hard choices to get to your goal," she said as touched his face. Reginald smiled at her. "I know you want what's best for me.

"I'm going to make the best decision I can," said Reginald. He kissed her lips softly. Their kiss was interrupted by Duane's heavy footsteps on the floor. "Reg, go see your boy out there," yelled Duane as he stomped up the hall.

Reginald felt a sense of déjà vu as he walked through the hallway to numerous handshakes, daps and congratulations. He saw Craig and his companion sitting in the booth. He thought back to the meeting with Mister Donaldson. "Man, I hope this isn't a repeat," he thought.

"Reggie, it's good to see you again my friend," said Craig as he shook Reginald's hand. "This is my associate, Sonny Benson," he continued. "It's good to meet you Reginald," said Sonny. Reginald shook Sonny's hand. "Nice to meet you Mister Benson,"

said Reginald. "Call me Sonny," he responded. "Listen, I loved the show," said Craig. "I was really impressed with your act," he continued. "It's unfortunate that I can't offer you a contract today, however I can offer you a chance to sing for the big wigs up at Image tomorrow," said Craig. "If you do what you did tonight, you'll blow them away," he said. Reginald looked perplexed. "So I have to audition again," asked Reginald. "Yes, but it'll only be one song," said Craig. "I've also got a contingency plan in place for you. Sonny's an agent. He'll work for you for free over the next year until you get a contract. Then you can pay him later," said Craig. "Reggie, the only stipulation is you have to lose the band, buddy," said Craig.

Reginald felt his heart sink. It was like somebody just punched him in the chest.

"Why is it that they can never get a shot," asked Reginald, frustrated. "Look Reggie, you have to lose them. They aren't on your level, and *frankly*, they're holding you back," Craig said. Reginald looked down for a minute. He rubbed his temples. When he looked up, he saw Brandie standing at the bar. She gave him a sweet smile. "Okay Craig, okay," said Reginald. "I'll do it," he finished. The three men stood up. Sonny put his shades back on. He looked at Reginald. "You won't be sorry," he said. "Be up there at two sharp Reggie," said Craig. Reginald shook their hands. As they left Brandie ran over to the table as Reginald sat back down.

"So what happened baby," she asked excitedly. "I've got an offer to come audition for Image executives tomorrow afternoon at two, but the band isn't invited," Reginald said. "I don't know how to tell them that I'm getting my chance, but they have to keep on waiting," said Reginald with a frown. "Reggie, you know if you make it, you can give them a chance too," said Brandie. "A victory for you is a victory for them," she said as she hugged Reginald closely. "Yeah, I hope they see it that way too," said Reginald.

Chapter 5

As Reginald embraced Brandie, he felt hurt and frustration. He knew that he would have to move on without his friends in order to fulfill his dream.

"Let's go baby. You need to tell them," Brandie said as she looked into Reginald's eyes. Reginald took a deep breath and then sighed deeply. He turned and slowly walked back to the dressing room, hand in hand with Brandie.

As they walked in, Reginald saw his friends laughing and cutting up like they always did after the shows they put on. Duane was the only one not participating. He stood in the corner with a scowl on his face. He looked at Reginald and nodded his head in reluctant approval. Reginald looked at Brandie and she smiled back at him.

"Hey guys, chill for a second," Reginald said, speaking over the ruckus. "Reggie, so what's the word," asked Farley. The three men looked at Reginald. Reginald looked down and began to speak softly. "I'm sorry," Reginald whispered. Tommy stood up and walked over to Reginald. "What do you mean you're sorry, son" Tommy asked in frustration. "That's bullshit man, we blew the crowd away tonight," Vance yelled. "Calm down, guys," interrupted Farley. "What exactly did he say Reggie," he continued. Reginald shook his head.

He didn't know how to tell his friends that he was moving on without them. He held Brandie's hand tightly as he looked up. "They said they only want me," Reginald said quietly. "You told them to fuck off then too, right Reg," asked Vance. "Shut up Vance," Farley said. "Reggie, what did you say," asked Tommy. Reginald looked down again.

"No you didn't piggy back off *our* hard work," Vance yelled. "You son of a--," yelled Vance. "Shut the fuck up Vance," Farley interrupted again. "Reggie, did you take the offer," Farley asked. Farley looked into Reginald's eyes intently. Vance began breathing hard as a tear rolled down his left cheek. "Yeah," said Reginald. "I took the offer," Reginald said.

Vance slammed his fists against his dresser. Tommy turned around and put his head against the wall and just leaned there. "So you got a record deal and we get nothing," asked Farley with a frown. "Not quite," replied Reginald. "I got an audition. I have to go sing for some executives tomorrow," said Reginald. "If that goes well, then I get the deal," he finished.

Farley stepped closer to Reginald. Reginald's shoulders tensed up. He thought that Farley was going to attack him. Reginald's fists clinched up as if to prepare for the worst. Farley looked at Reginald and sighed. "Congratulations brotha," Farley said as he hugged Reginald. "I'm happy for you," he continued. Reginald was surprised, but he hugged Farley back. "Thank you," said Reginald.

Tommy turned around and leaned against the wall. He had tears in his eyes. "Damn Reg," Tommy said. "You just go and put on a show for them crusty, old white dudes," Tommy said forcing a smile. Reginald walked over to Tommy and shook his hand. "Thank you Tommy," Reginald said. "That means a lot to me," he finished. When Reginald turned around, Vance was standing behind him.

"Nigga, I shouldn't be happy for you, but deep down, I am," Vance said before he reached out and hugged Reginald. "I'm sorry I got mad at you playa," Vance said softly in Reginald's ear. "You my boy," he said.

The whole room was quiet, and the mood had lightened dramatically. Brandie was sitting on a stool next to the door, wiping tears from her eyes. Duane still stood quietly in the corner.

"C'mere man," Duane said to Reginald. Reginald walked over to Duane. "I'm proud of you and anything that I can ever do for you, just say the word," Duane said. Reginald wiped his eyes and smiled. "Thanks Duane," he said as they shook hands.

"Look, if I get this break, I'm going to do whatever I can to get you guys on," Reginald said. "You guys are a part of me and we've been friends for years," he continued. "Just keep working hard and I'll get you a shot, some how," said Reginald. "I *know* my crew has talent," said Reginald.

"Reg, do what you gotta do," said Farley. "We appreciate you looking out for us, but you've been looking out for us for years," Farley continued. "It's time that you took care of you," said Farley.

"Now damn it, everybody put your hands in the circle," Farley said. The four men put in their hands. "Hey, what about y'all two," asked Tommy, looking at Brandie and Duane. They came over and put their hands in the circle. "One, two, three..." counted Vance. "We Crew," they all yelled.

Reginald was very excited about this opportunity. He felt a weight lifted off his shoulders. He had the support of his best friends, his biggest supporter, and his girlfriend. Things were moving in the right direction.

As they walked to the bus stop, Reginald and Brandie held hands and talked. "Baby, I'm so proud of you," Brandie said. "I can't wait to see you on TV," she laughed. "That's going to be the shit," Brandie continued. Reginald laughed. "Let's do one thing at a time, now," said Reginald. "I need to kick ass tomorrow for these execs," he said. "I need something that will make them say 'wow,'" said Reginald.

"What do you have in mind," asked Brandie. "An original song," Reginald replied. "Do you have anything that you can use," asked Brandie. "No, not yet, but I'm looking at my inspiration," Reginald said as he looked into Brandie's eyes. They stopped walking and Brandie kissed Reginald passionately. "I knew when I met you that you were a great catch for any woman," Brandie said. "Girl, please, I was a nineteen year old mess," laughed Reginald as they started walking again. "I saw your potential and you have always been good to me," Brandie replied. "I love you Reggie."

"I love you too Brandie," said Reginald. "You bring out the best in me," he continued.

They approached the bus stop. It was well after midnight and the moon was bright in the sky. While they weren't in the best neighborhood, people didn't mess with Reginald

or his friends for fear of angering Duane. That gave Reginald a quiet confidence, even in the worst situations. Duane always had his back.

They sat on the old bench and began small talk, waiting for the 12:15 bus. "One day baby, I'm going to buy both of us cars so we don't have to wait on this bus," Reginald laughed. Brandie didn't smile or laugh; she just sat in silence.

"What's wrong," Reginald asked. "Reggie, when you make it, you're going to meet all these other women, celebrities," Brandie said hesitantly. "So what," Reginald replied. "I'm just saying. How can I compete with that," she asked. "You know that women all over the country will be throwing themselves at you," Brandie said bluntly. "Brandie, I love you and I want to be with you for the rest of my life," Reginald said as he grabbed her hand and kissed it. "When I make it, I want you by my side," he said. "Otherwise, none of it means a thing to me," Reginald finished.

Brandie looked relieved. She smiled at Reginald. "You are wonderful," said Brandie as she leaned in to kiss Reginald.

Chapter 6

It was 8:55 am. The vibration of his cell phone startled Reginald. He looked at the display. It was Craig. He rubbed his eyes as he put the phone to his ear. "Hello," Reginald said in a scratchy voice. "Reggie, is that you," asked Craig. "You sound awful," he continued. Reginald cleared his throat. "I had a long night, Mister Martin," said Reginald.

"Listen, I just wanted to check in with you and make sure you talked with your friends last night," Craig said. "Remember, this is business. When you get a chance to move forward in your career a little, you can help them out," he continued. Reginald lied back on the bed. "I talked to them. They understand," Reginald replied. "Excellent," Craig said with a smile. "Okay buddy, I will see you around fifteen 'til two," Craig finished. "See you then," said Reginald hanging up the phone.

Reginald placed the phone on his nightstand and rolled back over. Brandie was in bed next to him, sleeping peacefully. He rolled over on his right side and wrapped his arm around her waist. He pulled her close. She scooted in a little closer as Reginald kissed her bare shoulder. They slowly drifted back off to sleep.

Once again, Reginald was awakened. This time it was by Brandie climbing out of bed. "Baby, where you going," asked Reginald. "Boy, it's noon, we overslept," Brandie

said. "Get up, you need to start getting ready," Brandie finished. Reginald removed the white sheet from his body. He rolled over and rubbed his tired eyes. Brandie turned on the CD player and put in Stevie Wonder's greatest hits as she walked to the kitchen.

Reginald climbed out of bed and decided to hop in the shower. As he showered, he thought about the opportunity in front of him. "I can't believe this is happening, finally," Reginald said to himself. A huge smile formed on his face as he let the reality of the situation sink in.

While in the kitchen, Brandie began to make a quick breakfast for them. "I know Reginald promised to be with me, but can he really follow up on it," she asked herself while cracking the eggs. "He means well and I know he loves me now, but things are going to change. I might lose him," she thought. Brandie found tears rolling down her cheeks. She sniffled and wiped the tears from her face.

Reginald walked into the room and saw Brandie crying. "What's wrong baby," he asked. He ran over to her and put his arms around her. "Nothing, I'm fine. I'm just so happy for you," she said. "Happy for us, we're going to make a beautiful life together," Reginald said as he kissed her forehead.

"I wouldn't be here without you," Reginald continued as he maneuvered around behind her and put his hands on her hips. Reginald found himself grinding into her from behind. "Stop it Reggie," Brandie laughed. "You are trying to start something that we don't have time to finish," she continued. She turned around and kissed his lips. Then she handed him his plate of scrambled eggs and bacon. "Go eat," she said with a smile.

Reginald watched her walk from the kitchen into the bedroom. He smiled to himself as he began eating his breakfast.

When Brandie shut the door, she fought back more tears. She took deep breaths and then went to the closet to get out clothes. Once again she found tears streaming down her cheeks. She hurried to the shower, hoping that the warm water would help her relax her mind. She argued back and forth within. "He loves me, he's not going to leave me," she said. "But he'll meet celebrity girls. I can't compete with that," she debated. Brandie shook her head. "I've got to stop doubting him. He's a good man and he's my man," she said convincingly. With that, she finished her shower. When she walked out of the bathroom, Reginald was sitting on the bed, tying his shoes.

"You ready baby," asked Brandie. "Yup, just about," Reginald replied. Reginald got up and began walking towards the living room. He kissed Brandie on the cheek as he walked by. As he sat on his couch, he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. It was Farley. "Knucklehead, how's it going," asked Reginald with a chuckle. "I'm alright. I was just calling to wish you good luck on your meeting. Remember bro, we're on your side," Farley said. "Thanks, that means a lot," said Reginald. Just then, Brandie walked out of the bedroom. "Let's go Reggie. We're running late," she said. "Farley, I gotta step. I will hit you back after it's over," Reginald said. "Later," said Farley.

Reginald and Brandie walked outside. It was warm, but not too hot. There was a nice breeze and they decided to walk to the cab depot. When they arrived at the depot, it was around 1 pm.

The couple hopped into Reginald's cab and headed to Image. Reginald thought about what he was going to sing, as he drove. He was a little nervous, but he knew that he couldn't blow this opportunity.

When they walked into the office, Craig was down stairs waiting to greet them. "Reg, how are you," he asked. "Brandie, you look beautiful, it's nice to see you again today," Craig finished as he shook Reginald's hand. "Where's Mister Benson," asked Reginald. "He'll be around later," said Craig as he led them from the lobby. "So do you know what you're going to sing," asked Craig. "Yeah, I made up something last night," Reginald said with a smile.

"Creativity, that's a big plus. I hope it's good, my friend," Craig said. They approached the conference room and Craig stopped them. "Look Reggie, I'm wishing you well in here. These guys are tough, but I know you have what it takes. Brandie, you can't go in with him, but it won't take long," Craig said as he led Reginald to the door.

Reginald and Brandie shared one last kiss before Reginald disappeared through the big double doors of the conference room. Brandie looked around at her surroundings and sat on the big cushiony couch. "Good luck baby," she whispered to herself.

As Reginald and Craig entered the conference room, the chatter stopped. There were about 15 people around a long dark wooden table. "Everyone, this is Reginald Morgan," Craig said to his colleagues. Craig took a moment to introduce several of them to Reginald. There were a couple of people who really stood out in Reginald's mind.

"This is Arnold Chapman. He's our top producer and also the head of scouting here at Image," said Craig. Arnold was a short, older black guy with a serious receding hairline. He wore a chocolate brown suit, matching tie, and a black shirt. "That brother is dressed," Reginald thought.

"Reggie, this is Deane Milner. He's president and C.E.O. of Image," said Craig. "He's got the final say in all new acts, and he signs that nice paycheck that we all get here," laughed Craig. Everyone around the long table laughed. Deane was a fairly young man for his position. No older than about 45, very few wrinkles, but he was bald and not by choice.

"It's nice to meet you all," Reginald said with a nervous smile. "Reggie, go ahead and show us what you've got," said Deane. Arnold stood up and handed Reginald the microphone.

Reginald cleared his throat and focused. He closed his eyes and the words began to pour out.

“I didn’t make it this far
With it just being all about me
I didn’t make it this far
By just being lucky
I didn’t make it here
By being by myself
I didn’t succeed
Without the help of someone else
That someone is you.”

As he sang his song, the feeling in the room went from very business-like to that of fascination. Normally tight-lipped, straight-faced people smiled uncontrollably. They were all nodding their heads as if music were playing with Reginald's lyrics.

“If January happened in June
While people relocated to the moon
The Earth could rotate off its axis
And no one ever had to pay taxes
While roses stayed red
And violets stayed blue
I’d still be yours forever
This is my vow to you.”

As Brandie sat outside the room, she heard Reginald's powerful voice through the door. "He's singing about me," she said to herself with a smile.

“When I needed a friend

You were always right there
And when I constantly complained
You never even cared
When I got lonely
And needed company
You'd stop everything you were doing
And made your way to me
That's why I love you
If January happened in June
While people relocated to the moon
The Earth could rotate off its axis
And no one ever had to pay taxes
While roses stayed red
And violets stayed blue
I'd still be yours forever
This is my vow to you."

Reginald's eyes remained closed as he finished the chorus of the song. While he focused on his words, the emotion and the feeling of the song was drawn out by his love for Brandie. The song was definitely for her and about her.

"If something ever went wrong in your life
You can call me and I'd make it alright
I couldn't imagine going on without you by my side
I can't wait for the day, that you'll be my bride
If January happened in June

While people relocated to the moon

The Earth could rotate off its axis

And no one ever had to pay taxes

While roses stayed red

And violets stayed blue

I'd still be yours forever

This is my vow to you."

The boardroom erupted into applause. All the executives talked among themselves for a moment. Craig approached Reginald. "Reggie, you blew them away," he said. "I've never seen them this giddy before," Craig continued. "Man, I just focused and released. I hope that's enough," Reginald said as he reached out and shook Craig's hand.

"Mister Morgan," started Mister Milner in his deep voice. "I am not easily impressed. I've seen a lot of stars and wannabe stars come through here. I know the difference between the two," said Mister Morgan. "You sir, are a star in the making," he finished.

Craig began to clap and the rest of the group joined in. Reginald was so happy; he couldn't stop smiling. "Thank you sir, you don't know what this means to me," said Reginald. "Son, what we need from you is a demo tape to get to our producers and song writers. We want them to get a feel for your voice and have a plan laid out for your album. We want to get you started by the end of next week. Do you have a demo," asked Arnold.

"No sir, I don't have one right now," said Reginald. "You need to get one started by Friday. Can you handle that," asked Arnold. "Yes sir, absolutely," Reginald said.

"I need five songs, they can be originals, or whatever. Mix and match. Just get me the tape as soon as possible," said Arnold. "The song you just sang, put it on there. That's your first single," Arnold said with a smile. "I will sir, thank you," Reginald said as he shook Arnold's hand. Reginald couldn't stop thanking everyone for his chance. As he exited the conference room, he saw Brandie. She was grinning from ear to ear. "You did it baby," she screamed as she jumped into his arms. "I couldn't have done it without you babe," Reginald said and he hugged her tightly.

"Reggie, I don't mean to interrupt, but we need to schedule a meeting with you and Sonny, so you can discuss contract terms; things of that nature," Craig said. "We'll do that once your demo's in," Craig finished. "Thank you Craig. Thanks for everything. I'm

not going to let you down man," said Reginald. Reginald and Brandie started off down the hall.

"Well done, Craig," said Arnold. "Looks like you'll be sticking around for a little longer," he continued as he patted Craig on the back. As Arnold walked away, Craig dialed a number on his cell. "Sonny, it's Craig. Things are working out quite nicely. I will keep you informed." Craig said.

Chapter 7

Reginald and Brandie walked down the hallway hand in hand as they left the conference room lobby. "Baby, I knew you could do it," Brandie said gleefully. "I never had any doubt about your talent, you just needed your chance," she continued. "Yeah, I guess I just needed to reach out and take the opportunity," Reginald replied.

Someone calling Reginald's name interrupted the conversation. "Reggie, hold up," yelled Craig. "Hey, did I forget something," asked Reginald. "No, but I forgot to tell you something about your demo," Craig said. "You've got to front the money for the session," said Craig. "These guys don't want to reserve studio time for you and you not show up," Craig said. "It's not that I don't believe in you, but these guys take every precaution," Craig continued.

"Okay, so how much cash are we talking," asked Reginald. "I've got a little money stored away for a emergencies," he continued. "It's \$3000 per session, here," Craig said. "Shit, that's steep," Reginald remarked. "Baby, I can put in some to help you," Brandie said. "No, that shouldn't be necessary," Reginald replied. "How long is a session," asked Reginald. "It's four hours, that's enough time for probably two songs," Craig replied. "Damn, I need enough time for five songs," exclaimed Reginald. "That's \$7500 for five songs then right," asked Reginald. "Roughly, yes," Craig responded. "I'll come up with the money," Reginald said. He shook Craig's hand. "Thanks, I'll be in touch," Reginald said.

As they walked away from Craig, Reginald began thinking of ways to pay for his studio time. "Reggie, you know I can help you through this," said Brandie, looking up into Reginald's troubled face. Reginald smiled at Brandie. "You are wonderful Brandie," said Reginald. "I'll work it out, don't worry about me," he said.

Reginald dropped Brandie off at work, and turned on his 'on duty' sign. As he drove through the streets, he continued his brainstorming. After a while, he felt a vibration on his hip. It was Duane. "What's up man," Reginald said, answering his phone.

"How'd it go, negro," asked Duane. "I blew that shit off the hinges, but I gotta come up with some money for studio time," said Reginald. "I have to record five demo songs, and basically it works out to \$7500," Reginald continued. "No problem bruh," said Duane. "I can spare the cash for a good friend," Duane continued.

"I can't take that from you, man," Reginald replied. "You've already given me so much. I need to do this on my own," Reginald finished. "Please," Duane said with a laugh. "Consider it a favor between old friends," he continued. "We've been friends for a long time and when you and the guys exclusively play *my club*, you're putting money in my pocket," Duane said. "So, you don't owe me a damn thing," Duane finished. "You want cash, check or money order," laughed Duane.

After quite a bit of prodding, Reginald finally agreed to take Duane's money. But in the end, he made Duane agree to take the money back, when he could pay him back.

Reginald deposited Duane's check into his account and made his way to Image with a check of his own to pay for his studio time. Reginald scheduled five hours on Friday and five more on Monday.

Amazingly, Arnold decided to handle Reginald's demo project personally. No underlings, no new guys who're just learning the equipment. One of the best producers in the industry chose to involve himself in Reginald's demo. Reginald felt very fortunate to have a real professional like Arnold helping him through his first real recording session.

When the time came for Reginald to record, he and Arnold made a great team. Arnold had a wonderful ear for music. Although in his late forties, he produced acts for numerous age groups: from the 12-year-old prodigy all the way to the seasoned 60-year-old performers. During his 20 years in the music industry, he had been involved with 50 top five records, including 17 platinum records that he solely produced. Arnold had seen it all and if you were going to impress him, you had to work hard.

