

PUSH COMES TO SHOVE

A NOVEL BY

Oasis

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**PRAISE
FOR
PUSH COMES TO SHOVE**

Oasis is undoubtedly a creative genius—*Push Comes To Shove* proves it.

—Tyrone Clary, Parousia Gallery Art

Oasis is a refreshing voice for a new generation.

—Rashaan Ali, Essence bestselling author of *Nasty*

Alas! Oasis is like a breath of fresh air to the literary industry, debuting with an entertaining and heartfelt family drama.

—Joylynn Jossel, author of *The Root of All Evil & When Souls Mate*

A multicultural-suspense novel, vibrant and rich in characters. A plot so intense it literally leaves wounds on the heart. A stunning debut.

—Dawunny Ruby, Mahogany Media Review

Push Comes To Shove has to be one of the best books I've read in a very long time! Its real life issues, believable characters, and its twist and turns, have you laughing, crying, and shaking your head. Oasis is a talented author who is destined for great things in the literary world. This book is going to put him where he needs to be—at the top.

—Keila Miller, *Grown Folks Café*

In his newest novel, *Push Comes To Shove*, Oasis brings the drama right to his readers' face. His writing style is razor sharp, and the story line will cause your heart to skip a beat. I tremendously enjoyed this novel, and I look forward to more heart-throbbing stories in the future.

—Brenda Hampton, Essence bestselling author of *Naughty by Nature*.

An engrossing story. *Push* is a mixed bag of life situations and hard knocks that will keep you turning the pages—never a dull moment. *Push Comes To Shove* is destined for best-seller status.

—Natalie Darden, author of *All About Me*.

A positively compelling story that grabs you from the first paragraph and keeps you enthralled until the very end. A novel that evokes so many emotions: fear, anger, empathy, laughter, and tears. *Push Comes To Shove* is a tear jerker but the end is oh so sweet.

—Tina Brooks McKinney, author of *All That Drama*

Role Model: *James Henry Britt*, the man who taught me
the *true* meaning of family and what bonding is about. I
will carry your teachings on, R.I.P.
1931-2006

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SHOVE**

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Prologue

Greg Patterson hung in the nude from a vaulted ceiling by his young wrists. His 110 pound body was no match against the leather restraints. He wriggled and rocked himself past the brink of exhaustion. There was nothing else he could do now but wait.

He'd lost track of time hanging there in the cold dark. He wanted to relieve himself, but pissing on Mr. Reynolds's floor wasn't an option. It would only make matters worse.

Footsteps fell in the hall just outside of the door. Greg hated this part with passion, but at least ... at least it was almost over.

The tarnished door knob spun left.

He braced himself.

The group home's disciplinarian, Mr. Reynolds, stood in the entrance with a bucket of sudsy water in one hand. His widespread body covered the majority of the doorjamb. "You just refuse to learn your lesson."

"I won't steal again. This time I ... I promise."
He gestured no with worry.

"Foolhardy boy, you've made that meaningless promise since you learned how to talk." He doused the frail boy with the sudsy water. "A little incentive will keep you focused. You should really keep your hands off things that don't belong to you." He wrapped the ends of a heavy-duty

extension cord around his bone-colored hand. "You'll learn one way or the other."

"Mr. Reynolds, please don't beat me this time." Greg clamped his burning eyes shut hoping the soap would stay out. "I needed the art supplies for school. Untie me and ... and I'll take them back right now."

"After I give you an ass cutting for being a habitual rule violator." He hiked his gravy-stained sleeves past his pudgy elbows and stood behind the boy.

Greg tensed, anticipating the first blow.

Mr. Reynolds raised his arm and swung the cord with a batter's determination. "If I could beat the color off of you, I would."

The cord sounded like thunder when it cracked against Greg's brown skin.

"Aargh ... no more! I'm sorry, Mr. Reynolds." Greg stiffened all over. "Please, no more. I won't do it again. I'm sorry."

"You are sorry, aren't you?"

The cord slapped him once more, this time breaking the skin on his back.

"You're a piece of stinky shit, and that's all you'll ever be is shit."

Thunder struck again.

Greg yelled out so loud, he threatened to short out his vocal box.

"You're a bum, Greg." He switched hands and swung from a different approach. "That's all you'll ever be. Why do you think you've been here all these years? Nobody wants a bum, not even your mother."

Mr. Reynolds had lashed Greg until his arm was tired. He went into the hall and looked at his aged yes-man. "Untie him. Lock the thieving bastard up until his wounds heal. And get rid of those drawings he's always wasting time on."

"Right away, Mr. Reynolds."

Chapter 1

GP decided that tonight his family would eat good for a change. He eased the Renault Alliance to the order box; it stuttered and backfired every inch of the way.

"Welcome to Wendy's. May I take your order?"

He shut the car off so that he could hear. "Excuse me ... uh, could you run that by me again?" He could hear the cashier suck her teeth through the speaker, as if she was annoyed.

"Good evening, how may I help you?"