Monday, during the middle of the session, Arnold received what seemed to be a very important phone call. He completely stopped recording and walked out into the hallway. Normally if he had to step out, he'd let one of his production assistants handle things for a moment. But he completely closed up shop this time.

Ten minutes later, he re-entered the room. "Reggie, I need to speak with you," he said with a very serious tone. Everybody else in the room left. Only Arnold and Reginald remained. Arnold sat down in his cushy, leather chair. "Have a seat," he said, pointing at the chair directly in front of him. "That was Mister Milner on the phone," said Arnold. "They listened to your whole demo session from Friday," said Arnold. "It forced them to come to a decision," he continued. Reginald tensed up, and swallowed hard. "They want you to keep on recording through the week," Arnold said with a smile. "Trash those remakes, and we're going to record your record, starting with *My Vow*," he continued. Reginald's nervousness became excitement. "What, so I'm in," he asked as he jumped up.

"You've got it son," said Arnold. "You just need to get a manager, someone to negotiate a contract for you and you are part of the family," Arnold said.

Reginald shook hands with Arnold and the handshake became an embrace. "Mister Chapman, I can't begin to thank you for your help," Reginald said. "Son, you just keep working hard, that's thanks enough for me," Arnold replied. Just then, Craig walked in. He saw the grins on the faces of the two men. "Oh, so you've heard," Craig said with a big smile. "Yeah man, we did it," Reginald said as shook Craig's hand. "Listen, Sonny's down stairs, in my office," Craig said. "He wants to talk to you about signing with him, so he can work on your deal with the guys upstairs," Craig continued.

"That sounds good Craig, but I need to do something first, before I sign anything with Sonny," Reginald replied. Craig looked puzzled. "Reggie, you can't let this pass you by. Rumor has it, they are offering you a three record deal with an option for a fourth," Craig said. "Surely you aren't thinking of backing out," he continued. "No, not at all," said Reginald. "I just need to take care of something before I sign the record deal," he continued. "I'll be back," said Reginald as he hurried out of the recording room. Arnold and Craig each looked at each other with a look of bewilderment.

Reginald called Brandie to tell her the big news, but she didn't answer the phone. Instead, he got her voice mail. "Baby, it's on," he yelled into the phone. "I'll be there to get you after work tonight. I love you," he said as he hung up. Reginald walked hastily towards his cab.

"It's only right. I owe him," said Reginald to himself as he pulled out of the parking deck. Ten minutes into his drive, he found himself in front of The Hill. He noticed three black Escalades parked on the side of the building. They had out of state tags. "I wonder what that's all about," Reginald thought.

Reginald walked in, it was only 2 pm, but there were already several people at the bar. Reginald saw Hank standing next to the stage. "Hank, is Duane 'round," asked Reginald. "Yeah, he's out back, conducting *business*. Give him about 10 minutes," Hank said. Reginald walked back over to the bar and got a bottle of water. He said and watch several people as they walked by. Many of them recognized him and spoke. Reginald always spoke back and gave them a smile.

After a few minutes of people watching, he saw Duane and three of his bouncers walk in from the back. Duane had a briefcase in his hand and he looked a little flustered. Reginald got up and began walking towards Duane. He saw Hank whisper into Duane's ear and look over at him. Duane handed the briefcase to Hank. Reginald looked down at the black briefcase, he noticed a large dent in the side and there was a red smudge on the silver plating. Hank walked by Reginald as Duane greeted him.

"Reg, what are you doing here," asked Duane. Reginald was curious about what he just witnessed, but he shook it off. "I have a business proposition for you," Reginald said.

Chapter 8

"A business proposition," Duane said curiously. "What you need," he asked. "I'd like you to be my manager," Reginald said. Duane's mouth parted into a smile and he slowly began to laugh. "C'mere man," Duane said as he walked towards his office. "Let's talk in private," he continued.

They entered the office and Duane closed the door behind them. "Now why the hell do you want me to manage you," Duane asked with a laugh. "You're good with business and money," Reginald said. Duane walked over to the mini-bar and began to pour a drink as he listened to Reginald. "Besides, I trust you and I owe it to you," Reginald continued as he sat on the couch.

Duane joined Reginald on the couch. "Brotha, you don't owe me shit," he said. "I told you that before. I'm not going to manage you unless it's really what you want. You know that I'm not completely qualified for this," Duane said. "But I will do what I can," Duane finished. "I've managed some local people and of course I handle all the legal business here at the club, but this is another level," Duane continued.

"I really do want you to do this," Reginald said. "I don't know Sonny and I know you," Reginald said. At that moment, Reginald thought about all the things he'd seen go on at the club. He thought about the beat up briefcase. "I'm just overreacting," he thought to himself. "I trust that you wouldn't do me wrong and that you'd handle my business not only in a professional manner, but as a friend," Reginald said.

"Alright, I'll do it," Duane agreed. "D, first I need you to come to Image with me, because they've decided to sign me, but we've got to come to an agreement on contract terms," Reginald said.

Duane's eyes got big. "Seriously," asked Duane. "You big-timing now," Duane laughed. Reginald smiled and hugged Duane. "Yeah man, things are looking good," Reginald said.

"Are you busy now, because I'm sure we can go and look over their offer," Reginald said. "Hell no, let's go nigga," Duane said as he swiftly leaped up from his seat. The two friends headed over to Image.

As they entered the office, Duane began to receive odd looks from Image employees. Reginald and Duane reached Craig's door and knocked softly. "Hey Craig," Reginald said as he slowly pushed open the door. He saw Craig sitting across from Sonny

at his desk. Sonny began to frown as he saw Duane. "Sonny, listen, no offense, but Duane has been a good friend to me for years, and I want him to be my manager," Reginald said.

"Reginald, are you sure of this," said Craig with a scowl. "No offense, but we're talking six figures. Duane may not be equipped to handle that kind of money," Craig said. Sonny sat quietly, still frowning. "No offense to you *Craigy*, but I handle six figure deals regularly," Duane said sharply. "If my man here wants me to run the show, I'm runnin' this bitch," Duane said as he looked at Craig and Sonny. Sonny stood up, and looked down at Duane. Sonny stood at about six-foot-five. "Son, you ain't shit and you won't be running anything for long," Sonny said. He put on his shades and walked out of the office.

"Reg, I highly advise against this, but it's your career," Craig said as he stood up. "Let's go look at this contract," he said as he walked towards the door. Duane frowned up and whispered into Reginald's ear, "I don't like these motherfuckas." "Calm down D, just do your thing, show them that you can handle yours," Reginald replied. They followed Craig down the hall to see one of the company lawyers and financial representatives. Mister Milner was also present.

When Duane entered the room, you could feel the tension in the air. "Reginald, it's good to see you," said Mister Milner. "Likewise, sir," Reginald said as he shook Mister Milner's hand. "Everyone, this is Duane Clemons, my manager. He will be handling my contract," Reginald said. The room was silent. "Fine," said Mister Milner. It was obvious that Mister Milner wasn't pleased with Duane managing Reginald. But in the end, it was Reginald's choice. The financial representative gave Duane the contract. He and Reginald went to a desk at the opposite side of the office to look over it.

As they reviewed the terms, they found that rumors were correct. The agreement was for three records over the next two years. If the first went Platinum, the fourth record was automatic and he would be able to renegotiate for more money. If the first two went Gold, then the third went Platinum, the company had the option to match any offers that he received from other companies at the end of his contract. If he never went platinum, the company could re-sign him or he could go elsewhere.

There were numerous financial bonuses attached if he was successful, including: tours, guest appearances on other artists albums, as well as talk show appearances from coast-to-coast.

When Duane explained to Reginald roughly what he was looking at. "Reggie, if you complete four albums and all the other incentives, you are looking at close to a million dollars over the next three years," Duane whispered. "The absolute worst you can do is four hundred fifty large," Duane finished. Reginald couldn't stop smiling. "That is great man, any *fine print*," asked Reginald.

"Yeah, but nothing you'll have to worry about," Duane said. "Just some clause about you staying out of trouble. That's not a problem for you, though. You're squeaky

clean," Duane laughed. "Oh and you can't do anything stupid that would endanger your life, such as ride motorcycles and scuba-dive, shit like that," laughed Duane. "Not a problem," Reginald said with a smile. "Okay, let's go with it," he continued.

Mister Milner and Craig were both pleased with Reginald signing the contract. They had the utmost faith in him and his abilities. Their worries, however, were that he would wind up in trouble because of his ties to Duane. When things got rolling, surprisingly, there were virtually no problems. Reginald went back into the studio with Arnold and recorded the rest of his debut album. Reginald was working harder than ever. He put in numerous 15-hour days in the studio with Arnold. Finally after a month, they completed a 12 track CD.

All the hard work had finally paid off for Reginald professionally. He was on his way. Personally, however, Reginald was struggling. He knew once his first single hit the airwaves, he'd be going on tour. Brandie knew this as well. They had spent almost a month seeing each other only sparingly. It put a major strain on their relationship. He knew a tour would only put added pressure on them.

Brandie wasn't returning Reginald's phone calls. She almost seemed to be avoiding him. Reginald was frustrated, but he didn't have time to worry. He had been working so hard on launching his career that his relationship was almost completely on the back burner. Still, whenever he had some free time, he was making an effort to spend it with Brandie. He knew that he didn't have a lot of time before he'd be put on tour.

And as expected, *My Vow* got major airplay. The single CD sold 150,000 units the first week. Reginald was immediately booked into a tour featuring platinum hip-hop star, Big Mic. There were 24 stops on the tour, which stretched as far as Miami all the way to Portland. While in New York, the tour would take a two-day hiatus. There he would film the video.

When Reginald received the news of the tour, he was excited and saddened. He and Brandie had made plans for the evening, and they were having dinner when Reginald received the call. He looked over at Brandie and sighed. "Baby, I'm leaving on a month long tour tomorrow," he said. Brandie sat quietly. Reginald stood up and walked over to her. He kneeled beside her chair and grabbed her hand. "I know that we haven't spent a lot of time together lately, but this is me getting things started for us. Baby, you don't have to worry about anything," Reginald said.

"Reggie, you are going to be gone for a month," Brandie said. "I have to live off of phone calls between now and then," she asked. "Do you really believe that our relationship can handle being apart for a month," Brandie asked. "Yes, definitely. I love you, and you will always be on my mind," Reginald said. "Who are you touring with," Brandie asked. "Big Mic, Yvonne Summers, some other new people like me. Why do you ask," Reginald wondered.

"Big Mic is a notorious man-whore," Brandie responded. "You know that there will be a thousand groupies at each venue," she continued. "I don't like it, not one bit. You are a good man, and you will have these skanky, little hoes all around you. If I was there, I wouldn't worry, but a moment of weakness can lead you to a lifetime of regret," Brandie finished. Brandie got up and walked out of the apartment. Reginald just stood there, speechless. "I'm not going to give in to temptation Brandie," he said to himself. Reginald sat in his recliner and drifted off to sleep.

The following morning, Reginald flew into Atlanta for their first stop on the tour. From there, he would fly on the Image corporate jet with the rest of the musicians. As he walked through the terminal, he saw a chauffeur in a dark blue suit holding a sign with his name on it. "Hey pal, you looking for me," he asked. "I'm Reggie Morgan," he continued. "Identification please," asked the chauffeur. When he was satisfied that Reginald was who he said he was he led him to a limo that was parked out front.

Inside the limo, there was a bottle of champagne on ice, a television, a mini fridge filled with snacks, and a phone. The phone reminded Reginald to call Brandie. "Hope she picks up," Reginald said to himself. After a couple of rings, he got her voicemail. "Hey baby, I'm in the A-T-L. I'm headed to the hotel for the next three hours and then I'm going to the dome for the show," Reginald said. "Please call me, I love you," Reginald said as he hung up the phone.

When Reginald finally got checked into his room, he found a tray of fresh fruit, several ice cold bottles of water and more champagne. "I'm going to have a sip of that later," Reginald laughed to himself. He walked over to the super king sized bed and fell face forward. While lying on the bed, he looked to his right and noticed the bathroom. He quickly climbed off the bed and ran into the bathroom. "A jacuzzi, are you shittin' me," he laughed. Reginald decided to explore the large hotel, so he took his card-key and headed out the door.

While walking up the hall, he noticed a commotion ahead. As he got closer, he realized that it was Big Mic and a large group of fans around him. He was signing autographs and talking to each of them, mostly young women. Big Mic noticed Reginald coming in his direction.

"You the new guy right," he said in his deep voice. "Yeah, I'm Reggie Morgan," Reginald said reaching out to shake Big Mic's hand. "I'm Big Mic, as if you didn't know," Big Mic laughed. "Okay, no more autographs, I have to go everyone, but be sure to come to the show tonight," he said. He put his arm around Reginald's shoulder. "You gonna love this tour homeboy," Big Mic laughed. "This is my room, come on in," he said. He swiped his card key and opened the door. Reginald could hear the music blasting from outside.

Smoke filled the room. There were probably ten young semi-naked women in the room. There were two large men standing guard with live firearms. "They must be bodyguards," Reginald thought to himself as he coughed. There were two other guys

sitting on the couch. They were smoking stogies that were gutted out and refilled with marijuana. "You want a hit young buck," asked one of the men. "No thanks, I'm good man," Reginald said. "Hey Big Mic," Reginald yelled over the music. "Call me Mike," Big Mic said. "Mike, look, I gotta go," said Reginald. "Why, you don't like women," Mike asked with a laugh.

"It's not that. I've got a girlfriend back home. I am not feeling too comfortable being in here," Reginald replied. "Come here boy," Mike said. "At least burn a little with me," said Mike. "I don't smoke man," said Reginald defensively. Mike took a long hit from the stogie. "What *do* you do," Mike asked. "Your lady is in another city, she'll never be the wiser," Mike laughed. Reginald shook his head and walked towards the door. When he got out into the hallway, he coughed a little. His eyes burned from the smoke.

"Reggie, what's the problem man," Mike asked as he came out into the hallway. "Listen man, I'm trying to be faithful to my lady, and I don't smoke," Reginald said. "I need you to respect me and I'll respect you," Reginald said, looking Mike in the eye. "Okay man. But if you're ever needing a piece or you wanna get lifted, you know who to call," Mike said as he turned to walk back to his room.

"Damn, I need somebody I know around here," Reginald thought. "Maybe I can fly Brandie in," he said to himself.

Chapter 9

Reginald slowly walked back down the hall to his room. He was still rubbing his eyes from the smoke. He walked into the room and sat on the large leather couch. Reginald sighed as he put his head back. "This just ain't right," said Reginald.

Reginald dialed Brandie's number and listened to the ringing. Eventually, it went to her voicemail. "Babe, I really need to talk to you. Please call me," said Reginald. As he disconnected the call he closed his eyes and found himself drifting off to sleep.

The vibration of his phone in his hand startled him as he awakened. He looked at the time. He'd been sleeping for an hour. As he checked the caller ID, he realized it was Duane on the line. "D, what's up," said Reginald. "Reggie, you all right," asked Duane. "Yeah, I'm good man, just waking up," Reginald said with a yawn. "How's the hotel," asked Duane. "It's big," said Reginald. "Dude, I saw Big Mic in the hall. He's wild."

"Word? Did you talk to him," asked Duane. "Yeah, for a second. He invited me into his room, shit was outrageous," Reginald laughed. "What, is he on some homo-type shit," Duane laughed. "Far from it, based on the company he keeps," Reginald laughed. "Look, seriously, if you see Brandie, tell her to call me," said Reginald. "I need somebody here with me," said Reginald.

"Boy, stop trippin'," Duane snapped. "You are in a lap of luxury," Duane continued. "Why in the *fuck* do you want Brandie there with all them women around you." Reginald just shook his head. "Man, that's the difference between the two of us," said Reginald. "I love my lady. She's not just a piece," Reginald continued.

"I'm not saying that you shouldn't love your lady. What I'm saying is that why do you want her around cramping your style," Duane said. "Check this, why don't I haul ass to Atlanta, and we can kick it for a few stops on the tour," Duane asked.

Reginald took a second to think. "Do I really want Duane's crazy ass here," Reginald thought to himself. "Well, it's better having somebody I know around. Plus, he is my manager, he should be here anyway."

"D, you should be here anyway dog," Reginald said. "When are you coming," he asked. "I can be there first thing in the morning," Duane replied. "Okay Duane, that's good. I gotta go. I'm headed to the dome in a minute," said Reginald. "I'll see you in the morning Reg," Duane said. Reginald hung up the phone as he walked to the restroom.

He looked into the mirror and decided to wash his face. "I'm looking all crusty," Reginald said to himself. He sat his phone down and turned on the hot water. As the water ran, his phone vibrated. With the sound of the water running, he didn't hear the vibrations. As he finished washing his face, there was a knock at the door.

Reginald grabbed a towel and dried his face as he walked to the door. He looked through the peephole and saw Big Mic standing there. "Hey Mike, what's up man," Reginald said as he opened the door. "Time to roll son," Mike replied as he patted Reginald on the shoulder. "Okay, let me put this towel away and get my phone," Reginald said. "No time man, we need to be gone now! The limo is waiting out front," Mike said.

Mike grabbed Reginald by the arm and pulled him out the door. "Man, I need my stuff," Reginald complained. "You won't even need that shit, just forget it," Mike replied.

When they got outside, Reginald saw a white stretched Escalade. Reginald noticed there was a woman in the SUV, but he couldn't see her face. Mike got in and sat next to the woman. "Hey sweetheart, good to see you," said the woman. When Reginald got in, he realized it was Yvonne Summers. "Hi there," said Yvonne to Reginald. "Hello," Reginald said nervously as he sat opposite of Mike and Yvonne. Reginald had five of Yvonne's six CDs. Four of her CDs were platinum and she owned four Grammys, one for

album of the year. Reginald was a huge fan and he also harbored a slight crush on her since his late teenage years.

Yvonne was in her mid-thirties, but she could easily pass for a 25 year old. She possessed natural beauty that most celebrities had to buy. Even in her everyday clothes, she looked amazing. Reginald found himself looking her up and down, but he tried to hide it. Yvonne obviously noticed, but she didn't say anything, as she was deep in conversation with Mike.

Soon, Reginald was completely engulfed in a daydream about Yvonne. His eyes were glazed over and he had a sneaky smile on his face.

"Ain't that right Reggie," said a male voice. Reginald didn't respond as he was enjoying the dream. "Reggie," yelled the voice. Reginald snapped out of his dream and realized that he was zoned out looking directly at Yvonne. Mike was trying to get his attention. "Yeah, huh," Reginald said, trying to get his head straight.

"I said, you can handle this concert shit, right," Mike urged. "Yeah man, I can manage," Reginald replied. Yvonne got up and made her way over to Reginald's side. "Honey, are you sure you're up for this," Yvonne asked as she put the palm of her hand on his cheek. "Look at you, you're sweating," Yvonne said. Mike laughed, "Yeah he's sweating alright!" Reginald just smiled at her nervously, but said nothing.

As the group arrived at the dome, Reginald looked out the window and saw droves of people standing outside. They seemed to be buying tickets, tailgating, and just having a wonderful all around time. "Look Reggie, there are some of your fans," Yvonne said. Reginald looked to where she pointed and saw a large group of young women. They had signs with his name on it and even shirts with his face. "Damn, that's kind of scary," laughed Reginald.

The limo slowly crept into the restricted areas of the parking garage. The three musicians made their way out of the Escalade and they were met by their escorts and taken to their own dressing rooms.

Reginald walked into his dressing room and sat down. He was still trying to get his cool after being around Yvonne. But his mind soon moved on to more important things. The next few hours were a blur. There was wardrobe coming in and helping him pick out his attire for the evening. The sound-check people had him come out and test the microphones. The make-up artists came in and touched him up. There was even a stylist who came by and freshened up his fade.

Soon, the wardrobe people were back and urging him to get dressed. As Reginald put on his clothes, he heard a knock at the door. "Reggie, what's up son," asked Mike, entering the room. "How you feeling baby," asked Mike. "Bruh, I'm nervous, but I'm ready to get it started," Reginald replied as he buttoned his shirt. "Knock-knock," said a familiar voice from outside the room. Reginald looked up and saw Craig. "Craig, what's

up man," asked Reginald. "I had to get here to hear you perform, Reggie," Craig said reaching out to shake Reginald's hand. "Thanks for the support, I appreciate it," Reginald replied. "No problem," said Craig.

"Reggie, I gotta go," said Mike. "Good luck," he said walking out the door. Reginald heard Mike's bellowing voice down the hall. "Hey you! Get me some wings," Mike yelled. Just then, the door opened again.

The stage assistant came in as Reginald finished dressing. "Mister Morgan, you're on in five minutes," he said. "Thanks," said Reginald. "You're going to put on a show out there Reg," said Craig. "I sure hope so," Reginald said. "Can you all excuse me for a minute," Reginald said. Everyone slowly left the room. Reginald bowed his head and closed his eyes. "Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale," Reginald said softly. "Lord, be with me."

Reginald walked out and followed his guide to the stage. It was dark and there was a buzz in the crowd. There was a gentle roar. The only light he could see was from lighters, cell phones, and the flashing of digital cameras. "This really is it," Reginald said to himself.

Chapter 10

As Reginald stood on stage, he took in the sounds of the crowd. The gentle roar slowly turned into a raucous gathering of cheers. His heartbeat began to speed up. The music started playing in the background.

Listening intently, he heard his cue and he began to belt out one of his songs. Reginald was completely focused. In his own mind, he was just sitting around with his friends singing for fun. As he walked to the beat, back and forth across the stage, he made eye contact with many of the female spectators in the crowd. As he sang, they felt as if he were singing directly to them.

After completing several of his songs, Reginald felt a sense of relaxation out on the stage and a sense of accomplishment. "I've finally made it," he thought. He decided to address the audience in an impromptu dialogue.

"Hey everyone, before I finish up my time, I just want to thank you all for coming out to see me Big Mic and Yvonne," he said into the mic. "It really means a lot to have the support of people like you all," he finished as the crowd applauded. The usual crowd noise followed. Somebody screamed, "We love you Reggie!" Reginald laughed, "I love you too baby."

Reginald pulled up a stool and sat down as he began to sing his hit single, *My Vow*.

As he began the first verse, the crowd erupted into applause and many of them sang along with him. Reginald just smiled as he sang. He was content and in his element. Being on stage for him was just like being in his living room. He was completely comfortable.

Backstage, Craig, Mike and Yvonne stood and watched Reginald perform.

"That kid is good," Mike said. "I wish I was able to grab my fans that way," he finished. Yvonne smiled as she watched Reginald on stage. "He's something special, there's no denying that," she said. Craig just shook his head in amazement. "I knew this kid was for real when I first met him," Craig remembered aloud. "He was singing in the damn cab," he laughed.

Fifty thousand people began a simultaneous applause as Reginald finished up his performance. He took a bow and waved as he exited the stage. As he walked off stage, the group met him.

"Reggie, you were outstanding buddy," said Craig as he shook Reginald's hand. "I was very impressed at how you handled such a large group," said Craig. "Thanks Craig, it just felt good and I was relaxed," said Reginald.

"Son, you kicked some ass out there. You sure you ain't never done this before," asked Mike. "Man, I'm just living a dream," Reginald laughed as he gave Mike a fist pound. "Keep on dreaming then playboy," said Mike.

Reginald looked over to his right and saw Yvonne standing there smiling. "Hey," he said with a grin. "I'm proud of you Reggie," she said. "You did a great job," she said as she reached out to hug Reginald. Reginald's heart skipped a beat. "Thank you Yvonne," Reginald said awkwardly. They released their embrace and for a second Reginald found himself staring again.

"I've gotta finish getting prepared for my performance gentlemen, I will see you all after it's over," Yvonne said as she walked away.

As Yvonne walked away, Mike crept over to Reginald. "She likes you," he said with a jubilant laugh. "Please Mike," Reginald said with a smirk. "She's a celebrity and I'm just getting started," he said. "Besides, Brandie is waiting for me at home," Reginald finished.

"I don't mean no harm Reg, but if she loves you so much, why is she not here," Mike asked as he walked away. Reginald just stood there in silence. Craig walked up behind him and put his hand on Reginald's shoulder. "Good performance buddy," he said.

"But you should definitely be careful about what you do from here on," Craig urged as he walked away.

Reginald hurried back to his dressing room. He remembered there was a phone in there and he wanted to call Brandie. As he dialed her number, he was very excited to hear her voice and tell her about the concert. The phone rang one time and went straight to voicemail. "Brandie, baby, it was amazing," Reginald exclaimed. "I feel good about the show, really good. I hope you're okay. I really miss you and I want to talk to you," Reginald continued. "I love you babe," he said as he hung up the phone.

Reginald began changing out of his performance clothing. He heard a knock at the door. "Mister Morgan," inquired an unfamiliar female voice. "Yeah, come in," Reginald replied. "Hello, I'm Miss Summers' personal assistant, Andrea. She would like you to meet her for a late dinner tonight. Just come to this address," said Andrea as she handed him a business card. Andrea turned and left the room.

Reginald looked at the card. It had Yvonne's cell phone number on it, along with her home number and an office number. There was a restaurant name and address written on the back of the card in red ink. "*Durante Amante*," Reginald said to himself. He laughed, "Sounds expensive."

When he finished changing his clothes, he stepped out to side stage and he saw Yvonne performing. She smiled to the crowd as she sang. She looked to her left and she saw Reginald. She gave him a wink and she continued to sing. Reginald smiled back as he folded his arms and watched the show.

"Watching your lady I see," Mike said as he walked up behind Reginald. Reginald turned to Mike and just shook his head. "Man, it's not like that. I had a huge crush on her growing up," Reginald said. "I just admire her," he finished. "Bullshit man. You want them panties. And guess what, you can get it. She likes you," Mike said. "She never takes to people as quickly as she did with you. I've toured with her for five years. Most of the time she never talks to new people," Mike finished.

Reginald reached into his pocket and looked at the card that Andrea had given him from Yvonne. Then he looked up at Yvonne performing on stage. "I know she isn't trying to get with me," Reginald thought to himself.

Chapter 11

Reginald paced the floor of his hotel room. It was just after 11 pm. He was torn about this meeting with Yvonne. "I have to admit, I'm attracted to her. I'd be lying to myself if I said I wasn't," he thought. He sat on the cushy couch. "If I hang out with her with honorable intentions and promise myself to keep my cool, I will be alright," he said to himself. He nervously stood up. "I can make this strictly platonic," he said. "After all, I'm not interested in a relationship with her. I love Brandie," he said.

Reginald walked into the restroom and saw his phone sitting on the marble counter next to the sink. His message light was blinking. "Brandie," he exclaimed. He walked over and dialed his voicemail.

"Reggie, hi," Brandie said. "I'm so happy that you had a good performance," she continued. "There's something I want to talk to you about, but I'd rather do it in person," she continued. "Call me tonight when you get this message," Brandie finished. The call ended.

Reginald quickly dialed Brandie's cell.

One ring.

Two rings.

Three rings.

"Hello," said Brandie, quietly. She was sleeping. "Baby," Reginald said excitedly. "I missed you so much," he said. "I didn't mean to wake you, but I got your message to call you," he finished.

"Hey Reggie," she said. "I'm glad you called. I need to talk to you. Where's your next stop," she asked. "We're going to be in Memphis in a couple days, but we're staying here tomorrow," Reginald replied. "Okay, I will fly into Atlanta tomorrow morning," she said. "Duane's coming in too, you should get with him in the morning," said Reginald.

Just then, there was a knock at Reginald's door. "Hold on baby, somebody's at my door," he said. Reginald walked over to the door and looked through the peephole. It was Andrea, Yvonne's assistant. "Hey," said Reginald as he opened the door. "Hi," said

Andrea. "Yvonne is about to leave the hotel. She wants to know whether she should be going to the restaurant to meet you or if you are declining her invitation," Andrea said.

"Yvonne who," Brandie said into Reginald's ear. "Hold on baby," Reginald said to Brandie. "Tell Yvonne that I can't meet with her tonight, but I'll take a rain check," Reginald said. "Very well," Andrea replied as she turned and walked down the hallway. Reginald closed the door behind her.

He sat back on the couch. "Brandie, you still there," asked Reginald. "Yes," Brandie said. "So are you going to come with Duane," Reginald asked. Brandie didn't respond. "Hello," said Reginald. "Why are you meeting with women at almost midnight," asked Brandie. "She invited me to dinner," Reginald responded. "I never said I was going," he said. "But you didn't say 'no' either," she snapped back.

"Baby, she sent her assistant to me while I was at the concert. I never had an opportunity to say anything. I won't lie, I was thinking about going, but only to hang out," Reginald said. Brandie scoffed. "You are full of it Reggie. Yvonne, this is Yvonne Summers, the woman you've been crushing on for years," Brandie yelled into the phone. "You can't seriously think that I would believe that shit," she asked.

"Brandie, can you please trust me," asked Reginald. "I know you got my voicemail earlier, right," he asked. "I wanted you here with me because I love you and I want you around." Brandie sniffled a little and wiped her tears.

"I've never given you a reason to not trust me and I don't plan to start now. You wouldn't believe some of the stuff I've seen today and you know what keeps me grounded," asked Reginald. "It's you, baby," he finished. "Reggie, I love you, but I'm scared," said Brandie. "You know I'm independent and secure with myself, but having a boyfriend who's a celebrity and gone all the time," Brandie said before taking a pause. "It's stressful and you know how my mind can wander," she finished.

"Baby, I'm going to say something to you," Reginald said. "I can give all this up for you," he said. "If you aren't happy, then none of this is worth my time," he continued. "Now you know that's not necessary," Brandie said. "I'm just having a problem adjusting to you not being around," she said. "I worry about you, out there alone and away from me," she said. "I won't be alone for long baby. You and Duane are both coming. I'll have him call you and order your ticket," Reginald said.

"Okay, I'll be expecting his call. I'm going to get some sleep," she finished. "Yeah baby, go ahead. I'm going to hit the sack too," he said. "I love you," Reginald said. "I love you too, babe," replied Brandie. They both disconnected their calls. Brandie quickly drifted off to sleep. She felt a new sense of comfort after talking with Reginald and it soothed her mind.

Reginald sent a text to Duane to tell him to buy Brandie a plane ticket on his flight and bring her with him. Duane responded, 'ok'. Reginald put his phone on the

charger and decided to take a shower before going to sleep. "I'm glad I finally got her on the line, especially with this whole dinner thing," he said to himself. "I don't know if I could have declined without her."

Reginald finished his shower and got ready for bed. As he pulled his covers back, there was a knock at the door. He looked at his clock. It was almost 1 am. He looked out the peephole. It was Mike. He opened the door. "Mike, what's going on man," asked Reginald. "We are going to invade the House of Waffles," said Mike. "You know it's like 10 of them bitches right here on this strip. Each one next to an all night liquor store," Mike laughed. "Come eat with a nigga," Mike said, looking at Reginald with his eyes glazed over.

Reginald laughed to himself. "Man, get outta here, I got an early morning tomorrow. Gotta meet my lady and my manager tomorrow," Reginald said. "Look atcha," Mike said. "You in your draws, looking like Rog from *What's Happenin'*," Mike laughed. "Yvonne in there," he asked. "She ain't in her room," he finished.

Reginald laughed, "Nobody's here but me dude! Go eat and I'll get at you tomorrow," Reginald said. "Holla," Mike said as he stumbled down the hall. Reginald shut the door. He could still smell the weed from Mike's body. "This fool got munchies and he wanna go eat," laughed Reginald as he climbed into bed. He quickly drifted off to sleep.

Another knocked at the door interrupted his slumber. Reginald opened eyes. The clock said 3:37 am. "Damn, who is that," Reginald asked himself. He heard the knock again. "This better not be Mike," Reginald grumbled. He walked over to the door and opened it as he rubbed his eyes. It was Yvonne.

"Hey baby," she yelled loudly. Reginald's eyes nearly popped out of his head. "Hey," he said softly. Yvonne put her arms around his neck and kissed tongue kissed him sloppily. Reginald found himself kissing back for a second, but he put his hands on her waist and pushed her away, though her arms were still around his neck.

"Yvonne, what are you doing," he asked in shock. Yvonne laughed loudly as she released her hug. She walked back to the door and slammed it shut. "You know you want this," Yvonne said as she rubbed her hands slowly, but clumsily all over her body. "Yeah, you are pretty hot," Reginald thought to himself. "Yvonne, you're drunk," he said. "Let me take you back to your room," he said. "No," yelled Yvonne.

She started walking towards Reginald and as she got closer, she began removing her clothing. Reginald's eyes widened. He had imagined this before, but not like this and he didn't feel right about it. "Damn it Yvonne, stop," he yelled. She didn't listen. She was down to her pink thong. Reginald looked at her naked body and he was more than aroused. His eyes darted from her face to her breasts to her thighs. Yvonne smiled. "I knew you wanted this," she said as she pushed him backward onto the bed.

She grabbed his right hand and placed it on her left breast and rubbed it slowly. Reginald was lying on his back as he felt her tongue explore his neck and his chest. "She's a lot better at this than kissing," he thought. "She is drunk though, and I can't do this," he thought. Just then, he felt her whip his boxers off. Her tongue began to go a little lower and Reginald sat up. "Yvonne, no," he said. He grabbed her wrists and turned her around and sat her on the bed. He grabbed his boxers and pulled them back on.

"You need to put on your clothes, we can't do this," Reginald said. "Your body says otherwise, Reggie," she said as she batted her eyelashes at him. Reginald was tempted, but he knew that he had already gone too far and he knew he was wrong. "Yvonne, you're drunk, and I'm not single. We can't do this! You need to leave," Reginald demanded.

Yvonne looked into his eyes. She knew he was serious. "I'm so embarrassed," she said. Tears began to fill her eyes. She got up from the bed and began to gather her clothes. "I shouldn't have shown up here," she said. Reginald stood quietly. He actually began to feel bad for her. "Is she an alcoholic," he asked himself. As she sat on the couch and began to put her clothes on, she began to sob uncontrollably. Reginald sat on the couch next to her and pulled her close.

"Yvonne, it's going to be okay," Reginald said as he hugged her. "Let's get you cleaned up." She continued sobbing and then suddenly she started coughing violently. "Yvonne," Reginald said, worried. She jumped up from the couch and ran into the bathroom. Reginald could hear Yvonne throwing up. He went in and saw her on her knees. She was heaving violently. "Do you want me to call 911," asked Reginald.

Yvonne lifted her face from the bowl of the toilet. "No," she whimpered. "Leave me be," she said as she rested her head on the side of the toilet. Reginald walked back to the bed and sat down. He put his head in his hands. "Are there any normal celebrities," he thought to himself. He lied back on the bed and closed his eyes.

Chapter 12

The room was silent and dark. Reginald was still on his back, in the same position he was in when he laid down. Then came a knock at the door. Reginald's eyes cracked open. He rolled over on his side and saw the clock. It said 10:13 am.

"Damn," said Reginald under his breath. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. He heard the knock at the door again. Reginald got up and walked over to the door and looked out the peephole. It was Duane and Brandie.

Reginald, still in a bit of a haze, opened the door. "Hey y'all," he said sleepily. Duane shook his hand, "What's up Reg, this spot is nice!" Reginald hugged and kissed Brandie. "Hey baby," said Reginald. "I missed you so much," he continued. "Me too," said Brandie behind her bright smile.

Duane walked over to the couch and saw the blouse on the couch. He saw pants on the floor and one pump with a four-inch heel. "What the fu--," Duane muttered to himself. He turned and looked at Reginald. He walked into the bathroom and saw Yvonne lying next to the toilet. All she had on was her under-clothes. There was dried vomit on her face and in her hair.

Duane kneeled down and put his finger on her wrist to check her pulse. "Man, at least she's alive," he said. "Reggie," yelled Duane. "Come here!" Reginald was groggy, but he suddenly remembered Yvonne. "Oh shit," he yelled. He scampered quickly into the bathroom and saw Duane standing over her. "Is she okay," asked Reginald. "Yeah, she's alive and breathing, but she's completely fucked up," Duane said.

Reginald rubbed his eyes. "Man, you wouldn't believe last night," he said shaking his head. He noticed that Brandie was standing in the doorway of the bathroom with Yvonne's blouse in her hand. "What the hell is this Reginald," she asked sternly. "And who's the bitch on the floor," she asked angrily. "Baby, let me explain," said Reginald.

"Talk fast nigga," Brandie said as she turned and walked away. Reginald leaped up from his knees and ran up behind Brandie. "Okay, you remember last night when we talked, right? Well, after that, Mike showed up and wanted to go eat. I told him no and went back to bed," Reginald started. Brandie turned to him and just shook her head. "What's that got to do with the naked bitch in the bathroom," she asked. "Well, while I was asleep, Yvonne came knocking at the door and she was trying to get with me, but only because she was drunk," Reginald said in a panic. "I swear to you nothing happened," said Reginald.

"I got her to back off and when she sat down to put back on her clothes, she got sick and hurled! I offered to call 911, but she said no and I wound up going back to sleep," Reginald said desperately.

Brandie turned around and looked at Reginald. "You should have kicked her out," Brandie said. "Better yet, you should have never let her in." Brandie took the blouse and threw it in Reginald's face and walked towards the door. "Brandie, come back," Reginald pleaded. "Goodbye Reginald," she said as she slammed the door behind her. "Damn it," Reginald exclaimed as he threw the blouse on the floor. He sat on the couch and put his head in his hands.

"Ahem," grunted Duane. Reginald looked up and he saw Duane and Yvonne. She was leaning on him and she seemed only about half conscious. Duane helped her onto the bed where she just fell back and drifted off again. "Yo, what did she drink," he asked. "D,

seriously, I have no idea," Reginald said. "She showed up here drunk last night, trying to sleep with me," Reginald said. "I knocked her back, and when she got the picture, she also got pretty sick," Reginald said. "She went in the bathroom and puked. All I know is that I was going to call 911, but she said 'no'. I went back to sleep and now here we are," Reginald finished.

"First off, if she's passing out drunk and shit, you call 911. I don't care what she said. You got this strange woman in your hotel, if she died, they could put that on you. Matter of fact," said Duane as he picked up the phone. "Front desk? Yeah, we need an ambulance now," Duane said. "Yeah, thank you," Duane said as he hung up the phone. "They should be sending somebody in a minute," he said. The two looked at Yvonne on the bed.

Reginald sat down on the bed and nudged at her shoulder. "Yvonne, the ambulance is on the way," Reginald said. Yvonne's eyes opened. "For what," she said. "I'm fine, just a hangover from hell," she continued. "Well, they are on their way Yvonne," said Reginald. "Cancel it, I'm fine, I just need some coffee. Where's Andrea," asked Yvonne. "You're in my room, not yours. I haven't seen Andrea since last night," Reginald replied.

"You there! Call and cancel the ambulance," Yvonne said pointing to Duane. Duane cracked a smile as he picked up the phone to call the front desk. "Reggie, I'm okay and I'm sorry about barging in on you last night," Yvonne said softly. "Can you give me my clothes, I need to go back to my suite and get cleaned up," she said. "Duane, can you get her clothes for me, I need to find Brandie," Reginald said. "Yessa massa," said Duane sarcastically as he laughed.

Reginald put on his clothes from the night before and ran out the door. "Man, where could she have gone to," Reginald asked himself as he sprinted up the hallway. He got in the elevator and went down to the lobby. There were people everywhere. He noticed that there were people who recognized him. He quickly ran out the front door of the hotel, hoping not to attract any attention.

Off to his left, he saw Brandie sitting on a bench. He could see how angry she was and how hurt she looked. He ran over to her and sat next to her. "Baby," Reginald began. "Stop," Brandie interrupted. "I've heard your story and whether or not it's bullshit or the truth, you've broken my trust. You don't let women in your room, period. Especially not strange drunk women," Brandie said. "And if somehow she got in there, you should have sent her back to where she came from," Brandie said. Reginald couldn't say anything. His heart was beating triple time. He felt tears in his eyes.

"Brandie, I made a mistake, but I did *not* sleep with her and I did *not* have any intention of sleeping with her. She's a colleague and she had too much to drink. I've never dealt with anything like this before and I didn't know how to handle it," Reginald said. "All I know is that I'm sorry that I hurt you and that I hurt us. You know how important you are to me. I would never purposely put our relationship in this situation," he said.

Brandie put her hand on his cheek. "Reggie, I love you, but this is exactly what I worried about," Brandie said with tears in her eyes. "You are naive in a lot of ways, but it's not necessarily bad because I know you have a good heart. You want to help everyone and you want to believe that they are all out for your best interests," Brandie said. "But they aren't, everybody is trying to make money off you and get next to you. Do you know I heard a woman at the store the other day say that she would have your baby just because you're a celebrity," Brandie said. "I'm not okay with that stuff, not in the least," she continued.

Reginald sat back and sighed. "Reggie, everybody wants something from you. Duane sees dollar signs, your boys want a big break, the woman upstairs wants to sleep with you, Mister Martin wants job security, you got fans wanting to make babies with you and they've never even met you," she said. "I don't want people taking advantage of you, because you've got a good heart," she said. "But you're already trying to do everything for everybody," she said.

"But you come first," Reginald interrupted. "I would give all this up for you." "You would, but nothing would change," she said. "You'd still be letting Duane and your friends get over on you like they've been doing for years," she continued. "These people are leeches, and they won't stop until you don't have anything left. Then they will move on to the next person. I have to question your judgment, because you asked Duane to be your manager when Image already had somebody professional lined up for you," Brandie said.

"I owed Duane for all he's done for me," Reginald replied. "No, you don't owe him a damn thing," she said. "When you sing at The Hill, that's when they get paid the most, which means you bring in the majority of his legitimate money," Brandie continued. "He's using you and it's only going to get worse," Brandie stated.

Reginald stood up. He was frustrated. "How'd we get from last night to Duane," he asked. "It's all the same Reggie, you are too naive. This is what I wanted to talk to you about. You need to get another manager because you know that Duane is shady. He's going to be more trouble than he's worth," she finished.

"I can handle Duane," Reginald snapped back. "Oh really," Brandie said. "So then you are aware that the police are looking at him in connection with the disappearance of several patrons of the club? They found three Escalades at this chop shop around the corner from the club. The serial numbers for those Escalades matched out of state vehicles that were last seen at The Hill," Brandie explained. "What makes it worse is that the guy who owns all three of these Escalades not only didn't report them stolen, but they can't find him either.," said Brandie.

Reginald sat back down. "Duane's got some not so up-and-up shit going on, but he wouldn't go that far," Reginald said. "Believe it baby, I'm not going to watch him take you down with him," said Brandie. "Get out of this mess before it's too late," she said.

Chapter 13

Reginald pondered for a moment. "I know Duane is crooked, but hopefully not that crooked," Reginald thought. "Baby, do you hear me," asked Brandie. She grabbed his hand. "You have to find a way to get out of this relationship with him," she said. "I was just hoping that giving Duane a source of legitimate income would sway him," said Reginald. "Deep down, he's a good guy. He's just been hustling so long that it's hard for him to change," Reginald said defensively.

"Yeah, people who are good guys don't take other people's lives," said Brandie. "I can't tell you what I think. I think you should weigh your options," she said. Reginald sat there in silence as Brandie spoke. He really thought about what she had to say. "I'll talk with Duane, maybe I can talk some sense into him," Reginald said.

Duane wasn't easily influenced. He was very shrewd. He was also adept in business and flipping a few dollars. He had his ears opened at all times. Whatever the demand was, he was supplying it. Duane had investments in not only dirty businesses, such as narcotics, illegal gambling and prostitution, but he also had a hand in real estate and a trucking company.