"Gimme six No. 7s with Biggie fries ... and extra cheese. Make the sodas orange, no ice." He thought about how Kitchie loves Dave's chicken. "Uh, let me get two spicy chicken sandwiches and four baked potatoes with cheese. I guess that'll be cool."

"Would you like to try our apple turnovers this evening?"

Fuck it. "Yeah, why not? Gimme six and six Biggie frosties." He waited a few seconds for her response.

"That'll be \$48.23 at the pick-up window. Thank you for choosing Wendy's."

GP tried to start the Renault. "Come on, baby, crank up for daddy." The engine strained but wouldn't catch. He pumped the gas and rubbed the dashboard. "Come on, girl. I need you now more than ever."

He turned the key again. The engine backfired then came to life. With three vehicles in front of GP, he knew that his order would be ready in a matter of minutes.

His car sounded like a Harley Davidson outside of the pick-up window. An attractive cashier rolled her cat-like eyes and

shook her head. *Derelict*. She turned her lip up with attitude as she passed him three large bags and two drink-holder trays.

"That's \$48.23." She smirked and stared at GP.

GP secured the drinks on the front passenger seat then stomped the gas pedal. The Renault backfired.

The cashier all but jumped out of her skin.

With the power-steering pump broken, it was a difficult task for GP to make the sharp left turn. He jerked and tugged the rebellious steering wheel until he yanked the car onto Euclid Avenue.

He stuck a fry in his mouth and smiled. GP knew that, on this April Fool's Day, he would be the cause of three beautiful smiles.

Four city blocks away from his home, the Renault had had enough. The engine light came on just before the car stalled.

"Come on, baby, I thought you love me." He coasted to the curb. He tried to restart the engine but it refused; it only made a clicking sound.

He knew that if he started his journey on foot now, he would make it home long before the food was cold. With a bag between his teeth and two in his hand, he reached for the door handle but hesitated when he saw a Cleveland police car pull-up behind him.

"Fuck me!" he mumbled then lowered the window with a pair of vice grips. *Damn cashier could've let me slide. Ignorant chickenhead didn't have to call the cops.*

* * *

Miles dropped his skateboard on the sidewalk then stepped on it with an Air Force One sneaker.

A fragile image appeared in a screen door behind him. "Miles ... Miles, baby, you hear me?"

He removed the headphones from his ears as his broken arm remained at rest in a sling.

"Miles, baby."

"Huh?" He turned toward the house as his mother walked out onto the porch.

"See if you can find your brother. It's dark. I'm starting to worry; this isn't like him." She adjusted the belt of her housecoat and folded her arms.

"Jap is probably somewhere standing next to a tree testing his camouflage gear. Better yet, he might be with one of his weird friends on some type of mock-military scavenger hunt."

"I'm serious. Don't tell me what you think; do like you were told. We have to get a fitting on him in the

morning for his graduation gown and cap, and I want him home."

"Okay, Ma. I'll check a few places on my way to work."
He started off on the skateboard.

"Miles, baby ..."

He stopped and faced her again. "If you don't let me go, I won't have enough time to check on Jap and make it to work on time."

She removed a prescription slip from her housecoat. "Drop this off at the drug store, and I'll pick it up in the morning. I'm getting low on my heart pills."

He hurried up the steps, took the slip, and kissed her cheek. "See you later, Ma."

She grabbed a hold of his cast. "Why don't you get yourself a car? You can't afford to get too many broken arms on that thing."

He followed her gaze. "I love my board, Ma. I'm gonna ride until I'm an old man."

"You're still a baby to me; you ain't considered young no more."

* * *

The officer surveyed the car and shined his light toward the back seat. "What seems to be the problem tonight, sir?"

GP had replaced the large order on the front passenger seat. "Damn thing conked out on me. Four cylinders are supposed to run forever."

The officer looked at the beat-up car from front-end to rear end. "What year is this?"

"It's an eight-five." GP was starting to feel comfortable.

"Twenty years old is forever for a car." He pointed at the Wendy's bags. "Looks like you're going to be late for dinner."

"Yeah, I'm pushing it."

"Well, you can't leave it here overnight." He shined his beam on a *No Parking* sign. "It'll be towed by morning ... which is probably the best thing for it."

"This is all I got."

"Come on, let me help you push your headache to that lot."
He pointed.

The officer wiped his dusty hands on a hanky after they had rolled the car onto the lot. "Wendy's doesn't sound like a bad idea."

"Not at all. Thank you, officer." GP pointed his feet in the direction of home.

* * *

Kitchie Marie Patterson glared at GP through a set of powerful brown eyes. "Let's talk ... in the bedroom." She led the way.

GP shut the door behind himself. "Before you start, Mami, I just wanted to do something nice for you and the kids."

"It's at least fifty dollars worth of food in there, GP. You stole it, didn't you?" She shook her head with disappointment.

"You and the kids deserve the world." He stroked her almond cheek; she turned her face away. "I can't give it to you right now, but one day I will. Until then, it frustrates me to want y'all to have things that's beyond my reach."