His clean businesses weren't all that clean either. His trucking company routinely transported illegal products from one state to another, along with the legal goods. This is part of what made The Hill so popular. Some alcoholic beverages weren't permitted in the state. Duane would import them illegally and sell them for a little more and get a little extra profit. The drugs he sold typically were the highest quality that he could find for a good price. He'd also mark up the price on them and sell for another profit.

His real estate business owned a few upscale condos and some mid-level income apartment complexes. The condos were in a very good area of town, typically where high-income customers lived. He *rented* out the condos to his dealers. They'd stay there for free in exchange for selling his high-end drugs, like cocaine to the rich people in the area. They also had to agree to keep a low profile.

The apartments were mostly legitimate. In fact, Reginald stayed in one of them. But in each of the complexes, he had a small number of units reserved for *preparing* his product and an even smaller number of units reserved for the sale of the product. These units changed on a weekly basis. They'd rotate the apartments and have some willing tenants exchange apartments with them for an extra taste of *candy*.

Most people didn't realize how connected Duane was and how deep he was into the game. The assumption was that outside of the club, he wasn't bringing in any money. That's exactly how he wanted it though. He kept a low profile, although everybody knew who he was and feared him coming down on them.

Duane did have his share of problems that came along with his power. He was making moves quietly and doing quite well. He didn't have cops on his back and he had very few enemies.

Out of the blue, one day an out-of-towner came through with a proposal for Duane. The deal really was too good to be true. Duane suspected that this guy was either a snitch or a cop. After one of their meetings, Duane had Hank to follow him back to his hotel. After observing him for a couple of days, Hank witnessed a couple of known crooked narcs come to his room and shake him down. Hank knew he was either dirty or a snitch at this point. He called Duane, from a pay phone down the street. Duane ordered the guy's execution.

Whenever Duane wanted somebody dead, he called Earl. Nobody knew much about Earl except that he seemed almost robotic and heartless. Duane paid him well and he did whatever Duane wanted. Earl was efficient and effective. He was much older than Duane, probably closer to his forties. He worked for Duane's former bosses who were sent to prison. When Duane took over, Earl continued in the same capacity. This was just one of many instances that Duane used Earl to take someone out.

Earl went to the room and popped the guy three times in the chest and once in the head. It was an execution style hit.

Duane later found out that this guy was an undercover DEA agent, who was trying to take down several local dealers. The narcs had no idea who he was. But he knew them. He had a case file on each of them and they were looking at long sentences. Each of them pled out and spilled their guts about what they knew on the local dealers. Once all their information was shared with law enforcement, the DEA, the FBI and the ATF all had their eyes on Duane.

Fortunately for Duane, they really couldn't stick anything on him because local law enforcement was so corrupt that they always warned him when something was up. When it came down to *offing* somebody, Duane rarely ever got his hand dirty; that is until the most recent incident.

Duane had a business meeting set up with some guys from Texas. He was sitting in his office, talking business with Hank, when Gerald came in. "Santiago and his guys are here boss. Buncha shiny muthafuckas," he said. "They rolled up in three black Escalades," Gerald continued. "It's about 12 of them," he said.

"Fuck, man. Didn't I say this shouldn't be noticeable," Duane said as he banged his hand on his desk. "I told him to keep this simple," Duane said as he stood up. He opened his desk drawer and took out his glock. He put it in the back of his pants and sat back down. "Hank, get the boys into position out back," said Duane. "Gerald, lead them shiny bitches out back," he said.

Gerald walked out and met the men at the door. "Mister Santiago, thank you for coming. Mister Clemons will meet you in the back," Gerald said. "What a fuckin' dump this place is," said Santiago. His companions laughed a little under their breath. "I thought Clemons ran a high class business. This place looks like shit," he said. Gerald frowned. "Mister Santiago, with all due respect Mister Clemons is a business man who likes to keep a low profile. He doesn't like to play shiny suit man. He doesn't show up at colleagues establishments with an entourage of obnoxious cronies," Gerald said.

Santiago frowned. "Who are you to speak to me in that manner," he said. "I'm the man telling you that Mister Clemons likes to keep it simple," Gerald said. "And you are making it very hard for him to do that with all the attention you are drawing to us right now and outside with your caravan," said Gerald.

Santiago bit his tongue. "Okay, I can respect that," Santiago said. "Good, follow me," Gerald said as he led them to Duane.

Gerald led them to a structure that had been added onto the club as a storage facility. It was a steel room, 50 feet by 50 feet and the ceiling was about 12 feet high. There was also a port for trucks to unload. There were dollies, hand trucks, and a few forklifts scattered through the room. There was a large round table with six chairs. Duane sat at one of those chairs, his arms folded and a cigar in his mouth.

"Mister Santiago, have a seat," said Duane. Gerald walked over to Duane's side of the table and stood next to him. Santiago sat down across from Duane and put his briefcase on the table. "This is a sample of the product that we offer, two kilos of heroin," said Santiago. Duane nodded his head. "This is high end product, and the only reason I made this visit personally is because I heard that you were able to make us both quite a profit off of my product," said Santiago. "But after visiting you here and seeing a small sample of your organization, I don't believe that you are capable of being my business partner," Santiago said. Duane frowned as he chewed his cigar. He leaned forward. "Really," he asked, "Why is that," asked Duane.

"Your employees are shoddy, as are your surroundings," Santiago said. "You've obviously had no experience at this level," he continued. "You'd be a liability to my organization." Duane's eyes tightened. "Uh huh," he said. Santiago stood up and grabbed the black briefcase. "This meeting is over," he said as he turned to walk away. Duane looked to his left, where a pallet stood. He knew that Hank had positioned people in the room, out of sight just in case something went down.

"Santiago, you are one stupid bastard," Duane said. "I can take your product and make a major profit for both of us," he said. "You judge a book by its cover, but you don't realize that I'm pushing more weight than anybody in the state," he continued. Duane stood up as Santiago turned back to face him. "If you want to get high in this city, chances are, whatever your pleasure is, be it ex, heroin, coke, bud, acid or meth, it's probably passed through my hands," Duane bragged. "However, I'm subtle. I don't need an entourage. I don't need an ego boost. I don't need to dress like a playboy to make myself feel good," Duane said as he walked closer to Santiago. Santiago's guards began to become unsettled. "I just count a couple of wads of my money," he said. "I might laugh at a sorry muthafucka like you who walks around like a *got* damn peacock, waving his pink fuckin' feathers all over the place for a piece of ass," Duane said. "You don't want to deal with me," asked Duane. "Then get the fuck outta my city," yelled Duane.

Santiago stood in amazement. Duane looked at Santiago with his intense eyes. "Mister Clemons," Santiago said softly, "I see I have hit you in a soft spot. You obviously have a temper, especially when somebody questions you. That is yet another liability for my organization and me" he said. "I suggest that you step away now before there is trouble," Santiago said.

Duane's anger got the best of him. His fists clinched, his eyes tightened, he gritted his teeth, and he reacted. He caught Santiago in the jaw with a hard right fist. Santiago hit the floor. His guards reached for their weapons, but they were caught off guard, due to their surprise about the events unfolding before their eyes. Hank and five shooters stepped out from behind several pallets, guns blazing. They each dropped one by one, with shots to the head. Santiago was the only one left.

"Please, Mister Clemons, I mean no harm," cried Santiago. "If you spare me, I will give you one million dollars, cash money within the hour." Duane frowned. "Fuck you and your money, bitch," he said. "You can't buy my respect," Duane said. He began kicking Santiago in the face until he was a bloody mess. "Please," Santiago muttered through his mouth full of broken teeth. Duane grabbed Santiago's briefcase and slammed it into Santiago's head. Duane had beaten him to death in less than two minutes.

"Hank, go on out front and keep an eye on things, just in case this fucker has more back up. Also make sure there are no cops in the building, even if they are on our payroll," Duane said wiping the blood from his boot. "Gerald, you get a couple of guys together and take these bodies and put them on a truck. Take their keys and bring them to my office. Take their weapons and throw them in the river. Carry their bodies across the state line and bury them somewhere in the woods," Duane finished.

Duane picked up the briefcase and began walking back to his office with three of his bouncers. As he re-entered the club, he saw Reginald standing at the bar. Hank approached Duane. "No cops here and I don't believe anybody heard anything over all the noise out here. Reggie is here too," whispered Hank. "Take the case, and I'll go talk to Reggie," Duane said.

"Reg, what are you doing here," asked Duane. "I have a business proposition for you," Reginald said. Reginald didn't know just how close he was to witnessing something that could have changed his impression of Duane forever.

Reginald knew of most of Duane's endeavors, but he wasn't directly aware of anybody who he had killed and he didn't know just how low Duane could sink. Reginald believed that anybody could be redeemed. He thought by offering Duane an out, maybe he would legitimize his business. Duane was a very good businessman and should be able to see the benefits of being legal.

Reginald looked at Brandie. "We're pretty close, I think he will listen to me," Reginald said.

Chapter 14

Duane did have a lot of respect for Reginald. Deep down, he did want to make a change. But he felt trapped in the life that he led. If he attempted to leave, his colleagues could kill him. Duane knew too much about the people who supplied him. He knew too much about crooked cops who covered up a lot of their own dirt. Most of all, he knew himself. He knew that he would have a hard time leaving all that tax-free money on the table.

Duane sat in Reginald's suite, watching Yvonne as she washed her face in front of the mirror. His eyes glanced over her body. He looked at her butt and her hips and found himself licking his lips. "That's a fine woman," Duane thought to himself.

"What's your name," asked Yvonne while she began arranging her hair. She never actually looked back at him. Duane figured she was just making small talk. She definitely didn't really care, but she didn't want the uncomfortable silence. She also knew that Duane was watching her and she felt a little uneasy about it. She just wanted to break the ice and get him focused on something besides her ass.

"I'm Duane, Reggie's friend and manager," he said with a smile. "You," Yvonne said puzzled, as she turned around and faced Duane. "You are managing Reginald's career and his money," said Yvonne inquisitively. She looked him up and down. "He's not *ugly*," she thought, "but he is a hood." She looked at his gruff appearance. Duane looked like he lived a rough life, but his clothes were high quality, and he seemed smart. No, it wasn't the material things, his story was told in his eyes and in his words. She

listened to the way he spoke and she saw sneakiness in his eyes. "He's up to no good," she thought.

"Yeah, Reg is my boy," Duane said proudly. Yvonne turned around to finish her hair. "He played my club and I did everything I could to get him a break. Shit finally worked out," Duane finished. "He saw the way I ran my businesses and he believed that I would be an asset to his career," Duane said. "I know how to handle business and Reggie is a good friend," he said. "I'm going to have his back until the day I'm in the ground," he finished.

Yvonne wasn't impressed. "Don't screw this up for him, he's just getting started and he doesn't need *your* kind of trouble," she said as she turned around. She walked over to the door. "Tell Reggie that I'm sorry for everything and I hope he can forgive me," Yvonne said. She opened the door and walked out.

"What the fuck," Duane asked himself. "I'm trying to help my boy, and everybody got a fuckin' opinion." Duane slouched a little on the couch. After a few minutes, he felt his phone vibrating on his hip. "This is D," he answered.

"Boss, we got problems," Gerald said on the other end. "The Feds came through the club. Ain't no damning evidence here or anything, but they are getting more aggressive," said Gerald. "Okay, call our contacts at the precinct. Arrange a meeting; and you and Earl stand in for me. Find out what they *think* they know. Get back at me later," Duane said as he hung up.

The FBI was looking for Santiago. After finding his SUVs at a chop shop, they knew Santiago was nearby. They asked a few questions, and finally somebody informed them that the vehicles were at The Hill recently. Unfortunately for them, they couldn't put anything on Duane. For all they knew, Santiago and his group were having drinks. Any evidence they had was circumstantial at best. Still, Duane was a little concerned.

Reginald and Brandie walked back into the room as Duane was closing his phone. "Blackney Spears just walked out. She said she was sorry and she hopes you can forgive her skanky ass," Duane said in a disgusted tone. Reginald looked at Duane; he could see frustration on his face. "He looks pissed. Yvonne must have said something," Reginald said to himself. "D, I gotta talk to you man," Reginald said solemnly. Duane felt his phone vibrate again. "Hold on man, and I'll give you my full attention," he said as he answered the phone.

"Yeah, this is Mister Clemons," said Duane. Reginald watched Duane's eyes get larger and his lips curl into a big smile as he listened to the voice on the other end of the phone. "Thank you! Thank you very much! Goodbye," Duane said with excitement. "Reg, bruh, you are never going to believe this," Duane said.

Reginald began to get excited too. "Reggie, you've been invited to be on BST. You're going to be performing live in front of a national audience," Duane yelled.

Reginald and Duane hugged. "Damn, man that's great," Reginald said to Duane. "I can't believe this," he said. "I'm going to be on live TV," Reginald finished.

"So what did you want to tell me before the call man," asked Duane. Reginald looked at Duane and then at Brandie. "It's nothing man, don't sweat it," he said. Brandie frowned and slipped out the door unnoticed with her bag as Reginald and Duane celebrated.

"Reginald is so naive," Brandie thought. "He just doesn't realize that Duane is going to dig them both a big hole," she said to herself. She walked out of the hotel. She stood on the sidewalk to catch a cab. The cab pulled up and she put her bag in and sat down in back seat, disappointed in what had occurred. "The airport please," she said to the driver.

Back in the room, Reginald noticed that Brandie wasn't in the room, but he didn't know that she left the building. "Where's Brandie," asked Duane. "I thought she just went to get some air, but I don't know," Reginald said. He picked up his cell and called Brandie. She answered, while in the cab on the way to the airport.

"Baby, where are you," he asked. "I'm going home Reginald. I'm happy for you, but your success is not going to last unless you drop Duane," Brandie replied. "Baby, now is not the time," he replied. "Reggie, there's never a good time to disappoint somebody. But you've disappointed me twice today: once with that drunk bitch and another time by not being *man* enough to talk to Duane about his situation and how it will affect your life. I can't live like this anymore. When you get it together, give me a call. Until then, have fun with your boy," Brandie said as she slammed her phone shut.

Reginald sat down. He was completely shocked. "What happened," Duane asked. "She just dumped me," he said quietly. "For what," Duane asked. Reginald didn't say anything. He just sat with his arms folded. "It's cool dog. You don't gotta say anything. I'll leave you alone," said Duane as he got up and walked out.

Reginald chose to spend the rest of the time in Atlanta alone. The next few stops on the tour, Reginald sang his heart out. He was really feeling the words to his songs. He couldn't believe how he had lost his love. Duane continued to be there and support him. Even Mike showed support in his own way. Craig said to him several times, "A personal life is a detriment to the beginning of a star's career!" It didn't help. Reginald was lonely.

The entire time they were on tour, Reginald watched Duane closely. He wanted badly to believe that Duane was keeping his nose clean. And he had no evidence to the contrary based on the most recent experiences. For that reason, he didn't see a need to let Duane go or even talk to him about it. It just seemed redundant. Reginald finally settled on the thought that Brandie was just looking for a reason to leave him because of her own insecurities. Duane was a convenient excuse, so she used him as reasoning.

"Her loss," he thought as he took a sip of his bottled water. "Great show tonight Reggie," said one of the stage assistants. "Thanks man," Reginald replied. It was the final stop on the tour. Philadelphia was good to Reginald that night. He got three standing ovations. He actually had to come back on stage to get his last one. The applause held up Big Mic's performance by almost 20 minutes. Reginald was feeling pretty good about himself and his career.

"Reggie," said a familiar voice. He turned and saw Yvonne standing in the doorway. "We haven't talked much since Atlanta. I just wanted to tell you that I have really enjoy your performances. You are getting better every stop," she said. "Thanks Yvonne, I appreciate that," he said quietly. "Okay, I'm going to go," said Yvonne. "Have a good evening," she said as she walked away. Reginald got out of his chair. "Yvonne, wait," he said. Yvonne turned around, "yes?"

"What are you doing tonight?"

Chapter 15

Yvonne looked stunned, but a smile quickly came to her face. "I'm not doing anything important," she said. Reginald smiled back. "Good. How about you meet me at my room tonight around nine and we'll have a bite to eat and talk a little," Reginald said. "Okay, that would be nice," Yvonne said behind her smile. She turned and walked away. "Nine o'clock," Reginald yelled in jest. "I'm there," she yelled back.

Reginald looked at himself in the mirror. "Have I changed that much in just a couple months," he asked himself. He thought about how much he loved Brandie and how she broke his heart. "This wasn't just for me; this was for us," he thought. "It's great to be famous and well off, but when I can't share it with anybody, what's the point," he whispered.

As he got out of his chair, he heard a knock at the door. "Come in," he said. "Bruh, me and Mike were just over in the lobby where the fans with backstage passes go," Duane said with a big grin. "The honeys over there are bangin'," Duane said excitedly.

"Is that right," Reginald said with a smile. "Nigga," Duane exclaimed. "Mike just bagged two of them to go back to his dressing room with him. You know what time it is," Duane said.

Reginald shook his head. "Y'all fools need to be careful that them girls aren't underage," Reginald said. "Reg, I don't mess with nobody without I.D.," Duane laughed. "Yeah, alright," Reginald laughed.

"Look here," Reginald said. "This TV appearance on BST, what's up with that," asked Reginald. "I talked with a producer, they just want you to sing *My Wow*, introduce a couple videos and do a 5 minute interview. It'll take about 30 minutes if you count the commercial breaks," Duane said. Reginald nodded, "Sounds good."

"What are you doing tonight man," Duane asked. "Me and Mike are headed out to the Sixers game. They are playing the Lakers. Kobe, baby," Duane said excitedly. "We won't be there until halftime though. You want in," he asked. "I'm having dinner with Yvonne tonight," Reginald replied.

Duane bit into his cigar. "What? You trynna get them panties," Duane asked. "It's not that. I think she's cool and I could learn a lot from her. We just need to get to know each other, that's it," Reginald said. "Yeah, okay," Duane said sarcastically. "The only thing that kept you from hittin' that ass the first night was that you were still with Brandie, barely," Duane said.

Reginald sighed. "Whatever," he said. "Knock-knock," said Mike as he walked into the room. "I got two naked hoes in my dressing room," he said. "They will do anything, and they'll do it on camera," Mike laughed. "I'm good Mike, thanks," Reginald said. "Fuck, Reggie! We been on like 20-some stops and yo ass haven't got no pussy yet. You find Jesus or something," Mike asked. "Reggie is just about his business. He don't wanna mix it with his pleasure," said Duane as he walked to the door. He patted Mike on the back, "Now about these girls in your room." Duane and Mike walked out of Reginald's dressing room.

Reginald laughed to himself. "Them fools are a match made in ghetto heaven," he said. He opened his duffle bag and began to pack his things. When he finished packing, he took a limo back to his hotel.

As usual, there was a bottle of expensive champagne on ice waiting for him in his room. He climbed out of his clothes and hopped in the shower. He still had about 45 minutes before Yvonne would arrive. When he finished showering and drying off, he noticed the light on the room phone was blinking. He had voicemail. He dialed in the numbers and listened. It was Yvonne.

"Hey Reggie, I was just calling to make sure we were still on for this evening. I'm in my room, waiting. Call me when you're ready for me to come by."

Reginald dialed her room. "Yvonne, give me 10 minutes and you can come on by. I just gotta get prepared," he said. "Okay sweetie. See you in a minute," she replied. Reginald finished getting dressed and sprayed on a little cologne. As he was brushing his

hair, he heard a knock at the door. "Just a minute," he yelled as he trotted across the room to the door.

He opened the door and there was Yvonne. "You look good," he said. "Mmmm, and you do too! And you smell wonderful," she said. They engaged in a brief hug. "Have a seat," Reginald said, pointing towards the couch. "I didn't order any food, because I didn't know what you might want to eat, but there is a bottle of champagne on ice if you want some," Reginald said.

Yvonne looked uncomfortable. "I don't drink anymore Reggie," she said. "I stopped drinking after--," she said cutting herself off abruptly. Reginald sat down. He felt awful. "I'm sorry, Yvonne," he said. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable," Reginald said.

"Well, we hadn't talked in a while, but I decided that I was too old to be making a fool out of myself," she said. "I'm 36 years old, there is no reason I should be running around all times of night drinking like a fish. I don't want to set that kind of example for my fans, and I don't want my friends and family to see me as some lush or something," she said. Reginald just nodded. "I respect that, and I'm proud of you," Reginald said with a smile. The two embraced tightly. "How about a bottle of water," laughed Reginald. Yvonne smiled, "Sounds good."

Reginald got up and opened the mini-fridge. He grabbed a couple of bottles and walked back to the couch. "Do you know what you want to eat," he asked. She looked at the room service menu. "I like lobster and steamed vegetables," he said. "Okay, I think I'll get a steak and salad," Reginald said.

After Reginald ordered the food, they engaged in small talk and began getting to know each other a little better. Reginald already liked Yvonne and while she was 14 years his senior, he felt very relaxed around her. So relaxed, that he found his arm around her shoulder and he held her close while they talked. It was very natural and not uncomfortable or forced at all.

"So Reggie, what made you want to sing," Yvonne asked. Reginald smiled as he closed his eyes. "Have you ever just been natural at something," he asked. "That's how I with am singing. I remember being in Christmas plays at church and singing when I was a little kid. My great aunt Iris would always sing to me and keep me involved in something musically. I didn't grow up with my mother. She died when I was only two. My father couldn't handle her death and he disappeared. We never saw him again," said Reginald.

"Since my grandparents passed before I was born, my aunt Iris raised me. She took me to church and I sang in the choir. I started singing in community center dramas. I sang in school, in the male chorus. I'm just good at it and I love to do it," he continued. Yvonne sat back and smiled as Reginald reflected.