"Then get a job—a real job. You don't have to quit your hustle but get a job, GP. How far do you think we can get on just your hopes and dreams alone? This is the real world we're living in, not some animated world like them cartoon characters you're banking our future on." She thought for a few seconds. "Now you're to the point of stealing again. Yeah, you made the kids happy tonight and saved me the humiliation of throwing some bullshit together, but what's gonna happen to their happiness—" she pointed towards the living room, "—when you get yourself in some trouble?"

"You act like I steal for the sport of it, Kitchie. I steal for one reason: because we really need something, and I have no other alternative of getting it. I felt like we needed to sit down tonight and share a decent meal with each other like a regular family."

"A real nine-to-five will make that possible every night, Papi Chulo."

He heard something else in Spanish that he didn't quite understand, but understood she was trying to take this conversation to a place he wasn't willing to go.

"Listen ... my work is honest; it's what I love to do. I don't want to go back and forth with you. This isn't what I intended. All I want to do is see your beautiful smile as much as I can." He lifted her chin with a finger. "Let's eat; the food is getting cold. I got your favorite."

She bit her bottom lip. "Chicken?"

"Dave's spicy chicken sandwich. Now let me suck on them Puerto Rican lips of yours."

She stood on her tip-toes to reach his six foot height then kissed him on the mouth. "I wish you would shave and get your hair braided; it looks like you gave up." She pulled back. "GP, you can't keep stealing when it's convenient for you. One day stealing is gonna get you in some trouble you're gonna catch hell getting out of."

"Or get me out of some trouble I'm already catching hell

with."

* * *

Greg, Jr. took a bite from the double classic. His seven-year-old teeth barely plugged the cheeseburger. "Daddy, I need my own bike. Secret's bike is hot pink with that stupid, flowered basket on the handlebars. Everybody makes fun of me when I ride it."

Secret was trying her damndest to suck the frosty through a straw. She gave her jaws a break. "Stay off my bike, then, since it's stupid and pink, punk. I don't like sharing it with you anyway, you little—"

"Hey, kill the name-calling." Kitchie stopped chewing and frowned at Secret.

"Little man." GP squeezed Greg, Jr.'s shoulder. "Bear with me; I'm gonna get you the best bike in the neighbor—"

"Don't be doing that, GP. It ain't right." Kitchie swallowed her food. "Okay, fine, tell him you're gonna get him a bike. But don't be making these fantastic promises that you can't deliver. You're doing terrible in the delivery department. Don't do him like that."

"How many times do I gotta ask you not to challenge me in front of the kids?" He wiped the corners of his mouth with a napkin. "When you feel like I said something that should be corrected, talk to me behind closed doors."

"We can still hear y'all in the bedroom arguing." Secret kicked Greg, Jr.'s shin.

"Ouch." He tried to kick back but his legs were too short to reach her under the table. "Ma, tell her—"

"Stop, Secret, and quit being so damn grown." Kitchie focused on GP again. "I apologize, Papi ... I'm just a little frustrated, that's all. I still don't want you to get Junior's hopes up only to let him down. That'll hurt him more than getting made fun of."

GP finished the last of his burger. "There's nothing wrong with hoping, having faith in something—especially when I know that I can make it happen." He looked at his family one by one. "Let's get this out in the open so we all know. Secret, what do you want? What does my baby's heart desire?"

"Hmmm ... I can say anything I want?"

"As long as it's appropriate coming from a nine year old." Kitchie sipped her soda between bites.

Secret's expression was thoughtful. "Daddy, I want my own room." She rolled her eyes at Junior. "Lots of new clothes like my friends would be nice, too. Oh yeah! I want a puppy, and I hope you give me my piggy-bank money back that you

borrowed last month."

GP stroked the top of Junior's head. "And what about you?"

"All I want is a bike, but I'd take a PlayStation if what we're saying was real."

"What about you, Mami Chula?" GP blew Kitchie a kiss. "Tell me what you dream of when you close your eyes."

"This is pointless; I'm not getting involved with this ... stuff." She started on her apple turnover.

"Aw, Ma." Secret sucked her teeth. "Tell us, we wanna know."

"Yeah, it's only a game." Junior dropped a French fry in his lap. "We're playing pretend."

Five seconds passed and GP leaned forward. "We're all waiting." He was unsettled by his son's comment.

"This is foolish, GP, and you know it. If it must be known, what I want more than anything in this world is for my marriage to defy time." She began to blush, then the reality of their current situation hit her. "I want us to have a bigger house—bought and paid for. I'm not big on having a lot of money, but I wish we could at least be comfortable and able to send you guys to college when it's time."

"Your turn, Daddy." Junior balanced his chair on two legs.

"The first thing I want is to be in a position to give y'all everything you want. And I want to always be able to protect y'all from danger. Comfortable might be cool for your mother, but I need our bank account to be sitting on at least a million. Of course, I want the Street Prophet to get recognition on a national level, a Saturday morning cartoon or something."