"My aunt was a great lady, though. She died just before I started singing at Duane's club," he said. "She used to sing old gospel hymns all the time and I used to sing them with her. Imagine a three-year-old singing *Wade in the Water*, but that was me. When she died, I was all by myself. I don't have anybody else, at least not by blood. I don't have any family except my boys, Vance, Farley and Tommy. Then I've got Duane and--," Reginald paused. "Well, them and Duane."

Yvonne could see hurt in his eyes. Reginald looked at her and cracked a slight smile. "I'm sorry that I made you re-live that Reggie," said Yvonne. "I kind of heard about you and your girlfriend splitting and I was definitely a part of that. That's part of why I didn't approach you up until earlier. I didn't want to overstep my boundaries," Yvonne said. Reginald smiled. "Hey, it's fine. You didn't break us up, she did. Put that thought out of your head," Reginald finished. Yvonne sighed hard.

"What about you, Yvonne," Reginald asked. "Why aren't you seeing anybody? If I'm not prying too much," Reginald asked.

Yvonne forced a smile. "I'm sorry, I am prying," Reginald said. "No, it's not that, it's just that I was seeing somebody for quite a while," she said. "I had been with my ex-boyfriend for almost five years," she said. "We broke up about six months ago and I haven't been with anybody since. About a year ago, I was pregnant and I miscarried," she said. "For the next six months, he accused me of horrible things." Reginald swallowed. He felt worse for bringing up her past relationship. "Finally, I couldn't take it anymore and I left," Yvonne said as she thought about her situation.

"Since then, I've been focusing solely on my career. People who aren't a part of the business have a hard time relating to those of us who are involved. They just don't get it. That's why I'm alone. At this point, I'd rather be with a man who's in the business in some capacity. At least then, he could relate and understand where I'm coming from. But most of the guys are like Big Mic. They just want to screw me and then go on to the next girl. Then there are the guys like you," she said, smiling at Reginald.

Reginald looked surprised, "Like me?" "Yeah, like the new kids who are all bright-eyed and innocent," she said. "You guys are perfect, because you haven't been in the game long enough to become jaded. You haven't developed all the terrible habits and you're definitely a good guy. The only problem is that you're my nephew's age," she said, laughing embarrassingly. Reginald smiled and began to chuckle. "No, I'm serious," Yvonne said. "If I dated you, everybody would think it's strictly physical on my part, then everybody would say that I'm using you and taking advantage of you," she continued. "And what would you say," asked Reginald. Yvonne paused, "I'm not sure, but it wouldn't be a superficial relationship. I think you're truly one of the good guys," said Yvonne with a smile. Reginald reached for Yvonne's hand. He took it and kissed it softly.

As the night stretched on, the two became more and more comfortable together. It was apparently that they were both lonely, even though there were always people around them. They had both been missing the companionship of a strong relationship.

Their ages were a small factor, but they managed to not make it an outward issue. Reginald saw Yvonne as a beautiful woman who was possibly damaged goods. But he knew that she had a good heart. He also believed that she couldn't possibly be after his money. She had more than he did. He believed that maybe with some work, they could take their friendship to a different plain.

Yvonne saw Reginald as young and impressionable. She knew that if she wanted to use him and take advantage, she could. He was way too trusting. But that wasn't why she was here. She was enjoying his company and the maturity he showed towards her. She was flattered that he was so attracted to her, but more than anything, she enjoyed the respect she got from him. Even though he saw her at possibly her lowest point, he still treated her like royalty.

As the days went by, after their night together, Reginald and Yvonne began to grow closer. Their relationship hadn't become a physically intimate one, but it was emotionally intimate. He thought the world of her and he wanted more with her. He wasn't sure if she was ready for that, so he didn't push her. He just let things take their natural course.

The following Saturday, in New York for the first time, Reginald found himself on television. It was his first live appearance on television. BST's top rated show simply entitled, 'Live.' Former singer and producer, Carmen Lane, hosted it. Carmen knew music. She only wanted the most talented performers on her show. Reginald felt very blessed to have been invited.

Before the show began, Reginald sat on the couch next to Carmen. She was very friendly, but also professional. He felt completely comfortable, even though there were millions of people watching him, live.

"Mister Morgan, I'm just going to ask you a few questions, let you introduce a couple of videos and then you perform. That's it, it's nothing else to this, okay," said Carmen.

"I've got it," Reginald replied. "And you can call me Reggie," he smiled. "Okay, thanks Reggie," she said as she smiled back.

As the cameras began to roll, Carmen introduced the show and walked over to the couch and then introduced Reginald.

"So, Reginald, first of all, thank you for coming on the show," Carmen said. "Thank you, it's a blessing to be in this position," he said. "How'd you get started in music," she asked. Reginald briefly told of his great aunt, and how he sang from three

years old up until now. "Which singers are your main influences," she asked. Reginald smiled. "I love old school. Luther Vandross, Barry White, Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, those are some of my heroes in the industry," he said. "I also used to love the groups in the late 80s and early 90s, like Mint Condition, Troop, Boyz II Men, and Jodeci," he finished.

"I grew up on those people too. Most singers your age think old school is music that came out two months ago," Carmen said with a smile. Reginald laughed. "Not me, I respect those who paved the way for me," he said. "I can dig that. Reggie, can you introduce the first video for me," Carmen asked. Reginald looked at the monitor.

"This is *Our Love* by my good friend, Yvonne Summers," said Reginald with a smile, as the video came on.

Carmen put her hand on Reginald's knee. "Reggie, how long are you going to be in town," she asked. "I'll probably be here tonight and tomorrow. I have to head back home to see some of my friends, while I've got a couple of free days," said Reginald. "Okay, why don't you come out tonight with me to a party," Carmen asked. Reginald was definitely interested, but he didn't want Carmen to get the wrong idea. But on the other hand, maybe it was he who was getting the wrong idea. "I'm sorry, I just need to clarify, are you asking me out, or is this business," Reginald asked. Carmen twisted her long brown hair around her finger, "A little of both."

Chapter 16

At 9:30 pm, Reginald found himself in front of one of the hottest new clubs in New York City, Sol. Also known as Club Sol, the Sol Club, and many other local monikers. From the outside, it seemed like a large modest brick building. But you knew something major was going on inside, because of the line wrapped halfway around the block.

Reginald walked up to the front door, as instructed by Carmen. "What's your name," asked the door attendant. "Reginald Morgan," said Reginald. "Get the fuck outta here," laughed the attendant. "You that nigga that sings *My Vow* right," asked the attendant. Reginald was feeling a little embarrassed. "Yeah, that's me," he said with a nervous grin. "Go on in man," he said as Reginald walked by. "Got damn! Reggie Morgan," yelled the attendant.

As Reginald walked into the club, saw hundreds of people on the dance floor. He opened his cell and dialed Carmen's number. He could barely hear the phone ring.

"Hello," screamed a voice on the other end of the phone. "Carmen," Reginald yelled back. "Where you at," asked Reginald. "I'm in VIP. Hold on, I'll come get you. Where are you," asked Carmen. "I'm at the entrance, I'll stay right here," he finished.

After a couple minutes, he saw Carmen come around the corner. She looked amazing. "Damn, girl you look good," Reginald said as he hugged Carmen. "Thanks Reggie, and you're looking rather dapper yourself," she said, as she rubbed her hand on his jacket-covered chest. He smiled as she led him back to the VIP section.

When they walked in, Reginald was overwhelmed. He saw so many celebrities: singers, actors, athletes, and socialites; people he only saw on television.

Carmen led Reginald to a large round table with a booth surrounding it. As Reginald sat down with Carmen, he recognized both of the people at the table. Reginald saw Spit Fye, one of most successful hip-hop stars of all time. He had six consecutive platinum albums; one of them actually went diamond. Everybody in the business wanted to work with him because they thought he was the best, bar none. But he only worked with a selected few. The other person he recognized was William Jones. William was a running back for New York. He led the league in rushing for three straight years. He also led the league in touchdowns. Jones was amazing on the field, but his work off the field is what set him apart. He routinely donated 25% of his money to charities and he spent a lot of time working directly with children at risk. Reginald really admired Jones.

Reginald shook hands with everyone at the table. "You all, this is Reggie Morgan, a bright new star in the music industry," said Carmen. "Nice to meet you," Reginald said with a smile. Carmen whispered into Reginald's ear, "These guys say they can really help your career, for a cost," she said. Reginald whispered back, "And what is that cost?" "I'm not sure. Very few people can pay the price. Most people don't make it. When they heard you were coming on my show, they called me and asked if you'd come with me and meet them here," Carmen whispered. "I think it's like a secret society-type thing," said Carmen. Reginald was curious, but also very suspicious.

"Enough with the motherfuckin' whispering," snapped Spit Fye. "Reggie, have a drink," he said. He poured Reginald some of whatever he was drinking. Reginald took the drink and thanked Spit Fye. "Reginald, we have a deal for you," said William. "We want you to be on Spit's label. I know you just released your first CD. It's well on its way to going platinum. Congratulations on that, by the way," said William. "Thanks," Reginald said curiously. "I will buy out your contract and be your manager for only 5% of your earnings over the course of your contract with Spit. You can work directly with him, and he'll be your mentor. Everything this man touches becomes successful," William said as he put his hand on Spit's shoulder.

"Look here, son. I can produce your music personally. I can make sure you get paid more than the nickels that you're getting from Image, and I can do it all for only a small, one time fee," said Spit Fye. "What's that fee," asked Reginald.

"Carmen, can you excuse us, sweet heart," asked William. Carmen squeezed Reginald's shoulder as she got up and walked away. "It's not about the money," said William.

"Reg," yelled a familiar voice. Reginald looked around, and saw Big Mic standing behind him. "Mike, what's up man," asked Reginald. Reginald noticed that Mike had a couple of beautiful women with him, as usual. "Jamal," said Mike to Spit Fye, "long time no see!" "What the fuck you want, nigga," asked Spit Fye in a disgusted tone. "And you don't know me well enough to call me *Jamal*, so watch your fuckin' tongue before it gets cut out," demanded Spit Fye. "Michael, can you excuse us," William said calmly. "Naw, I can't excuse you, because I'm talking with my boy here," Mike said. "It's cool Mike, give me a minute to talk to these guys and we'll catch up," said Mike.

"Mind ya fuckin' business Mikey! Get outta here," said Spit Fye. "Reggie, I know you wasn't fuckin' with no girls on the tour, but do you have to take it this far," asked Mike. Reginald was puzzled. "What are you talking about man," asked Reginald. "These niggas are faggots," Mike said softly to Reginald. "They want to fuck you," said Mike. "Michael, you don't know what you're talking about," William said. "Shut the fuck up Mikey," said Spit Fye. At this point, the group was making a scene. Everybody in the VIP section was standing around watching.

"Reggie, let me guess. William's going to buy out your contract and re-sign you to Jamal's punk ass label. They promised you more money, right? Yeah, they sign you to a lot of money, but it's all based on sales. If you don't sell enough, they won't have to pay you. And, you know what else? They'll make it so you have to pay them back the buyout money before you can sign anywhere else," Mike said. "I heard this whole bullshit scheme before, because they tried to use it on me," Mike yelled. Spit Fye stood up, and reached into his jacket for his gun. "Oh what, you gonna shoot me in the VIP, Jamal," asked Mike sarcastically. Mike began to laugh. "Plus, nigga, I forgot about the small one time fee," said Mike. "Michael, would you *shut* the fuck up," yelled William. "Naw bitch, I won't," said Mike.

Reginald sat in his seat nervous and stunned. He saw the hatred in Spit Fye's face and the fear in the face of William. "What in the fuck have I gotten myself into," Reginald thought. Reginald stood up and put his hand on Mike's chest, pushing him away. "Let's go man," said Reginald. "Naw, you need to hear this, everybody needs to hear this," Mike yelled. "Reggie, they gonna take that fee out your ass, literally, buncha faggots," yelled Mike. The onlookers gasped in disbelief. William's head dropped into his hands. "Fuck you," yelled Spit Fye as he pulled his gun out and fired.

Ten minutes later, sirens were blaring throughout the street. In front of the club, there were police cars, an ambulance, and multiple television stations. Rumors spread quickly in the entertainment world. But when a real story breaks, the paparazzi come out in full force.

Carmen, sat on a bar stool in the nearly empty club. Her make up was running from the tears she had been shedding. She rubbed her eyes, as a detective came to her to get her statement. As she looked up from giving her statement to the police, she saw an officer hauling off a handcuffed Spit Fye. He didn't resist. He seemed almost calm as the officer escorted him out of the club.

She looked over across the room, where she saw William Jones speaking with another detective. He was probably giving his statement as well. "God, what is happening," she thought to herself.

From her home in Los Angeles, Yvonne received a phone call from Andrea to check turn on the 8 o'clock news. Yvonne turned on the television and sat in shocked disbelief as the newscaster spoke solemnly.

"Tonight we come to you from, Sol, an upscale club in Manhattan, where there has been a tragic loss in the entertainment industry. Twenty Nine year old Michael Hall, also known as rapper, 'Big Mic' was shot and killed during an argument. Also injured in the incident was 22-year-old Reginald Morgan, who police say was shot by accident. The bullet fired from another rapper, Jamal Wilson, known as Spit Fire, grazed Morgan's shoulder and hit Hall in the throat. Apparently, the shots were fired after an argument escalated between Hall and Wilson. We'll have more on this story as it is available," said the reporter.

Reginald sat on the back of an ambulance as they stitched up his shoulder. "Mister Morgan, are you allergic to antibiotics," asked the paramedic. "No," Reginald said softly. The paramedic took the needle and gave him a shot of penicillin. Reginald looked at the club entrance. He felt a vibration on his hip. He reached down and saw his cell phone was cracked from his fall, but it still worked. "Hello," he said quietly as he opened the phone. "Reggie, are you okay," asked Yvonne. "Yeah," Reginald said, as tears streamed down his face. The medics were wheeling Mike out of the club in a body bag. "He was just looking out for me," said Reginald. Yvonne sat quietly, as tears began to form in her eyes. "He took that bullet because of me and my stupidity," Reginald said. "I have to take care of something, I'll call you back," Reginald said as he hung up his phone.

He jumped down off the ambulance as he saw Spit Fye walk by in cuffs. "Hey bitch," Reginald said as Spit Fye turned to look. Reginald drew back and decked him as both Spit Fye and the cop fell to the ground. "You wanna hit me while I got on cuffs, you fuckin' pussy," yelled Spit Fye with a mouth full of blood. "Let me get out of the motherfuckin cuffs, I will take your life, boy," he said violently as he was jerked up from the ground by two cops. "Morgan, get back," said one of the detectives. "Come get it big man," yelled Reginald. "When I get out, I am gonna take it out of your ass," yelled Spit Fye as they put him into the cruiser.

Reginald stood in silence as the cameras flashed in his direction.

Chapter 17

The night after the shooting, Reginald found himself back home. He slipped into his old apartment in the stillness of the night. None of his stuff had been moved since he left. He did find Brandie's key to his apartment on his dresser. There was no note and no sign of life in the unit. Reginald sat on the couch and eventually his exhaustion led him to sleep.

He dreamed of the encounter with Spit Fye. The difference was the shot was fired at Mike and struck Reginald instead. As the shot struck, Reginald awakened. He looked at the clock. It was 11:42 am.

He looked at his battered cell phone and saw 15 missed calls and eight voicemails. The calls were from everybody, even some unknown people. He had a voicemail from Craig, one from Duane, one from Carmen, two from Yvonne, one from Farley and one from Brandie. The others were reporters trying to get a scoop.

The call from Brandie was only 30 minutes ago. He listened to the voicemail.

"Hey Reggie, it's me," Brandie said. "I was calling to find out if you were alright. I heard about what happened in New York. I'm sorry about your friend. I just wanted you to know that I do still care. Bye-bye," she said as the message ended.

Reginald sat in silence for a minute. Then he called Craig. "Craig, it's Reggie," said Reginald. "Reggie, what the hell happened up there the other night," asked Craig. Reginald sighed. "Spit and William Jones wanted to buy out my contract with Image and have me sign with them," said Reginald. "I was invited there by Carmen Lane, and she introduced me to them. When they told me what they wanted, I didn't really take them seriously. Then Mike showed up and things got really tense. Spit pulled his gun, and fired while I was trying to push Mike away," Reginald said. "I got hit in the shoulder, and Mike took a shot to the throat. He bled to death in my arms Craig," Reginald said, as his voice cracked.

"I'm so sorry you had to witness that, Reggie," said Craig. "The suits upstairs want you to keep quiet and to cooperate with the police in any way that they need you," Craig continued. "Where was Duane in all this madness," asked Craig. "He was back home, handling some personal business. He didn't have anything to do with this incident," said Reginald. Craig sat silently. "Hello," said Reginald. "Yeah, I'm here Reg," said Craig. "Arnold wants to meet with you about doing a couple of hooks," Craig said. "I think they are going to try to do a tribute to Mike and you were a good friend of his, so they want you involved heavily," Craig said. "I'll call him, thanks Craig," Reginald said softly. "I have to go, but I'll call you later Craig," said Reginald as he hung up the phone.

He sat back quietly and closed his eyes. He found himself drifting off to sleep again, when there was a knock at the door. Reginald went to the peephole. It was Duane. He opened the door and walked back to the couch.

"Reggie, I got like five magazines blowin' me up right now, trying to interview you about the shooting. I keep telling them to back off, but they don't get it," Duane said. "Yeah, I got a call from Vibe and another one from Ebony," said Reginald. "I'm not even gonna get into what happened, except that I'm sorry about Mike. He was a good dude," Duane said. "But I have to warn you, the TV stations got a good video of you from several angles throwing a beating on Spit," said Duane. "I'd do it again if I had the chance," said Reginald. Reginald's fists clinched.

"Look man, why don't you come down to the club tonight," Duane suggested. "You don't gotta sing or nothing. Just come see your boys. They been asking about you," Duane finished. "Yeah, Farley left me a voicemail this morning," Reginald replied. "I'll get at them today," Reginald said. "So you coming through tonight," Duane asked. "I'll be there D," Reginald replied. Duane extended his arm to Reginald and gave him a fist pound. "Later, then," he said. "Lata'," said Reginald as the door shut behind Duane.

Reginald sat in silence. He couldn't get Big Mic out of his mind. He was angry and hurt. He went from anger towards himself, to anger towards Mike, then back towards Spit Fye, anger at Carmen, and the back to himself again. His anger was interrupted by another phone call. "Reggie," Yvonne said softly on the other end of the phone. "Hey," Reginald replied.

"I'm coming there to be with you," she said. "My flight from LA will be coming in around 3 pm. I'm on a layover in Dallas right now," she said. "Okay, I'll come get you from the airport," Reginald said. "I'll see you soon sweetie," she said.

Reginald looked at the time; it was only 1:15 at this point. He turned on the TV and saw himself on one of the celebrity gossip shows. One of the hosts called him a thug. Reginald felt his temper getting the best of him. He turned off the TV and chose to return the phone calls he had received, except for Brandie. He wasn't ready to talk to her. He advised the reporters that he spoke to that he wasn't authorized to speak about the shooting, but he did send out his condolences to Mike's family.

By the time he finished his calls, it was time to head to the airport to pick up Yvonne. When he finally arrived in the terminal, he found himself surrounded by people. "Damn, why do I always forget that folks know me," he asked himself. Cameras began to flash, and cell phone cams were aimed at him from all angles. People were asking for his autograph and a few people who were confused about the news they heard called *him* murderer. Reginald just shook his head. He looked through the crowd and finally saw the Yvonne coming his direction. Bodyguards and several security guards were escorting her.

As they met in the middle of the crowd, they embraced tightly. Even though the hug hurt his wounded shoulder, he didn't want to let go. "Let's get out of here," she said as they followed the entourage to a limo waiting outside. "What about my car," asked Reginald. "You can come back and get it later when things die down, honey," said Yvonne.

As they settled into the limo, the silence was awkward. Yvonne broke the ice. "Where do you want to go, Reggie? Do you want to go eat or go home, or what," she asked. "I just need to be alone with you," Reginald replied. Reginald gave his address to the driver and the driver brought them to Reginald's building.

Reginald opened his door and carried Yvonne's bags into the bedroom. Yvonne made herself at home on his couch. She kicked off her pumps and rubbed her feet. Reginald came back into the room and sat on the couch close to Yvonne. "I'm so glad you're alright," she said. "Yeah, physically, I'm fine, but right now I can't even get my thoughts together," said Reginald. "I just want some peace," Reginald finished.

Yvonne put her arms around him and held him closely. She kissed him softly on the cheek and he rested his head on her chest. Reginald felt comfortable and completely at rest for the first time since Mike was murdered before his eyes.

Reginald opened his eyes, after falling asleep with Yvonne on the couch. It was almost 7 pm. "Yvonne, I'm going to the club to hear my friends play and to hang out with them. Do you want to come," Reginald asked. "Sure, I don't mind going with you," she said as she yawned. They slowly dragged themselves off the couch and got ready to head out on the town. Reginald called one of his friends at the cabstand to take them to the airport so he could get his car. Once he had his car, they made the trip back across town to The Hill.

Parking was terrible, as usual. But Reginald found a suitable space to park his car. There were people everywhere; most of them recognized both Reginald and Yvonne. As they walked in, Reginald saw his friends sitting at a table, taking shots. Reginald slowly walked over to the table. He was very happy to see his friends, but it was hard for him to show it under the circumstances.

"We Crew," Reginald bellowed. Vance turned around, and shouted, "Negro, you made it!" "Hey Vance, good to see you brotha," said Reginald. Farley and Tommy both stood up. Reginald shook hands with them both and pulled them into a hug. "Man, it's just so good to see you guys," Reginald said as he smiled. "Reg, are you going to introduce us to your beautiful friend," asked Tommy. Reginald looked back at Yvonne and smiled. "Y'all know she doesn't need an introduction, but for your benefit, I'll give her one. Yvonne, these are my boys, the Crew. Vance, Farley and Tommy. Guys, this is Yvonne Summers," Reginald said.

"Fuckin' aye," Vance yelled. "It's a pleasure meeting you Miss Summers," Tommy said shaking her hand softly. "Miss Summers, it's nice to meet you. You should

watch the company you keep," Farley laughed as he pointed to Reginald. "Knucklehead, shut it," Reginald laughed. "It's nice to meet you all, Reggie talks about you guys all the time," Yvonne said.

The group all sat down and talked. Reginald got caught up in all the happenings at The Hill and in the city over the last six weeks. He heard more about how Duane was trying to steer clear of trouble and about the missing guy and his three luxury SUVs.

"Where is Duane anyway," asked Reginald. "He's in his office with Earl and Hank. There's no telling what them niggas are up to," Tommy said. Farley scooted over close to Reginald, and began to speak softly. "I heard about you and Brandie, and I'm sorry. But just to let you know, she's seeing this other cat and they are in here regularly," Farley whispered. Reginald swallowed hard. "Really? I don't even know how I feel about that," he said quietly back to Farley. "Look at it this way, you have Yvonne on your arm, you can't get much better than that," Farley said and he gave Reginald a playful forearm nudge.

Reginald smiled and looked over at Yvonne. "Do you want a drink," he asked. "Yeah, a club soda please," Yvonne said. "One club soda coming up," Reginald said as he got up to walk to the bar. As Reginald got up, Tommy slid into his chair. He looked at Yvonne in a semi-serious seductive manner, "How you doing," he asked. Yvonne laughed.

Reginald walked up to the bar and ordered a club soda and a beer. He sat on an empty stool and waited for the drinks to arrive. "What up nigga," asked an unfamiliar voice. Reginald looked over at the guy. He was similar height, but a little smaller build than Reginald. He had long dreadlocks and wore these thin-framed glasses. Reginald didn't recognize him. "'Sup," Reginald said as he turned his attention back to the club patrons. "Yo, I know you don't know me, I but I sure as hell know you," said the man. Reginald stretched out his hand to shake the man's hand, "And you are?" "I'm Shaun, Shaun Colston," said Shaun. The two shook hands. "So you saw me perform here, or got my CD or something," asked Reginald casually. "Naw, nigga. I fucked yo bitch," he said smugly. Reginald quickly turned and looked Shaun in the eyes. "What," asked Reginald. "Brandie, she gettin' some real dick now, and she takes it how I give it," Shaun replied. "Look man, what you and Brandie do is between you two. We aren't together anymore," Reginald said. "Shit, I was fuckin' when y'all were together. How you like that partna," Shaun said.

Reginald was getting angry. He didn't believe that Brandie was cheating on him all along. He just thought that Shaun was trying to push his buttons. Reginald began to breathe deeply. He didn't want to do anything he'd regret.

"Look at yo bitch ass. I see why she left you, because she wanted a real man," Shaun said with a laugh. "You ain't shit. Ya money don't mean a motherfuckin' thing, because you don't even have the respect of ya bitch. That's why I been knockin' the dust off that ass," Shaun continued. Reginald's fists began to tighten.

"Oh, now you wanna get mad," asked Shaun sarcastically. Shaun laughed. "Yeah, that's why your boy got clipped at the club the other night - bitch ass ni--," before Shaun could finish his words Reginald gave him a right to the jaw that knocked off his glasses. Shaun fell into the bar and knocked down four people on the stools. Reginald grabbed Shaun by his hair with his left hand and continually punched him with his right.

Shaun grabbed a bottle from the bar and smashed it over the right side of Reginald's head. Reginald fell to the ground. Shaun dug his fingers into Reginald's gunshot wound. Reginald cried out in pain. On his back, Reginald mustered up enough strength to push Shaun off him. They both got up, Reginald punched Shaun in the stomach and when he doubled over, he kicked Shaun in the face. At that moment, Duane came through the crowd with Farley to pull Reginald back.

"Fuck you, you fuckin' pussy," Reginald screamed. "Don't you ever come at me like that," he continued. "If I ever see you in here again, I will fuck you up," yelled Reginald angrily. "Get this bitch outta my club," Duane yelled over the commotion. "Colston, if I see ya ass anywhere near here, I will drop you where you stand," Duane continued, while holding Reginald back.

"Fuck both of y'all," Shaun yelled. "Reggie, I'm going home to fuck ya bitch again," he yelled as he was shoved out the door. "And, I'm suing you and Duane," he continued.

"What the fuck happened, Reggie," asked Duane. "Man, I was getting drinks and this nigga just walked up talkin' shit. I was amused until he started in about Brandie and Mike," Reginald said as he attempted to catch his breath. Yvonne made her way through the crowd. "Oh, baby," she said as she put her arms around him. She and Reginald began to walk out of the club.

"Duane, I'm sorry bro," said Reginald.

Chapter 18

"Do it," yelled Duane into the phone. He slammed down the receiver and leaned back in his chair. His office was quiet. He lit up a cigar and sipped on some cognac.

It wasn't often that he was able to sit in silence. There was always somebody wanting to talk to him about something. A new business, improvements on the club, auditions to be a performer and more recently dealing with Reginald's business affairs. But at this point, it's 3 am and the world around him has quieted down a little.

"We've made it too far to let this little pussy take us down," said Duane to himself. He knew it was a risk, but it was one he was willing to take.

Duane had thought a lot about dropping out of the business. He didn't want to spend the rest of his life dodging the cops and thinking of new ways to avoid custody. This kind of life took a toll on him and his health. Hank and Gerald would always get high to get away from their problems. Duane stopped smoking weed a long time ago, that old dope boy proverb. Don't get high off your own supply. Duane was about to break that rule.

He went out to the warehouse and opened a box that contained his stash. He took one of his cigars and gutted it and refilled it with weed. As he lit it up and took a puff, he heard the doors behind him open. Two of his boys dragged Shaun into the room and threw him down at Duane's feet. Earl walked in behind them. He screwed the silencer tightly onto his .45.

"Fuck me," asked Duane as he took a toke. Shaun looked up at him with tears rolling down his bloody and bruised face. "Duane, please don't do this," Shaun said as he cried. "Don't beg me nigga. You shoulda thought about that shit when you started fuckin' with my boy," said Duane. "You're a real tough guy, Shaun," said Duane. "You hit Reggie with some low blows; his friend dies and you fuck with him. He breaks up with his girl, and you fuck with him. Then you want to fuck with me by association," Duane said as he walked around Shaun.

Shaun began to cry heavily. "You know you done fucked up right," Duane said with an evil smile. "Put him in the chair," said Duane. Duane's guys tied Shaun to a metal chair and dragged him to the back parking lot. "Any last words bitch," asked Duane. "Please--," said Shaun. "Shut the fuck up, I've heard that already," Duane said. Earl aimed his piece at Shaun and prepared to pull the trigger. "No, don't shoot him. I want him to feel this," Duane said. He walked over to Shaun and taped his mouth closed. "Burn him," Duane said. Earl went to the pump and put gas into a container. He walked slowly back over to Shaun and smiled.

"I'll be inside," Duane said as he walked back in. Duane walked back to his office and sat back down as he smoked on the cigar. "Damn," he whispered. Tears began to form in his eyes. "I want out Reg, but I don't know how to get out," Duane said to himself.

Hours later, Reginald lied in his bed. Yvonne was next to him with her arm draped over his body. Reginald opened his eyes and saw the time. It was 10:37 am. Reginald sat up and groaned. He got out of bed and checked his voicemail. He listened as message after message came in about Big Mic. It was mostly just reporters still trying to get the scoop. "How'd they get my home number," he asked himself.

"They pay very well," Yvonne said quietly. Reginald turned and saw her standing in the doorway. "Good morning," said Reginald. They embraced tightly. "How you feeling this morning," asked Yvonne. "I'm okay, just sore," said Reginald. "You wanna get some breakfast," asked Reginald. "Sure," said Yvonne.

The two got cleaned up and dressed and headed down to a local diner. "Man, I love the pancakes in here," Reginald laughed. The waitress smiled. "They are the best in the city," she said. "Oh, those are so fattening," Yvonne laughed back. "Let me get some fresh fruit and some turkey bacon," Yvonne said. The waitress took their orders and went on to the back. Reginald and Yvonne held hands across the table.

"Reggie, it's funny with us being here like this," Yvonne said. "I know you're having a hard time, but I'd like to think that I have a positive influence on your mood," she said. "Oh yeah, you do," Reginald said with a smile. "We haven't really known each other that long, but I care about you a lot, and I don't see any way that changes," Reginald continued. "Reggie, I don't want to run you off or anything, so I hope this doesn't make you uncomfortable," she said.

Reginald almost braced himself, but he thought it would probably be unnecessary.

"Reggie, I love you. I know we've got a big age difference, and folks are going to stare and talk, but I don't care. I've completely fallen in love with you. I would do *anything* for you, no matter what. I just want you to be happy," said Yvonne.

Reginald wasn't really surprised. He had very similar feelings.

"Yvonne, since we met, and especially since we've been seeing each other, I don't think I've ever had a better relationship. You've been so good to me and you're always there for me, under any circumstance. I truly believe your unconditional friendship towards me sparked a flame," Reginald said. Yvonne found a tear streaming down her left cheek and then another down her right cheek. "I love you, Yvonne," Reginald said. Reginald stretched across the small table and he and Yvonne kissed softly.

As they sat back down their food arrived. Just as Reginald was about to tear into his pancakes, his phone rang. "Excuse me," he said to Yvonne as he got up. "Hello," he said.

"Reginald," said a familiar voice. "Brandie," said Reginald in a quiet and curious manner. "Brandie, what do you need," asked Reginald curiously.

"Reggie, what did you do with Shaun," she said as her voice cracked. "What are you talking about," asked Reginald. "Shaun is gone. His front door was left open and his phone is off. His car is still parked outside and there's blood all inside the car," said Brandie. "I heard about your fight," she said. "Slow down Brandie," said Reginald. "I haven't seen him since our fight at the club," said Reginald. "I went home right after that," said Reginald.

"I'm calling the police Reggie," she screamed into the phone. "I hate you!" The call disconnected.

"Fuck," Reginald said quietly. He dialed Duane. Duane didn't answer the phone. Reginald left a voicemail. "Duane, call me as soon as possible, I need to holla at you," he said.

Reginald walked back into the diner and sat down. His appetite was quickly going away. "Yvonne, that fool from last night is missing. Brandie just called me and accused me of being involved," he said. "That's crazy," said Yvonne. "You were with me all night," said Yvonne. "I know," said Reginald.

Reginald's phone rang again. "Hold on Yvonne, I'm sorry," said Reginald. "Duane," said Reginald. "Come down to the diner, at the corner of 5th and Stanley," said Reginald. "Done," said Duane.

Moments later Duane rolled up in his SUV. He walked in and quickly spotted Reginald and Yvonne.

"Reggie, what's going on man," said Duane. "That damn Shaun is missing, and after last night. It's gonna to look like I did something to him," said Reginald. Duane frowned and chewed his cigar. "C'mere," Duane said as he pulled Reginald out of the booth. "Outside," he continued as he walked out the door. Yvonne watched with a very concerned look on her face. She couldn't make out the words of the conversation, but it was very intense.

"D, you are my boy, probably my best friend," said Reginald. "But I know some of the ill shit you've been involved in. *If* you did something to Shaun, I don't want to know anything about it. I'd rather not know. As far as I'm concerned, Shaun took a long and unexpected vacation," Reginald finished. Duane stood there with a scowl on his face. "Reggie, I didn't know he was missing until you told me. Fuck, I don't know where that bitch-ass nigga is," Duane said. "Just chill, it'll be all right," he said. "Go inside and eat them pancakes and order me some with some links. I gotta make a quick call," said Duane.

Reginald breathed a sigh of relief. "Okay," he said as he walked back inside the diner.

Duane dialed a number on his phone. Earl answered. "Bleach that burn in the back, and find that titanium tub. We gotta get rid of them remains," Duane said.

Chapter 19

After breakfast, Reginald, Yvonne and Duane all went back to Reginald's place.

"Reg, you making mad money right now, bruh. You should really consider getting a new place," said Duane. "Why do you wanna stay in this shit-hole," asked Duane. Reginald laughed. "Man, quit it. You own this place," Reginald said. "Touché," laughed Duane.

Yvonne just looked on at the two of them cutting up like teenagers. "I may have misjudged him," she thought to herself of Duane. "He seems to really care about Reggie, like a big brother," she thought.

Reginald turned on the television and flipped the channels for a while. Duane sat and made a few calls. Yvonne sat close to Reginald on the couch, with his left arm around her. Reginald stopped on BST News as he saw a picture of Spit Fye.

"This nigga," Reginald said as he pointed the remote at the television.

"Jamal Wilson, better known as Spit Fye, has been released on bail after the shooting death of Michael Hall, better known as Big Mic," said the reporter. "Never at a loss for words, Spit had this to say," said the reporter before Spit Fye's statement. "Our industry suffered a tragic loss that I was unfortunately a part of. My heart goes out to Mike's family and friends. A lot of things have been said about me, but I can say that when justice is served, I will be vindicated."

"Mother--," said Reginald angrily. He sat and shook his head. "That nigga is fake as a three dollar bill," said Reginald. "You know they are going to call you to testify against him," said Duane. "I will gladly testify against him," said Reginald.

"Hey, hold on that's me on TV," said Yvonne.

"In related news, good friend of Big Mic, Reginald Morgan the R&B sensation, is going to be a father. Sources say that he and Yvonne Summers are expecting their first child," said the reporter. "Representatives from either party could not be reached for comment," the reporter finished.

Yvonne's mouth dropped. "Oh my God," she said. She ran to the bedroom and grabbed her cell phone to call her assistant. "Andrea, what is the hell is going on," asked

Yvonne. "We haven't been able to reach you the last couple of days about this rumor," said Andrea. "I want you to issue a statement that I am not expecting a child and that my personal affairs are to remain just that, *personal*," Yvonne said as she hung up the phone. When she came back into the living room, Reginald was on the phone with Craig.

"This is so untrue," said Reginald to Craig. "We not expecting a child and furthermore, I expect a full retraction from BST and every other network or publication that prints this stuff," said Reginald. "I'll have our lawyers handle it Reggie," said Craig. "And find out who this source is," said Reginald as he hung up the phone.

"This shit is fishy Reg," said Duane. "I'm going to do a little diggin' too, because I think I know who is said this," Duane finished. "Do what you gotta do man," said Reginald. Duane stood up to leave. "I'm going to make a few calls back at the office and I'll let you know what I find out," said Duane as he walked out.

After a couple of days, all the retractions were made and things seemed to die down a little. There was still talk of them being in a relationship and a few fuzzy camera phone pictures showed up here and there, but neither Reginald or Yvonne would confirm anything to the media about the nature of their relationship.

As Duane continued to dig, he came across some interesting information. One of the producers at BST was a childhood friend of Spit Fye, and still a current associate.

"There it is," said Duane. "This nigga is pullin' strings," he said. Duane called Spit Fye's agent and arranged a meeting between them in Indianapolis. Spit Fye had a show there that evening and had been granted permission to leave the state for work purposes only, by a New York judge.

They decided to meet at a local establishment called Club Blaze. It was a Wednesday and fairly quiet. Duane walked in and told them he was looking for Spit Fye. The hostess directed him to the VIP section. He saw Spit Fye sitting at a table alone in the back corner.

"Spit, thanks for meeting with me," said Duane. "My time is valuable, what do you want," asked Spit Fye. "Yeah, I get that. You know what else is valuable," asked Duane. "Reputation," he said as he put a cigar into his mouth. "I know that you value your rep. That's why you shot Mike. You didn't want everybody to know how much you enjoy a stiff one in your holes," said Duane. "I respect that. Hell, I don't care what you like. It's of no consequence to me," said Duane. "What I do care about is you meddling with the rep of my good friend, Reggie," said Duane. "I know that you peddled bullshit to BST through your friend about him and Yvonne. That shit's not cool, and I'm just serving notice to you that it's done. No more," Duane finished.

Spit Fye leaned back a little in the chair.

"And who are you," he asked. "His bodyguard? His spokesperson? His big brother," mocked Spit Fye. "I'm not afraid of no two-bit small time dope dealer. You wanna-be Suge Knight motherfucker," said Spit Fye. "Look here Clemons, I know all about your ass too. I got connections. And with one call, I'll bring you and that bitch of a friend down. Try me, nigga. I shot Mike's ass on G.P. I wouldn't bat an eye to have a couple of my boys roll up on you while you try to go the airport and fly back home. You know why? Because I don't give a fuck," said Spit Fye. He reached into his coat pocket and showed Duane his gun handle. "I could fuck you up right here and nobody would care. You are a *nobody* dope-peddler. The world would be better off with bitches like you," said Spit Fye. "Now who's getting ass fucked," he asked arrogantly.

"I see," said Duane as he chewed his cigar. "Then this meeting is over," he said as he got up and began to walk away. "Gonna have to put a bullet in his ass," Duane thought.

Spit Fye just sat there in silence as he watched Duane walk away. He grabbed his cell phone from his side and dialed a number. "Hey, I got more news for you. And I think it's time to blow the whistle on somebody," said Spit Fye.

The next morning Duane headed back home. Before he got on the plane, he dialed Reginald. There was no answer, but he decided to leave a voicemail. "Reggie, that nigga Spit Fye is the one spreading bullshit about you. He ain't gonna quit either. I'll talk to you more later," said Duane and he closed his phone and boarded the plane.

Reginald heard the beeping of his phone, but he didn't answer. He was seeing Yvonne back to the airport, so she could fly back to her home in Los Angeles. She had a few appearances to make and she couldn't stick around forever. She had already been there for a week.

"I will see you soon baby," said Yvonne and she held Reginald close. "Okay," said Reginald quietly. "I will be out there as soon as possible," he said. They shared one last kiss before she boarded the plane.

As he walked back to the parking garage, he listened to his messages. He got the one from Duane. "I knew that negro was up to no good," said Reginald. Duane was in the air right now, so Reginald couldn't call him back. He decided to just go home.

When he got home, he turned on the television and once again saw himself, but this time with more news.

"Reginald Morgan, has been nominated for song of the year for *My Vow* and also nominated for best new artist. Rapper Spit Fye is up for his second Album of the year award and ironically is going head to head for song of the year with Reginald Morgan for his single, *Bump That*," said the reporter.

"Damn," said Reginald. "I don't want to be associated with him, period. But controversy makes news," he said to himself. Reginald sat back and rested his eyes.

A while later, Reginald was awakened by a phone call.

"Hello," he said with a scratchy voice. "Morgan, you're going to need a new business manager," said the voice. "Who is this," Reginald asked. "Sonny, Sonny Benson," said Sonny. "Sonny, what the hell are you talking about," Reginald asked. "Duane was just arrested at the airport for violating the RICO Statute," said Sonny. "He's going away for a long, long time," said Sonny.

"How do you know all this stuff," asked Reginald. "Because I arrested him," Sonny laughed.

Chapter 20

"Say what," asked Reginald. "How are you going to arrest somebody?"

"I work for the FBI. I was brought here to bring down Duane and his cohorts," said Sonny. "You really think that I'm some sort of kiss-ass agent," he continued. "All I can say to you is that I hope you aren't involved in his business. If you are, you're going down with him," said Sonny. The call disconnected.

Reginald dropped the phone. He dropped his head into his hands. He really didn't know what to do. "Craig will know what to do," he said to himself. Reginald called Craig.

"Hello," said Craig. "Craig, listen, Duane just got busted. I need a new manager, can you check in to that for me," he asked. There was silence on the other end of the line. Just then it occurred to Reginald who Sonny was. He was Craig's associate. He introduced Sonny to Reginald and Duane.

"Wait a minute, you knew," Reginald yelled into the phone. "What the fuck is going on here," he asked. "Reggie, calm down. I need you to come to my office and we'll talk about it." Reginald was fuming. He bit his tongue. "I'll be there when I get there," he said as he hung up.

Reginald ran out the door and hopped into his car and drove to the city lockup to see Duane. There were Federal Marshals everywhere. Reginald walked to the desk to speak to the attendant. "Excuse me, can I see Duane Clemons please," he asked. "No,"

said the attendant. "Let him see Clemons, it's okay," said a voice. Reginald turned around and saw Sonny. Sonny smiled at him from behind his shades. "I figured you'd be down here," Sonny said. "Go on in and see him," he finished, pointing the way.

Reginald walked to the door where he was frisked before being allowed into the room. They brought Duane into the room. His wrists and his ankles were cuffed. He looked pretty calm considering what he had been through.

"D, what happened," asked Reginald. "I got arrested in the airport. They were waiting for me," Duane said. "They got one of my trucks coming into the club and they found my spot in one my buildings," he said. "I guess I was getting sloppy," Duane said. "Enough about me. Find a new manager, okay," said Duane. "That punk Spit is after you and it wouldn't surprise me if he was after me too. He knew all about me," said Duane. Duane called Reginald to come closer, "Earl hasn't been caught yet. Tell him to handle the *business* and to give you half the proceeds." Reginald shook his head. "Man, I don't want your money," said Reginald. "Just tell him. He'll explain," said Duane.

"Okay," Reginald replied solemnly. "I think you oughta know that Craig is part of the reason you got busted, but I don't know the whole story behind it. I'm headed to his office next to find out what's going on," said Reginald. "Yeah, I didn't like him much at first, I hate his ass now," said Duane.

"I'm going to get you a lawyer," said Reginald. "Man, I'm going down. Fuck it," Duane said. "Take care of yourself and watch your back," said Duane. Reginald gave Duane a fist pound. "Thanks bruh," said Reginald.

As Reginald left he saw Sonny. Sonny had a smirk on his face. "Son-of-a-bitch," Reginald said as he walked by Sonny.

Twenty minutes later, Reginald found himself walking through the office door of Craig Martin. Craig sat quietly. He looked sad, and he felt guilty.