"Take the French fry out your nose, boy, before it gets stuck." The look Kitchie cast across the table put Junior right in line.

Someone knocked at the door.

"I'll get it." Secret pushed away from the table.

Kitchie grabbed her by the pants. "Make sure you know who—"

"It is before I open the door," Secret finished Kitchie's sentence.

She stood in front of the door. "Who is it?"

"Publisher's Clearing House Sweepstakes," came from the other side of the oak.

Secret pulled the door open as far as the chain lock would allow. She studied both White men in their jeans and button-down shirts.

One had a clipboard with a large envelope fastened to it.

"Where's the microphones and TV cameras?"

The bigger of the two men laughed. "That's only for our grand prize winners. Third place doesn't get that type of

publicity. Is Kitchie Patterson in?"

"Yes, would you hold on a minute?" She freed the chain lock and ran into the kitchen. "Mom, Dad, you're never gonna believe who's at the door. The Publisher's Clearing House people. Ma, you won."

Kitchie looked at the ceiling. "Gracias Dios."

The Patterson family rushed into their living room.

The smaller, balding man was unplugging their TV from the wall outlet.

The other man thrust the envelope toward Kitchie. "Your Rent-A-Center bill is overdue. You've been ducking us for over a month now. We're here to collect or repossess." He turned to his coworker. "Set that down and go around the corner and get the van."

"Don't you people have an ounce of feeling?" GP stepped between Kitchie and the envelope.

"Sometimes it's an ugly job, but it pays my bills. If you would tighten up on your payments, I wouldn't even be here." He slid the envelope under GP's armpit. "Straighten out this \$523 bill, and I'm out of here."

GP sighed. "I don't have it right now." Then, he heard Mr. Reynolds's antagonizing voice in his head loud and clear. *You're a bum, Greg. That's all you'll ever be.*

"Then I'll start with the kitchen set and work my way through here." He pointed to the furnishings.

The Patterson family watched through a window as the two men loaded the last of their furniture into the van. Kitchie fought to hold back the tears.

The bigger man came back inside with sweat beads on his temples. "Mrs., I'm sorry. Would you please sign here?" He passed her the clipboard and put his finger on the spot where he wanted her signature. "Would it be possible for me to trouble you for a glass of water?"

GP stared at the man as if he had asked for blood.

"Junior, get the man something to drink." She scribbled her name on the form.

Moments later, Junior returned with a tall glass of water.

The man drained the glass. "Ahh, now that was good and cold." He turned and left.

Kitchie surveyed their bare living room. Secret was sitting on the radiator finishing her meal. So much for having a decent meal like a normal family. She went and stood beside GP at the window. "Publisher's fucking Clearing House. They cleared us out all right." She and GP watched the Rent-A-Center van drive away. "Papi, this ain't an April Fool's joke. You need to do something. This is only a prelude to what's next."

GP dropped his head and heard Mr. Reynolds shouting at him for what had to be the millionth time. *You're a worthless piece of shit. Your mother should have swallowed you.*

Kitchie walked away. "Maybe a glass of cold water will calm my nerves." She turned on the faucet to fill her glass. The water was luke warm. She checked the refrigerator. No water jug. No ice. "Junior!" She put her hands on her round hips. "Where did you get the cold water from?"

He looked at Secret and they laughed. "Promise you won't get mad, Ma."

She returned to the empty living room, hands still on her hips. "Boy, what did you do?"

"Everybody knows the coldest water in the house is in the toilet."

Chapter 2

The morning sun cast its strong rays through the living room. Secret sat in the middle of the floor with her lip poked out and arms crossed. "Why can't I stay home and go to work with you and Ma?"

GP tied his worn-down boots. "Because school is important. You don't take days off just because." He yelled up stairs, "Kitchie, you and Junior get it together. If we're not out this door in the next five minutes, the kids will miss the school bus, and we'll miss our bus, too." He went and sat down beside Secret on the floor. "The only time you don't want to go to school is when you have to ride the bus. Is someone bullying you?"

"Yeah, right! You should be asking if I'm bullying somebody. How soon before you get the car fixed this time?"

"I'm not sure if it can stand another fixing." He straightened her collar. "Secret, when did you start keeping secrets from me? If you don't talk to me, I can't help you."

She sighed. "It's these two girls—sisters—Tameka and Kesha Stevens. Everything is about money with them. They be bragging and showing off because they was in Bow Wow's video. I only see them at the bus stop and that's when they shine on me. They think they're so special because their father is a bank president. National City this, National City Bank that. They be having the hottest stuff, and I gotta go to school in this." She ran a hand over her skirt. "I got this last year, and I got this shirt on my seventh birthday. They don't forget nothing; they make sure everybody else remembers, too." She sucked her teeth and lowered her head. "When you drop us off at school, I

never see them because our grades are different."

"Secret, some people are blessed more than others."

"Does that mean they have to be mean and embarrass me because they are?"

"No. Some people are ignorant and don't know it." He put his arm around her neck. "What do you be doing while they're ... broadcasting their ignorance?"

"Shoot, I be getting smart right back."

"But you're the one with bruised feelings in the end."

She looked down at the floor. "Seems that way."

"I know being made to feel small or embarrassed isn't fun. People shine on me, too, when they can. I don't like it at all, but I learned something."

She looked at him with wonder.

"I found out that people will keep running their mouths as long as you fuel them with a response. Your mother and I are raising you to be tough, right?"

"What does tough have to do with it? I can beat them both, if they don't jump me."

"Tough goes beyond being physical, Secret. If you're tough enough to ignore them, they'll leave you alone and find someone else to bother. Someone they can get a response from."

Kitchie sauntered into the room with calculated grace, holding Junior's hand. "Let's go."

GP helped Secret up. "Would you ignore them for me today?"

"I guess." She threw her backpack over a shoulder. "Try and get the car fixed fast."

"I'll try. Promise that you'll be tough until I do."

"I promise."

* * *

"Daddy, there they go right there." Secret rolled her hazel eyes. "The two with the Cartier shades and Gucci sneakers."

GP did a quick examination of the two little girls across the street. He had to admit that the sisters looked like a million bucks. He kissed Secret's forehead. "Don't sweat it. Remember what I told you." He gave Junior a high-five and whispered in his ear. "Hold your sister down."

The children kissed their mother then headed across the street.

"Secret, hold your brother's hand." Kitchie thought about how much things had changed from the time her children were toddlers.

* * *

The folding hydraulic door hissed open as the Rapid Transit Authority bus halted in front of GP and Kitchie. They gathered their belongings and climbed onto the bus.

"Good morning." Kitchie flashed a bus pass and gasped. "Did you see that?" She pointed a manicured finger toward something outside the window.

The driver followed the direction of her index finger. With a sleight of hand she slipped GP the bus pass.

"See what, lady?" The driver turned back.

"That man over there almost got hit by a car." She went and took a seat.

GP climbed the last step, flashed the pass, then sat beside Kitchie.

By noon the hustle and bustle of downtown Cleveland was in full swing. Vendors of all varieties had their booths lining the sidewalk between East Fourth and East Eleventh Street of Euclid Avenue.

Kitchie's part of the hustle was powered by two sources: undue beauty, and charm. She was a people magnet. No man could resist the urge to regard her almond hue stretched with precision over a 5 foot 4 frame accessorized with a tiny waist-line, firm breast, and a thirty-four-inch curve that stuffed the backside of her jeans. Whenever she tossed her nut-brown hair and smiled, Kitchie would reel them in every time.

"Do you have this for a toddler?" Suzette Sanders held up a Street Prophet sweatshirt.

"We don't stock that particular item in children's sizes. But my husband can custom-make you one." Kitchie noticed a man standing near the costume shop's display window, and his blue eyes were undressing her. "If you give me your child's size and a way to reach you, I'll have it ready for you in a week."

"That'll be fine." Suzette dug a business card and pen from her purse. "The choice is yours. I'm a volunteer at the mission two blocks over."

"I know the place."

"I'm there every day until around this time." She finished writing on the back of the card. "You can stop by there or call me, and I'll come by and pick it up."

Kitchie took in the information on the card. "Real estate."

"In my spare time. The majority of my time is spent trying to leave the world better than I found it."

"I'll give you a call. I can remember this number by heart, prefix all fives." Kitchie shoved the card in her back pocket as Suzette strolled away.

Blue Eyes was still watching.

Kitchie rested both hands on her hips. "You can't get a proper look from over there." She flashed her admirer a smile. "Come closer so you can really see what I'm working with."

Blue Eyes stepped away from the costume shop positioned in front of her booth. "If I knew it was that easy, I would have come over here twenty minutes ago."

"Well now that you know it wasn't as difficult as you thought, let me help you make up your mind on what you should buy from me." She tossed her hair away from her face. "Now you wanna be the first to get this, because when the Street Prophet goes global, you wanna be able to say you were down with the Prophet from day one." She held a T-shirt up to Blue Eyes and saw GP approaching with a struck-out look etched on his face. "You look like an extra large. T-shirts are ten a pop, but for you ... I'll give you two for fifteen." She tossed her hair again and tucked a lock behind her ear. "And I'll throw in some Street Prophet stickers for the kids." She looked at GP in his Street Prophet shirt and air brushed jeans. "There goes a loyal supporter of the Prophet."

Blue Eyes glanced at GP with contempt then focused on Kitchie again. "I'm not interested in any of your Street Prophet merchandise. What does interest me is your number and a dinner date to discuss my e-zine endeavor."

"Forgive me, but it's a rule of mine not to give out my number on the first purchase. So what'll it be, two for fifteen?"

He laughed. "Sexiness and persistence. I like." He peeled off a twenty-dollar bill. "Where is that adorable girl I've seen around here a few times?"

"My daughter? Why?"