"Craig, why," asked Reginald as he sat down. "There's a lot you don't know about me Reg," said Craig. "Let me start at the beginning," said Craig as he poured a shot of liquor.

"Since I was in my mid-twenties, I've been an addict. It started when I got involved in the industry. Everybody else was smoking, snorting, injecting. They were having fun and I wanted to fit in. So I started doing the same thing. Eventually, I lost interest in smoking. Injecting was too dangerous, especially if you weren't alone," he said. "For the last 10 years, I've been a hard cocaine addict. I had a guy that I used to buy from. I didn't know where he got his shit from, but it was the best I'd ever had. So I bought from him regularly. Right before I met you, I had run out and I had a big trip to make. I called one of my associates to buy some coke from my guy," he said as he took the shot to the head and sat back down. "They all got busted and they sold out everybody to save their own asses," said Craig.

"I got arrested and because the amount was so large, they were going to charge me with trafficking and not just possession. I met with some agents and they said that they wanted me to help them bring down the big man, Duane. I didn't know Duane at all before all this. Then my bosses told me that they were going to fire me if I didn't find some new talent, soon. Claude took me to meet Sonny at Italiano's, and I was told that I would know what to do when the time came. Claude told me to go outside and take the cab outside. You were in the cab and the rest is history," said Craig.

Reginald was stunned. He was angry that they used him to get close to his friend and one of his biggest supporters. "You are a sorry motherfucker," said Reginald. "I'll never trust you again, ever," Reginald said as he got up to leave. Reginald walked down to the media-relations office and had the house publicist to release notice that Image would handle all his inquiries and not his manager from now on.

As he left the building, he received a call. "Reginald Morgan," asked the voice on the other end. "Yeah, that's me," said Reginald. "I know it's very short notice, but would you be interested in being on our radio show in the morning," said the voice. "Maybe. Who is this," asked Reginald. "My name is Demond Wallace. I'm co-host of the Delux and Lushus Morning show," said Demond. "What's up man? I can do that," said Reginald. "Great, you can either come to the studio or call in," said Demond. "I'll come by," said Reginald. "Good deal, we need you here by six tomorrow morning," Demond said. "Okay, I'll be there, thanks," said Reginald as he got into his car.

Reginald started his car and headed home. He just wanted to go to bed.

His alarm went off at 4 am, and he got up quickly. He was still groggy, but he knew he had to be on the radio this morning. He showered and got ready and rolled out to the radio station. "Power 99.9 FM huh," said Reginald. I haven't listened to this show since high school," he laughed to himself.

As he walked into the studio, he saw the two hosts. Demond a.k.a. Delux was about six-foot-five and 250 pounds. He was a large man, bald, with two earrings and a little tickler under his bottom lip. Lushus was a nice looking woman. She was short, with long brown hair, probably about five-foot-two, big hips and big breasts. *Luscious* definitely described her.

"Reggie, have a seat. We've got a few minutes before the show, but let me tell you what we do here," said Demond. "We're going to ask you some questions about yourself, about what's going on around you, your career, things of that nature," he continued. Reginald nodded in approval. "No topic is off limits here," said Lushus. "We might ask you about anything, so be ready to answer," she said. "What's your name Miss Lushus," asked Reginald. "Lucy," she answered. "Lushus Lucy," Reginald said with a slight grin. "Okay, I will answer your questions, openly and honestly," said Reginald. "Great," said Demond. "We also let a few people call in and ask questions too," he said. "That's fine,"

said Reginald.

Moments later, the three of them had on their headsets and were on live.

"It's morning in the city! And this is the Delux and Lushus Morning Show," said Delux.

They spoke briefly about the weather and national news before getting to Reginald. They asked him several everyday questions and a few off the wall questions. They asked about Yvonne, Duane, Big Mic and even a possible beef with Spit Fye. Reginald talked around the beef with Spit Fye, rather than addressing it.

"Well, it's time to take callers," said Lucy. "Caller you're on the air," said Lucy. "Who is this," asked Lucy.

"This is Jamal," said the voice on the phone. "Hey Jamal, good morning to you," said Lucy. "I-I just got one question for Reggie," said Jamal. Reginald thought he recognized the voice, but he couldn't make it out. "Hey Jamal, what's up," asked Reginald cautiously. "Do you always let your cronies do your dirty work," said Jamal. "Scared to get your hands dirty," asked Jamal.

It was Spit Fye. "Jamal, let's relax a little," said Demond. "Back off fat boy. Yo, this is Spit," said Spit Fye. "Reginald, boy, you need to stay away from me son. I didn't want to help you at Club Sol and I don't want to help you now," said Spit Fye. "So because I didn't want to help you, you want to snipe at me. That's not manly at all," he finished.

Reginald sat quietly, and relaxed.

"Nothing to say for yourself Morgan," asked Spit Fye. "I'm taking the high road, *Jamal*," said Reginald. "High road my ass," mocked Spit Fye. "You just don't want everybody to know what a little bitch you are," he finished.

Reginald chuckled.

"No, *Jamal*, I think it's just sad that you call a radio station in an entirely different region, just to mess with me," Reginald said as he grinned. "It wasn't long ago that I loosened several of your teeth," he continued. "I think you need to get off my nuts," Reginald said as he gave the slash gesture to Demond. Demond disconnected the call.

"Man, I hope you know what you're doing," said Demond. "Folks don't fuck with Spit Fye."

"Folks don't fuck with me either," Reginald said as he got up and walked out of the studio.

Chapter 21

Reginald left the studio feeling pretty good about himself. While he had physically stood up to Spit Fye at Club Sol, everything else he had done was indirect. This time, he said what he had to say and held his own. He believed he had the upper hand for the first time.

When Reginald arrived at his apartment, he saw several of the same federal agents that were at the police station were all over his building. He expected that though, considering Duane owned the building.

"Morgan, if you've got something to hide in your little shit hole, we'll find it," said Sonny as he walked up from behind Reginald's car. Reginald turned and cracked a slight smile. "There's nothing to find in my apartment," he said. Reginald started up the stoop and into the building. "That's what they all say," said Sonny as he watched Reginald walk into the building.

As Reginald reached his apartment, he saw agents were looking all over. One of them handed him a search warrant. He watched them calmly as he sat on the couch. Reginald wasn't happy with the situation, but he also knew that making a scene wouldn't help. That's exactly what Sonny wanted him to do. It would also give more ammunition to Spit Fye.

After a few minutes, his cell phone rang. It was Farley. "Reggie, you okay man," he asked. "Yeah, I'm good," he replied. "I heard they were search all of Duane's properties, every single apartment in every building. All his trucks, his vehicles, his townhouses, they are on his ass," said Farley. "I hope that you're clean," he continued. "Man, I've always been clean," said Reginald. "There's nothing to find, not even a half burned joint," he said. "That's good, Reg. Listen, I wanted to talk to you about something else too," said Farley. "Okay, that's cool. Where you wanna meet," asked Reginald. "Just come over to my place," said Farley. "I'll be there in a minute," said Reginald as he got up off the couch.

As he walked to the door, Sonny met him there. "Where do you think you're going," he asked. "I've got a meeting. Just lock up when you're finished," Reginald said as he walked out.

Reginald quickly arrived at Farley's apartment. He noticed that Tommy and

Vance were home as well.

"Crew," yelled Reginald as he walked in. "What up bro," Tommy said as he greeted Reginald. "Good to see you man," said Farley. "Nigga," yelled Vance. Reginald sat down after he greeted his friends. They seemed unusually subdued.

"So what's going on fellas," asked Reginald. "Reggie, you know that *all* of Duane's assets are frozen," said Tommy. "That includes The Hill," said Vance. "That means we gotta find somewhere else to work," said Tommy. "Yeah, we can't wait for all this shit to get straightened out in court," said Farley. Reginald sat back in his seat. "I see," said Reginald. "What can I do for you guys," he asked. "A couple months rent would be nice," laughed Vance. "I'll do anything for you guys. A couple of months rent would be no problem," Reginald said, as the thoughts raced through his head. "But I can do you one better," Reginald said behind a smile. "I'll get you jobs in my road crew," said Reginald. "Initially, you won't be my band, but as you improve, I'll get Image to hire you as my permanent band," he said. "In the meantime, while the pay isn't that great as a roadie, I'll pay your rent," he said.

"Word," said Vance as he smiled. "You don't have to go that far Reg," said Farley. "We are family and we don't want to take advantage of you," he said. Reginald stood up. "I wouldn't be where I am without you guys, and even Duane," he said. "I owe you guys so much, and I thank you all for being my boys from day one," he said. A tear streamed down Tommy's cheek. "Reg, thank you," said Tommy. The four stood up and embraced. "Hey man, I love you guys. No thanks necessary," Reginald said. He felt his phone vibrating on his hip, but he ignored it. It was a special moment for him and his close friends.

Farley went to the kitchen and came back with four beers. "A toast to good friends," he said. They all clanked the tops of their bottles together and took their first drinks of the beverage. Reginald discussed a few details of the positions with them as they enjoyed their drinks.

After a while, Reginald decided to check his phone. He had two new voice messages. One message was from an unknown number and one from the Image office.

The unknown number was Duane.

"Reggie, I need you to handle some affairs for me. Can you come down and holla at me tomorrow. I'd rather talk to you about it in person," said Duane. "They are transferring me out to a federal facility in a couple days," he said. "Get at me," he said as the message ended.

The phone beeped and the second message came on.

"Reggie, this is the event secretary here at Image, Darlene McKay. You've been booked to a promotional concert in two weeks; it's a tribute to Big Mic. The proceeds are

being donated to his foundation. Please get into contact with us as soon as possible so we can iron out the details with you. Thanks," said Darlene as the phone beeped.

Reginald decided to call Yvonne. He hadn't talked with her that day and he wanted to tell her about the concert for Mike. The phone rang four times and went to voicemail.

"Hey baby, it's me, Reggie. I don't know if you know about this, but there's going to be a benefit concert for Mike's foundation. Image is putting on the concert. I figure they'll probably want you involved, but they'll contact you. I hope you had a smooth trip home and a good day today. I love you," said Reginald as he hung up.

"Guys, it's time for me to head home," Reginald said. "I gotta handle some business tomorrow at the office and go talk with Duane," he continued. "Tell Duane that he's in our prayers man," said Farley. "Yeah, go do your thing, and don't forget our jobs," Vance said. "Later homes," said Tommy. "I'm out guys," said Reginald as he walked out the door.

"I wonder what Duane needs," Reginald thought as he got in his car and headed home.

When he got home, his door was still partially opened. The agents were long gone and his things were scattered all over the place. He just shook his head. "Damn," he thought as he shut the door and locked it behind him. He put the pillows back on his couch and lied down. He slowly fell asleep.

When he awakened, it was just before nine o'clock. He stretched, yawned and got up to get ready for his day. "Gotta get outta here and talk with Duane," said Reginald. He quickly got cleaned up and ran out the door.

As he arrived at the city lockup, there weren't nearly as many agents there and Sonny was nowhere to be found. He walked up to the desk. "I need to see Duane Clemons please," said Reginald. "Have a seat, we'll get him out here," said the attendant.

After a few moments, Duane was being escorted to an interview room. He made eye contact with Reginald just before he was lead inside. "You've got five minutes," said the escort.

Reginald walked in and sat down. "I just got a few minutes, so let me make this short and sweet. They are sending me away tomorrow. I get no bail, period. Gerald's going away too, for conspiracy," said Duane. "I think Hank may have turned on me to get a deal," said Duane. Duane scoots a little closer and begins to whisper, "They don't know where Earl is, but I do. Call 555-8989 and tell him where to meet you. Tell him I said, 'bring the asset.' He'll know what I'm talking about. Also tell him to take out the trash. You take half and put it away for me, and tell him to take the other half. You got it," said Duane.

Reginald was still trying to catch up. "Call the number, get the asset from Earl and tell him to take out the trash and split the asset fifty-fifty," Reginald repeated softly. "Exactly. Look Reggie, I love you man. I had pretty much made up my mind that I was going to get out of this shit, but you can't always get out when you're this deep. Just know that your boy heard you loud and clear. And since I'm going to pay for my sins, I'm going out with a bang," said Duane as the agent walked in. "Time's up," he said. "Let's go Clemons," said the agent. Reginald watched sadly as they lead Duane out of the room in shackles.

As Reginald left the building, he found himself crying uncontrollably, but he composed himself as he got into his car. Knowing Duane's business, as shady as it was, he knew he had to make that call on a pay phone somewhere. He drove several blocks from the lock up and made the call.

"Yes," said Earl on the other end. "Earl, this is Reggie. Duane wants you to meet me. Meet me at the diner at the corner of 5th and Stanley. Duane said bring the asset," said Reginald. "Done," he said as he hung up the phone. Reginald hung up the phone and hurried over to the diner. Earl was already waiting on him.

Earl wasn't even slightly disguised. He sat in the booth in the back corner. When Reginald came in, Earl greeted him with a fist pound. "The asset is under the table," said Earl. "What exactly is *the asset*," asked Reginald. "Duane had me to hide ten million dollars for him for an emergency. This is an emergency. He trusted only three people in the world with this money: Gerald, myself, and you. Because I'm on the run too, he wants to pass it to you to hold for him until he gets out, if he gets out. If he doesn't get out, it's yours," said Earl.

Reginald looked down at the floor and saw the large blue duffel bag. "This might be your lucky day then, Earl," said Reginald. "He told me that you need to take out the trash and that half of the asset was yours. He told me to hold the other part for him until he gets out," said Reginald.

Earl didn't even smile at the thought of five million dollars. Reginald got an uneasy feeling. "What's the trash," asked Reginald quietly. "Need to know basis," said Earl. "And it's better that you don't know," he said.

Chapter 22

"Take the bag into the bathroom. Go into the first stall and I'll be back with a bag to split the money," said Earl. Reginald grabbed the bag and walked calmly into the

bathroom and went in the first stall. "I wonder what Duane is up to. It probably is better that I don't know, though," Reginald said to himself.

Moments later, he heard someone go into the stall next to him. "Reggie," said Earl from the next stall. "Yeah, I'm still here," said Reginald. "Count out half of the money and slip it into this bag," he said as he passed a large brown paper sack under the stall. Reginald carefully counted out five million dollars, and put it in the bag. "Go ahead and leave Reggie, and good luck with your career," Earl said. "You probably won't be seeing me ever again," he finished.

"Thanks Earl, you be careful," said Reginald as he walked out of the stall and out the bathroom door with the bag.

As Reginald reached his car, his cell phone began to ring. It was Craig.

"Yeah," Reginald said as he answered the phone. "Reggie, I know you don't want to hear from me, but you really need to get over to the office A-S-A-P," Craig said. "You need to meet with some execs and talk about the concert about Big Mic," Craig continued. "You're scheduled to be here in 15 minutes," he finished.

"I'll be there in a minute," said Reginald as he hung up the phone.

Reginald secured the duffel bag in his trunk and headed on to the Image office. As he entered the building, Craig met him; Reginald didn't even acknowledge him. "Reggie, come on buddy, talk to me," Craig pleaded. "I don't have anything to say to you. You put my friendship with Duane in jeopardy. I don't appreciate that," Reginald said as he got on the elevator.

Craig darted onto the elevator with Reginald.

"Look Reggie, without me, you wouldn't be here, period. So yeah, I used you, somewhat, but you used me too. That's what this business is. We are all whores to the industry! Duane used you to make money for his club and to get new customers into his building. You don't hold that against him, so why do you hold it against me? I was trying to save my neck, and I tried to get you to get another manager so at least you wouldn't know that you were indirectly involved when he went down," said Craig.

"Give me a break Craig. Sonny is full of shit. He was just going to use me to get to Duane too. No matter what, the only reason I got in the door was because of my connection to Duane. It's ironic though," Reginald paused. "You kept telling me he was bad news. Sonny felt the same way, and actually you two were trying to set me up to fall out with Duane," Reginald said. "But you actually brought us closer than ever," he said as he walked off the elevator.

Deane Milner, Claude Donaldson and Arnold Chapman all stood in the hall, in front of the large double doors leading to the conference room. Reginald and Craig

walked off the elevator. Tension was thick in the air. Deane broke the ice.

"Thanks for coming Reginald, follow me," he said as he opened the double doors. Everyone walked in and sat around the large table. Reginald thought back to the first time he came into this room and sang for some of these same people.

"Reginald, I understand that you've been involved with a major criminal," said Deane. "While your personal life is your own, we can't ruin our reputation here. I hope you've made new arrangements regarding your management. And I also expect that you'll cut ties with Mister Clemons immediately," Deane finished.

Reginald didn't even blink. "Sir, if I may speak freely," Reginald said. "Absolutely," said Deane. "First, I'd like to apologize for any problems I've caused the company. I greatly appreciate the opportunity that I have in front of me. However, some of the same people who helped to make this possible also stabbed me in the back," Reginald said. "How so," asked Deane.

"Duane, has been my friend and been watching out for me for years. He's never done anything to me that made me not trust him. However, Mister Donaldson and Mister Martin have both broken my trust," Reginald said. "I'm sure you're aware of Craig's *problem*. Are you also aware that Claude and Craig worked along with the FBI to bring down Duane? They also used my relationship with him to get closer than they normally would have been able to," said Reginald. "I don't deny any of this Reggie," said Claude. "Duane's a cancer to this community and he needed to be eradicated," he said.

"Exactly," said a voice from across the room. It was Sonny.

"Thank you for coming Mister Benson," said Claude. "I wanted him to explain how this whole thing transpired," he continued.

Sonny sat down beside Reginald. "We've been tracking Clemons for several years, but we never could make anything stick on him. We couldn't even get a warrant. Then one of his street boys flipped on him. But it was his word against Duane's and this kid had a lot of product on him. He was looking to sell it to Craig over there. We got a warrant for Craig's office here and found all kinds of paraphernalia. We were going to take him down and search the whole building. Claude intervened," said Sonny. "He said he knew of a guy who supplied most of the dope on the streets of this city and he had a way to connect us with him. Craig was one link in the chain, Reginald was the other," Sonny continued.

"Wait, why wasn't I made aware of any of this," asked Deane. "The less people who knew, the easier we could pull it off," said Sonny.

"The problem was that Reginald gave Clemons a reason to try and go straight. His shipments had slowed significantly from what our ears on the street said. We figured that Reginald wasn't just a friend of Clemons, but also a customer, and a soldier. Craig was

going to let us know when Reginald slipped and we'd use that to nail Clemons. Our guesses were wrong, because Reginald turned out to be completely clean, aside from his friendship with Clemons," finished Sonny.

"Okay, but how did you bust him if Reginald and Craig didn't do their jobs," asked Deane.

"We had some new evidence come to light. The police received a phone call from Brandie Lloyd, Reginald's ex-girlfriend. She said that Reginald had been involved in an altercation with her current boyfriend, Shaun Colston. That same night, Colston disappeared. Hundreds of people heard him threaten Duane and Reginald after the fight. When he disappeared, they took fingerprints from his car and his front door. They matched one of Duane's known associates, Hank Thornton. We brought him in for questioning and he spilled his guts. He said that he and some other guys beat up Colston and brought him to the club on direct orders from Duane. He said that Clemons and his associate, known only as Earl, tied him up and burned him. We dropped Hanks charges for more in depth information. He told us when the illegal shipments were due to come in. We never recovered Colston's body, but this gentleman has volunteered to testify in exchange for complete immunity," Sonny finished. "Reginald, by fighting with Colston, you just indirectly got Duane busted," Sonny laughed.

Reginald frowned. He was speechless. Then he thought about Spit Fye.

"Where does Jamal Wilson fit in, with all this," asked Reginald. "Easily," said Sonny. "He's one of our best informants. We bust celebrities using him very regularly. He knows everybody, and nobody would ever believe that he's a narc. How do you think he knew all about Clemons? When you and he began to have conflict, we gave him quite a bit of information about Clemons. When Clemons went to him on your behalf, he already knew about the impending bust. He just let us know where Clemons was," said Sonny. "Again, you are the indirect cause of Duane going down," Sonny laughed. "It's beautiful!"

"So you let a murderer be your informant? It doesn't even matter that I watched him shoot my friend in cold-blood? How do you sleep at night," asked Reginald. "I sleep very well, thank you. Jamal's not dangerous to anybody but himself. But your *friend* pushed him a little too hard. He pushed back," said Sonny. "He plead down to voluntary manslaughter," said Sonny. "He won't serve much time, if any because of his connections with us."

Reginald slammed his fists down on the table. "Fuck you Sonny," said Reginald. "Craig, Claude, fuck both of you too," Reginald said angrily. "Reggie, calm down," said Arnold. "Mister Chapman, with all due respect, I don't want to deal with them anymore. I don't trust either of them," said Reginald as he got up and began to leave the room. "Reginald, wait. What about Big Mic's concert in New York," asked Arnold. "I'll be there," he said as he stormed out of the office.

Reginald was angry, hurt and upset. He just wanted to escape his life. He knew just where he could go. He picked up his phone and dialed. "Yvonne, I'm coming to L.A."

Chapter 23

As the plane touched down at LAX, Reginald thought about his escape. Yvonne agreed that he should come out there and get some rest. Not just physical, but mental. Reginald had become a mega-star at a very early point in his career. One of his best friends was going to prison for a long time. Another friend was killed before his eyes and he's had two physical confrontations, all within a month. To top it off, he didn't feel like he could trust his bosses anymore, after they tried to use him to get to Duane. He had a lot on his mind.

After he picked up his bags, he saw a man standing with a sign and his name on it. The man recognized Reginald immediately and led him out to a limo. Reginald stepped into the limo and there was Yvonne sitting in the corner.

"Hey baby," she said excitedly. They hugged tightly and Reginald kissed her softly on the cheek. "I'm so sorry about Duane," said Yvonne. "If there's anything I can do, just let me know," she finished. "Thanks, but I don't think we can do anything for him at this point, except be there for him," Reginald said.