"I thought we could discuss this over dinner. I'm in the process of launching an internet magazine, and I would love to use your daughter as a model in an issue or two. She's beautiful; you two look just alike."

"Thank you. When you're ready, come back and my husband and I will see what you have and consider it."

"Keep the change." Blue Eyes took the shirts and blended into the sidewalk traffic.

Kitchie stuffed the money in her pocket and raised up on her toes to kiss GP. "What did they say?"

He began setting up the airbrushing equipment. "We can't get another extension. The bank's attorney said if I come up with the principal, penalty charges, and his fees, he'll stop the foreclosure proceedings. Other than that, foreclosure is final and we have five days to be out."

Kitchie pulled the bill from her pocket. "I've been standing out here all morning and this is what I made."

She waved the money. "Papi, you tried but this ain't panning out." She motioned to the Street Prophet items around the booth. "I know your dream is to give this character a life; I've supported you in everything. It's time to give it up because these twenty dollars can't pay our bills. We're past the point of do-or-die." She scrutinized the money closer. "Vete pal carajo!" She turned in the direction that she'd last seen Blue Eyes.

"What's the matter, Mami?"

"That bastard burned me." She passed GP a dollar bill with the corners of twenties glued over the numeral one.

A Korean woman hung the pay phone up next to GP's booth and it soon began ringing. She went to answer it.

"Excuse me, ma'am, that's for me." GP stepped away from the tables, unconsciously glanced at the street sign, then lifted the phone from its cradle. "Ninth Street Artwork, home of the Street Prophet. How may I help you today?"

"May I speak with Greg Patterson?"

"He's in the art room with a customer. Can I tell him who's calling?"

"Tracy Morgan. I'm an acquisitions editor for the Plain Dealer."

"Hold on a minute; I'll get him." GP covered the phone and gave Kitchie a thumb up.

A local bum strolled up with a cup in hand. "Spare some change, GP?"

He shoved Blue Eye's pseudo-twenty into the cup then placed the phone on his ear. "Greg speaking."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Patterson. I'm Tracy Morgan with the Plain Dealer. You filled out an application with us some time ago. Sorry I'm just getting back with you."

"It's cool. What's up?"

"Your sample work has impressed quite a few people in my department. If you're still interested, I'd like to interview you. I have a comic column available that I believe you'll do great in."

GP wanted to say hell yeah, instead he chose to keep things professional. "I'm interested; when would you like to meet with me?"

* * *

Kitchie had worked pedestrians moseying the sidewalk; GP had solicited various motorists whom had been delayed by a stoplight near the booth's curb. At the end of the day, they had earned a little over ninety dollars, which barely

covered the booth's weekly rental fee.

Due tomorrow.

"I sure hope they give you that column. It'll help out a lot, plus it'll get your foot in the door." Kitchie cleared a table, stuffing merchandise inside a duffle bag.

"Keep your fingers crossed." He packed the airbrushing guns.

A 2005 Chrysler 300C with mirror-tinted windows stopped at the red light near the booth. The car wasn't moving, but the chrome rims appeared to continue spinning.

The window was lowered.

"The starving artist who thinks he's gonna draw his way to financial freedom." Squeeze looked past GP and studied Kitchie's round ass. "Long time no see."

GP squatted some and leaned on the passenger door of the Chrysler. A gorgeous woman sat there snuggled with a dozen roses. GP nodded at the woman then addressed Squeeze. "It's been a while. What's up with it, Squeeze?" He admired the man's diamond-studded pinky ring. "I see you stepped it up a few notches from knocking over candy stores. What is it, you poison people for a living now?"

Kitchie was now standing beside GP, caressing his shoulder.

"I'll be the first to tell you that crime pays the bills. Candy stores was just a stepping stone, though. I'm the neighborhood loan officer now. Got fucked up credit, but need some cash? Holler at your boy." He stared at Kitchie's crotch, pulled her pants down with his eyes, and had his way with her. When he was done he turned his attention back to GP. "I see you still holding on to all that woman. I never could figure out why she chose you. I must not have been square enough."

"Don't act like I'm not sitting here," the woman holding the roses said.

Squeeze hit her with a backhand across the mouth. "Stay in your place."

A car horn sounded off. Squeeze ignored it and pulled out a business card. "Don't be bashful; if you ever need a loan, I'm sure I can work it out for an old friend." He gave GP the card then took a long-stem rose from his date's bundle. "Give this to Kitchie; I'm sure you haven't bought her any in a while." He winked at Kitchie.

The window was raised and Squeeze sped away.

"God, I can't stand him." Kitchie took the rose from GP and dropped it in the curbside drain.

* * *

"What are you gonna tell mom and dad?" Junior squashed a caterpillar that was crawling on the porch steps.

"Shoot, that I had to kick her butt. She put her hands on me first." Secret watched her brother scrape the bug from the bottom of his shoe. "You think Daddy will ever get us all that stuff we named last night?"

Junior ran the question through his head then shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know ... Nah, not all of it."

"Go in the house and get us something to drink."

"I ain't, you go."

Secret nudged him. "Scaredy-cat, you're too old to be afraid of the dark."

"I'm not thirsty. Go get your own drink."

"Chicken."

"You must be scared yourself."

She smirked. "No, I'm not."

"Go get something to drink, then, with your ugly—"

Kitchie pointed to the light pole while coming up the driveway. "What did I tell y'all hard-headed butts about being outside when them street lights are on?"

"It's more light out *here* than it is in *there*." Secret aimed a thumb toward the house.

Junior skipped to Kitchie. "Something's wrong with the lights. They broke, Ma."

Kitchie sat the duffle bag down, looked at the dark interior of their home, and began to cry.

* * *

GP climbed a steep hill that led to Cliffview Apartments. He never understood why they were called apartments when they ranked as no more than drug-infested projects.

He went into the building and held his breath to avoid inhaling the thick cocaine smoke as he passed a group of addicts smoking crack in the stairwell. He reached the third floor and pound on his best friend's door.

"Don't be banging on my shit unless you're in a hurry to get fucked up." The metal door squealed as Jewels yanked it open. "Oh, what's up, homeboy. I thought you were somebody coming to borrow some shit. A motherfucker asked me to borrow my dust pan yesterday."

Their fists touched in a greeting manner.

"I did come bumming."

Jewels turned away from the door. "You don't count."

She wore brush waves and dressed better than any man GP had

ever known. Beneath today's expensive urban wear was an average-looking woman. She was built like Serena Williams but much stronger.

She lay back on the weight bench and pumped 225 pounds effortlessly. "I didn't hear that raggedy-ass car of yours pull in the lot doing the beat box." She racked the iron after ten reps.

"You got jokes. It broke down yesterday. I went to check on it before I came here, but it was gone." GP plopped down on the designer couch in front of a McFadden and Whitehead album cover littered with marijuana.

Jewels sat up and stuffed a rolling paper with marijuana while looking at him from the corner of her grey eyes.

He shrugged. "I had to leave it in Lee's Chinese Food parking lot. Ignorant-ass Lee said it sat there too long, called my bucket an eyesore. Fake chink could've left my ride alone, you know?"

Jewels nodded and put a flame to the joint.

GP kicked a foot up on the coffee table. "He had it towed. Damn thing ain't worth more than it'll cost to get it out the impound and fixed."

"That's fucked up. Anything is better than footing it ... unless you enjoy a good walk." She passed GP the joint. "Lee do got more Black in him than me and you, fronting like he grew up in China."

"Rent-A-Center stuck me up yesterday. I got five days to pay the bank or the foreclosure is final." He choked on the smoke then released it. "And the list goes on. Junior wants a bike—which he deserves. Secret needs, and wants, new clothes to keep up with the Joneses. She's a good kid, too."

"You need some money, homeboy. It's cool to have big dreams and shit." She tugged at his Street Prophet shirt. "But you got a good wife and kids, too. They don't deserve to get dragged through a mud puddle while you chase your rainbow." She averted her gaze to her kick-boxing trophies lining the top of the entertainment center. "It's not about you no more, GP. You need to come up or do something to start contributing to your social security. Do your cartoons on the side. Fool, you ain't young no more; you got real responsibilities."

"Twenty-seven ain't old."

"It's too old to be dead broke." She pointed the remote at the flat screen. "You lucky I ain't never been on dick, if I had been the one to give you some pussy, for real, I'd do something vicious to you if you didn't take care of me and mine right." Jewels pulled out a nice-size bank roll. "How much you need?"

"I didn't come over here for money. I'll ask if I need it."

"You the one who said you came bumming. What your foolish ass want, then?"

"I have an interview tomorrow at the Plain Dealer. I need to borrow something to wear."

"Get out of here." She made a huge fist and tapped his chin. "Greg Patterson, Senior, a job interview? Hell must be below zero. Not only can you borrow something, you don't never have to bring it back." Jewels led him to her immaculate bedroom.

GP fell back on the oversized bed. "As nice as you put this place together, why don't you move somewhere ... more fitting, like Cleveland Heights or Shaker?"

"This stolen shit ain't nothing." She motioned toward her elaborate furnishings. "Wait till I come off with this account fraud. I'm strictly hood, though. Ain't no place like it. Damn suburbs are too quiet. I'll be forced to fuck up the noise ordinance." She slid the closet open and selected a garment bag. "This should fit you nice." She laid a tan Christian Lacroix suit beside him. "It hasn't been altered yet."

"You're really a jewel. I promise you, one day I'm gonna buy you a big diamond, just because I appreciate you."

She picked up a newspaper from her nightstand. "Check this out. Technology is a beast."

GP took a moment to examine the article. "FamilyGewels? Who the hell thought of some shit like this? Turn dead people into diamonds, come on."

"All they need is your ashes. I wouldn't mind coming back as a phat-ass diamond ring. But you don't have vision; the cemetery is full of dead motherfuckers. That ain't nothing but money."