They rode quietly to her home. Yvonne lived on the beach, in Malibu. Her neighbors were other celebrities: musicians, actors, and pro-athletes. She had palm trees in her front yard and sand in her back yard. The ocean was only 50 yards from her patio. It was unbelievably beautiful.

Reginald tipped the driver as he brought in the last of Reginald's luggage and quickly disappeared out Yvonne's front door. It wasn't even noon yet, but Reginald felt like napping. "Jet-lag is a trip," Reginald said softly as he found himself drifting off to sleep. "Yeah, it takes some getting used to," Yvonne responded.

Reginald took some time to catch Yvonne up on some of the things he had dealt with the last few days. He told her about Craig and Claude setting up Duane. He told her about Sonny, who she had never met. He also caught her up about the incident on the radio, with Spit Fye. He did have some good news for her. He told her about him including his friends in the tour and giving them a chance to become his permanent band again.

"That's great baby," said Yvonne. She was smiling ear-to-ear. "Those guys really love you, and it shows," she said. "Giving them an opportunity to work with you again is a wonderful thing to do."

Reginald nodded in agreement. They had always been there for him and he wanted to do the same for them, especially now that Duane wasn't able to run the club anymore. Reginald sat quietly and began to stare off.

"What's wrong, Reggie," asked Yvonne. Reginald hesitated. He wanted to tell her about his meeting with Earl and the money he was holding for Duane. "You can tell me anything Reggie. I hope you know that," she said. "Yeah, I know. But this is something you might not want to know about," Reginald said.

Reginald's phone began to ring. "Saved by the bell," he laughed. Yvonne smiled nervously. "Hello," said Reginald into the phone. "Reg, it's Farley," he said on the other end of the phone. "Knucklehead, what's up," asked Reginald. "Man, you aren't going to believe this. Turn to BST," said Farley. Reginald turned on the TV and he saw Spit Fye on the screen, being interviewed by Carmen on her show.

"I just want to express my deepest sympathies to Mike's family," said Spit Fye. "I know this might not be popular, but I plan to attend his benefit concert in our hometown of New York," said Spit Fye. Carmen seemed rattled. "Spit, are you sure that's a good idea. How do your lawyers feel about that," she asked. "They are against it, but I think it shows that I held no ill will against Mike. We were brothers in a lot of ways, and if people want to take out their anger over his death on me, then I can take it. I deserve it," said Spit Fye. "That's very brave of you," said Carmen.

"On a related note, is it true that you called into a radio station to harass Reginald Morgan," asked Carmen. Spit Fye scoffed. "It's not true," said Spit Fye. "Someone called in and pretended to be me," said Spit Fye. "Reginald has a problem with me and he's trying to make me look bad. I just want to say something specific to Reggie," said Spit Fye. He looked directly in to the screen. "I forgive you man," said Spit Fye as the camera zoomed in. "Well there you have it," said Carmen. "One of the greatest of all time, Spit Fye, completely open and honest," she said as she went to a commercial.

Reginald's fists clinched. "Farley, let me call you back," he said as he hung up the phone. "He is playing with me, trying to ruin my reputation," said Reginald. "Don't worry about him babe," said Yvonne. "He's not worth your anger. I can't believe he'd show his face at that concert. There's no way in hell that they should let him be there," said Yvonne.

Yvonne picked up her phone to call Image. "Let me speak with Deane Milner please," she said. "This is Yvonne Summers," she finished. She sat on hold for about thirty seconds when Deane picked up the line. "Yvonne, how are you," Deane said. "Not too good, Deane," said Yvonne. "Listen, why are you all allowing Spit Fye to attend this concert for Mike? Knowing he's the one who pulled the trigger. There's no way he should

be there. Mike's family will be there and you know they won't be happy to see the man who killed him," she said.

"Yvonne, BST has chosen to pick up this benefit concert. One of the stipulations is to allow Spit Fye and Reginald to have a sit down, on camera, prior to the concert. Then they have to agree to shake hands and put an end to all their conflicts," said Deane.

"Reginald is right here with me and he is not pleased about this at all," said Yvonne. "Here, you talk with him," said Yvonne. She passed the phone over to Reginald. "Hello, Mister Milner," said Reginald. "I just can't believe that you all are going along with this," Reginald said. "Look Reggie, all the incidents that you've had recently; the connection to organized crime. We just need some positive press. At this point, the shareholders are putting pressure on me to cut you loose if you don't agree to this. BST wants a sit down between you and Spit Fye so you can clear the air. If I'm completely honest with you, I believe it's a ratings thing. But I also believe that people who are fans of you both want to see peace," said Deane.

Reginald shook his head. "I see," he said. "I'll talk with him," said Reginald. "Good, we're glad that you are willing to move passed this whole incident," said Deane. "Yeah, here's Yvonne," Reginald said in disgust as he gave her the phone. "Deane, you know this isn't right," she said. "This is a business and you know this is all about business," said Deane. Yvonne hung up the phone.

"Reggie, do you have anything on schedule for the next few weeks," asked Yvonne. "No, nothing except getting my boys on their feet and going to Duane's hearings, that's it," he replied. "Well, I've got a lot of room. You are more than welcomed to stay with me indefinitely," said Yvonne. Reginald hugged Yvonne tightly. "Thank you baby," he said.

Over the next week, as Reginald got more comfortable, he went out and got a cell phone with a Los Angeles number, and even rented a post office box for his mail. He only shared his new number with his closest friends. Not even his bosses at Image had his number. Once a day, he'd check his voicemail on his old cell phone and find 20 or more messages. Most messages were from the publicist's office at Image, reporters and local party promoters were also calling.

Reginald really didn't want to talk to anybody. He did have to speak with an Image rep to finalize his *sit down* with Spit Fye. He agreed to speak with him the afternoon before the concert, there in New York, on camera.

The big day finally arrived. Reginald and Yvonne had flown in together from Los Angeles to New York. They reserved a luxury hotel suite in Manhattan, while they were in the air and reserved sufficient transportation from the airport to venue and then back to the hotel after the event.

The sit down was to be in a conference room in Madison Square Garden, which is also where the concert would be held. There were cameras filming Reginald and Yvonne's arrival to the building. They had also filmed Spit Fye's arrival. The cameras followed them into the building and through all the hallways.

The sit down had become almost a completely separate event from the concert, although they were initially related. People were more concerned with Reginald and Spit Fye's beef than they were with the memory of Big Mic. That didn't sit well with Reginald.

Carmen Lane was the moderator of the conversation. It would just be the three of them in the room together with nobody else except the camera people.

As Reginald reached the door, he saw Carmen standing there. Carmen approached Reginald as if walking on eggshells. She knew that he was very suspicious of her. "Reggie, I haven't talked to you since," Carmen hesitated. "I just want you to know that I had no idea about what was going on. I just wanted to help you," she said. Reginald nodded in approval. "It's okay, you didn't pull the trigger," Reginald said. He turned and hugged Yvonne. "I'm going in baby," he said. "Okay, I'll be waiting," she said. Reginald followed Carmen into the room. Spit Fye was already waiting for him inside.

"Okay, for the sake of the magazine covers and any other media that need still shots, can I get you guys to shake hands," asked Carmen.

Reginald walked over to Spit Fye. The intensity in the air was very thick. You could tell that the two didn't like each other. Spit Fye stood up and stretched his hand out to Reginald.

The two men shook hands as cameras flashed and recorded what seemed to be a good start to a very important moment for both men.

Chapter 24

As the two sat down, they glared at each other. It was clear that if either could get away with it on camera, they'd throw a few blows right there. Carmen sat between them and began the session.

"First, I would really like to thank the two of you for coming together and meeting. You two are among the biggest stars in the industry and you're both role models to young people. We don't want conflict to destroy our communities and people seeing

the two of you come together for a common goal can help remove the animosity that they may have between one another," said Carmen.

Reginald nodded in agreement. Spit Fye sat quietly in his chair.

"Okay, we all know why you two have this conflict. What we want to know is can the two of you forgive each other for the actions that you been a part of? Reginald, Spit already offered you his forgiveness on my show a couple weeks ago. Can you do the same for him," asked Carmen.

Reginald leaned forward in his chair and his eyes squinted a little.

"If you want me to be completely honest; no I cannot forgive him. A lot of things happened. And maybe at some point I will be able to squash this whole thing. But today, no I can't," said Reginald.

"How do you feel about that Spit," asked Carmen.

"I completely understand. I'll never forgive myself for what happened to Mike. I have to live with what I did every day of my life. But still, I forgive Reggie for his attacking me after the incident and I forgive him for the radio thing," said Spit Fye.

Reginald frowned and looked directly at Spit Fye.

"You forgive *me* for the radio incident," he asked. "I was minding my own business, just doing a show and all of a sudden you are on the phone talking crazy to me," Reginald said. "I didn't appreciate that and I didn't let you get away with it," he finished.

Carmen turned to Spit Fye.

"What exactly happened on the radio," she asked Spit Fye.

"I'm not sure. I was just informed that somebody called in using the alias Jamal Wilson, which is my name. They said some hurtful things to Reggie and Reggie responded in turn," said Spit Fye. "I had nothing to do with that call, it wasn't me."

Carmen turned back to Reginald.

"It *was* you. Only you and I knew about the meeting between you and my former manager," said Reginald. "How would some random caller know about that," asked Reginald.

"Spit," Carmen said inquisitively.

"Hey, I don't know how they knew. But speaking of that meeting, I didn't like how you sent him to threaten me. I feared for my life after that meeting. Mister Clemons

is a very dangerous man. I mean, he wouldn't be in prison if he wasn't," Spit Fye responded.

"Oh, you wanna change the subject, huh," interrupted Reginald. "Look, let's get something straight. You are part of the reason he's in prison," Reginald said.

"No, he's in prison because he's a criminal," Spit Fye said.

"Okay gentlemen, it's time for a commercial, but we'll be back," said Carmen.

As they took the show into the break, Carmen was visibly frustrated. "Look guys, I don't want this to turn into another argument. You guys are here to end this feud and move on with your lives," said Carmen.

Reginald scoffed. "Carmen, no offense, but I didn't ask to be here. I was forced into this by Image. Nothing would please me better than to move on from this thing with Spit, but will he let it go? No, he won't. He's the one who continues to come after me. He's sending crazy rumors to *your* TV station. He's calling radio stations and messing with me. The one thing I did to him was hurt his pride a little, with a punch in the mouth. And I didn't back down to him on the radio," said Reginald.

"Fuck that Reggie. You aren't on my radar, not even on my level. I'm offering peace and you shit on it. How am I supposed to react to that," asked Spit Fye.

"Knock it off guys," said Carmen. "Either squash this thing or leave, period," said Carmen. The cameras began to roll again and Carmen began to introduce the second segment of the interview.

"Thanks and we're back. So when we left, things were getting a little--," Carmen was interrupted by Reginald.

"This is a joke and it's bullshit," he said. "You can't say that on television Reggie," said Carmen. "This is all about ratings. Y'all live for this beef and to have it on television, live, this is getting you paid. I'm not going to be a part of this," Reginald said as he walked out.

Carmen was speechless. As Reginald walked out the door, there were several people standing by waiting to hear about the interview. Spit Fye came out the door right behind Reginald and grabbed his shoulder.

"Where you goin'," asked Spit Fye. Reginald instinctively turned and grabbed Spit Fye by the shirt and slammed him up against the wall. "Stay the fuck away from me," yelled Reginald. He let Spit Fye go and stormed off down the hallway.

The concert was set to begin in less than an hour. Several people were scheduled to perform, including Reginald and Yvonne. Spit Fye wasn't on tab to perform, but he did

have a five-minute window to address the crowd. It proved to be a volatile situation as there were signs in the crowd calling for his arrest and incarceration. Some signs went as far as to ask for his execution.

Spit Fye sat quietly in one of the dressing rooms. He was alone. A few make up and wardrobe people came by to make him look his best for his few moments in the sun. But he sat quietly, not saying anything. Deep in his heart, he knew that he had been wrong about everything he did. He knew that leaving Reginald alone was for the best. But he also knew that conflict sells records. He was torn, because nobody had ever stood up to him the way Reginald did. In his own way, he respected that.

No matter what his lyrics said, he had never shot anybody in his life. He had never even fired a gun until the night he killed Big Mic. He came from a good family. His father was a minister in Brooklyn and his mother a principle at a local high school. He went to a local university on full scholarship and got his MBA at the age of 22, graduating with a 3.8 gpa. Nobody would have expected him to become what he became.

He always enjoyed listening to hip-hop, but he wrote poetry as a therapeutic tool. Eventually, his poems gained notoriety. Eventually he began to rap at local clubs and by the age of 25, he had become one of the hottest underground rappers out there. Eventually he signed to a major label and became one of the greatest of all time. He knew that in the end, he would have given all of that up if he hadn't pulled that trigger. Mike had pushed his buttons.

When Spit Fye was in college, several people thought he was gay. And eventually it was proven to be true when he was caught naked in bed at a Frat party with another guy. Even still, he had been with many women since then. What hip-hop star hadn't? But his carnal desire wasn't for women. He loved men. And he loved having power over men who were on the down low. He didn't mess with openly gay men, only men who had something to lose. He knew that they would go as far as they could to conceal their secrets, so he knew as long as he didn't say anything, neither would they.

One of the first people he tried to fool around with was Big Mic. He tried to turn Mike, and Mike turned him down and threatened to expose him to everyone. Spit Fye didn't want to be exposed, so he gave Mike a large sum of money to remain quiet and Mike agreed to stay quiet. When Mike opened his mouth that night, all the anger from several years of ridicule as a younger man was released. He reacted and pulled the trigger.

"It's all my fault," said Spit Fye.

A production assistant stepped into the dressing room and told Spit Fye he had five minutes until he needed to be on stage.

Spit Fye had come to a decision. He was going to apologize and truly leave Reginald alone. He was also going to change his manslaughter plea to a guilty plea of

murder. He wanted to do his time and pay for his sins. He had brought everything on himself and he knew that in the end, the money wasn't worth his soul.

Spit Fye stood up and turned towards the door. Someone was in the room. "Hey," he said just as he felt three burning shots hit him in the chest. He couldn't breathe. He became light headed and his vision blurred. He fell to the floor. He coughed violently as blood began to climb from his throat into his lungs and into his mouth. He reached for the person in the room and his eyes closed. Jamal Wilson was dead.

The sound of the shots alerted security and several people ran to his room. They saw Jamal motionless on the floor in a pool of his own blood.

News of the shooting quickly spread throughout the building and throughout the music world. Speculation ran rampant. Many people pointed to the heated exchange that Reginald had with him earlier. Other people thought it was a suicide. Even still people pointed to the three shots in the chest and said it was an execution style hit.

That night, the authorities found Duane's sidekick, Earl, in the building. He had a .45 and a silencer. After a thorough check, they found no residue from a gunshot on his body. They also found that the .45 hadn't been fired. Still, he was arrested for his connections to Duane. He had come there to kill Spit Fye, however. That was part of him taking out the trash, as Duane had put it. In the end somebody did the job for him.

Reginald was questioned heavily about the incident. He had the most motive to kill Spit Fye. He even had a slight window to do it. His performance had been over for a while when they found Spit Fye dead. After hours of intense interrogation, they let Reginald go. They had done the same residue test on Reginald and found no evidence that he'd fired a gun.

Reginald walked out of the interrogation room in a Manhattan Police Station at 2 in the morning. Yvonne sat in the waiting room the entire time, waiting for him to get out. The two of them hailed a taxi and went to their hotel suite.

"Are you alright baby," asked Yvonne. "Yeah, I'm okay. Just a bit of a headache," he said as he walked into their suite. Reginald walked over to the bed and laid flat on his back. His eyes closed. He couldn't believe what had happened that evening. "I can see why," Yvonne said. "I know you didn't kill him," she said. She walked over to the bed and lied next to him on the bed. "Thank you for always believing in me," Reginald said.

He rolled over and they embraced and began to kiss. Only moments later, they were making love. Reginald had a difficult day and he needed a release of aggression and frustration. He needed to feel Yvonne's love and she gave that to him. Sounds of passion filled the room. Yvonne took everything Reginald had to give. She was very much in love with him, and she looked him in the eyes, never losing focus. As the climaxed together, Reginald said softly to her, "I love you." She smiled at him and kissed him

softly. "I love you too," she replied. The two lovers lied in the bed, with Reginald holding her closely until she fell asleep.

When Reginald opened his eyes again, it was almost nine o'clock. Yvonne was gone, but the bed was still warm with her body heat. "She must be in the shower," he thought. His head still throbbed with the headache from the previous night's events.

Reginald crawled out of the bed and walked over to the dresser where Yvonne's purse sat. He opened her purse to look for something to soothe his headache. He was shocked at what he saw. Yvonne had a .38 caliber gun. He took the gun from her purse and looked at it. There were three shells missing and the gun smelled like burning metal. "What the fuck," said Reginald to himself.

"Did she shoot him," he asked himself. He thought back to the diner.

*"I've completely fallen in love with you. I would do **anything** for you, no matter what. I just want you to be happy," said Yvonne.*

"*Anything*," Reginald said to himself. "Anything what," asked Yvonne from behind him. She was in the doorway to the bathroom in her bathrobe. Reginald turned, with the gun in his hand. Yvonne saw the gun, but she didn't flinch. "Did you," Reginald said before cutting himself off in disbelief. "I saw what pain he was causing you, and not only you, but also me," Yvonne said. "I wasn't going to let him get away with that. Jamal was evil and he needed to be stopped," she continued.

"But, you killed him," Reginald said still in disbelief. "Yeah, I did," Yvonne said. "Nobody will ever know. I'll get rid of the weapon and we can live our life together with no worries," Yvonne said. "It's your gun Yvonne," said Reginald. "They'll find it and trace it back to you," he continued. "No, they won't. I bought the gun on the street," she said. "You forget, I'm from the street and I know how to take care of things," she finished.

Reginald sat the gun on the dresser and walked to the couch. "What are we gonna do," he asked. "There's nothing *to* do, Reggie. We just move on. Nobody will know anything," she said. "I'll know and you'll know. You can't just live with killing somebody on your conscience," Reginald said.

"Then I did him a favor," Yvonne said.

The Hill (Epilogue)

Craig - Craig continued to grow in the music business and became one of the top A&R people in the industry. However, he began to slip again with his habits. His guilt over using Reginald led him to start using cocaine again and an office worker found him in the office with a pound. He's currently in rehab for his problem.

Arnold - Arnold continued to produce hit songs for Image. Including new albums for both Reginald and Yvonne. He's the most sought-after producer in the R&B and Jazz genre.

Sonny - After the bust on Duane, Sonny was promoted and eventually left the FBI. He's now the director of his own division of the DEA. He's currently investigating several major dealers all over the east coast. He still believes that they never scratched the surface of Duane's empire and he continues to investigate Duane on his own time.

Brandie - Brandie never forgave Reginald for what happened to Shaun. She still believes that Reginald had something to do with his disappearance and subsequent murder. She and the Colston family still hold out hope that they'll recover Shaun's body. In the meantime, Brandie continues to work as a cosmetologist.

The Crew - The Crew all went along for a short time working on Reginald's tour. They practiced with the professionals and eventually they were offered the position of being Reginald's personal band. They gladly accepted. After a couple of years, they cut their own jazz CD and are up for a Grammy.

Hank - Hank did rat Duane out to save his butt. He didn't know nearly as much as he thought he did. He knew of a few shipments that were coming in, but he didn't know about most of Duane's fronts or the locations of those fronts. His charges for trafficking and assault were dropped in exchange for the testimony against Duane. Hank was put into witness protection and never seen again.

Gerald - Gerald was convicted of drug trafficking, conspiracy to commit murder and conspiracy to launder money. He received a 15-year sentence and is up for parole in 10 years. Several people believe he made a deal to reduce his sentence, but he maintains that he never turned on Duane and his organization.

Earl - Earl was convicted for the murder of a DEA agent and drug trafficking. He never spent the money that Duane left him to kill Spit Fye. Nobody knows where that five million dollars went. Earl is a suspect in the murder of well over 20 people, ranging from other drug dealers, to every day citizens. He was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Big Mic - Big Mic's concert went well. The ticket sales and donations brought in over seven million dollars. Two million of that went to his family in a trust. The remainder went to his foundation for at risk youth in Brooklyn. Image released a memorial CD for Mike with five of his unused tracks and several songs from other artists who were his friends. He was given a Lifetime Achievement Award Post-Humously.

Duane - Duane was convicted for multiple violations of the RICO Statute, including: murder, drug trafficking, racketeering, money laundering. He was sentenced to multiple life sentences, not to be concurrent. He has no possibility of parole and is now in a federal prison. The fall of Duane's empire brought down players from coast to coast. His net worth prior to his conviction was estimated at 78 million dollars.

Spit Fye - After his murder, a lot came out about him. Several men came out and said they had intimate relationships with him. This fact didn't tarnish his legacy as one of the greatest MCs of all time. He had already completed enough material for three additional albums by the time of his death. Like Big Mic, Spit Fye was also awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award Post-Humously. A movie about his life is currently in production. His murder has never been solved.

Yvonne - Yvonne has continued her career as one of the top singers in the R&B genre. She remains sober to this day, however she is tempted regularly. The fact that she pulled the trigger to end Spit Fye's life has scarred her permanently. She takes comfort in the fact that she did it *for love*. She and Reginald remain together and are planning to be married.

Reginald - As time passed, Reginald's star continued to rise. He has put out multiple platinum CDs and is widely considered the best R&B singer of his time and one of the best all time. Reginald re-opened The Hill, cleaned it up and has several local acts perform there nightly. He holds half of the profits, along with the five million dollars from Duane in a separate account, just in case Duane gets released. For several weeks after Spit Fye's death, Reginald felt as if he had caused Yvonne to pull the trigger. In the end, he moved on with his life, never telling the secret that the love of his life had taken a life.

~The Hill~