"Forget about it." He tossed the paper on the nightstand. "We're not stealing dead people."

"Cremated pets work, too."

"No, Jewels."

"Buy yourself some shoes." She counted out a hundred dollars and put it in the suit pocket. "Listen, GP, if for some reason this interview doesn't work out, you know I'll set you up with a few ounces to get your pockets right."

"I'm not selling crack no matter how bad it gets. I can't believe you just tried me. Every time I see somebody on it, or hear about something happening because of it, I think—"

"About how your mother was a pipehead. How she gave birth to you in prison. You forgot that I know all about you and I'm tired of hearing it." She browsed through the clothes on

hangers. "When are you gonna stop feeling sorry for yourself and get over it? Anybody that had to go through what you have should be strong as a gorilla. Sorry I tried to help." She took out a collarless dress shirt matching the cream stitching of the suit. "On everything, if I come up with this money I need for this account hustle, I'm gonna do something real proper for you so you can handle your business."

"You stay in something." He pictured himself in the suit.

"What can I say but I'm a hustler. I'm thinking about changing my name to Dividends. All I need is one hundred grand, and it will yield me six hundred grand in a month's time—guaranteed. Why wouldn't I play at them odds?"

* * *

As GP neared his home, he slowed his pace and frowned upon the unusual sight. He scrutinized the other homes on his block and ruled out a power outage. *Maybe Kitchie put the kids to bed early.* Then, he noticed that the porch light was out.

That light never goes out.

He burst through the front door. "Kitchie!"

"We're upstairs."

He flicked the light switch at the bottom of the stairs.

Nothing happened.

He climbed the stairs and stood in the entrance of his bedroom. His family was bunched together on the bed. Two candles had burned down to their base, casting small flames from both nightstands.

GP dashed out of the back door and into the garage. He dumped his tool box onto the concrete. *Why is the world caving in on me all at once?* He grabbed a monkey wrench then went to the light meter that was fastened to the aluminum siding. With rage and frustration driving him, it only took four determined tugs to break the meter's lock.

"What are you doing?" Kitchie's brown eyes were plagued with concern.

He snatched the meter out. "What does it look like?" He removed the plastic breakers obstructing the electrical current. He shoved the meter back in place.

The house illuminated.

"There's no way in hell we're gonna sit in the dark looking crazy at each other. I'm doing the best with what I got to work with, and I'm not willing to let the little bit of food that we have in the fridge go bad."

Kitchie folded her arms and turned to go inside but paused long enough to see her meddlesome neighbor watching them from his kitchen window. Nosy old bastard. "Come in the house, GP,

and talk to your daughter." She trudged up the back stairs; GP followed.

He placed the wrench on the Formica countertop. "Who scratched you like that?" He leaned in closer examining Secret's bruised face.

"I tried to ignore her like you said, Daddy. But she pushed the back of my head like this." She reenacted by pushing the back of her own head.

Kitchie brushed the hair away from her face. "Now this child is suspended off the school bus for a week."

"I'm glad the lights is fixed." Junior came in the kitchen carrying a sneaker with a hole in its sole and waiving a piece of cardboard. "Ma, would you fix my shoe now?"

Chapter 3

Squeeze looked inside the deep trunk of a Mercedes at a frightened youngster dressed in army fatigues. "All of this is your brother's fault. It's a shame that you're caught in the crossfire, but some people have to learn the hard way." He closed the trunk and faced Hector Gonzales. "Take him to the country and lay low. If Miles don't cash in by tomorrow night, have fun with the kid and clean up your mess."

Hector chomped on a wad of chewing gum. "You should let me kill Miles and get it over with."

"Then who's gonna pay me?"

When Jap felt the car begin to move he hit the *Mark Home* button on his watch.

* * *

"Good afternoon, Mr. Patterson." Tracy Morgan stepped from behind her desk to shake GP's hand. She had no idea that GP was so handsome—braids hanging below his shoulders, a perfectly groomed goatee just the way she liked them. To have him in her department from time to time would suit her just fine. She took in his tan suit with detail. It hung on to his muscular frame with style. She gazed at his scuffed work boots and the melody in her head came to an abrupt stop. She pulled her hand away from his. "Please have a seat."

"Thanks for considering me for this column." GP eased onto a cozy chair facing her desk.

"Your artwork is captivating. May I have a look at your

portfolio?"

GP handed her a soft leather folder resting on his lap. "You'll find the first series of an underground comic book in there that I put out last year." He watched her facial expressions as she flipped through the drawings.

"This is great stuff. I'm in love with this Street Prophet character."

"I've been developing him since I was a kid. He's like an urban version of the Tales of the Crypt character, but he's more upbeat. A character that identifies with the Hip-Hop culture." He wiped the sweat of his palms onto his slacks. "The Street Prophet tells stories through the eyes of an all-wise Black man of morals and integrity. Stories that the reader can draw a positive experience from."

"I like the concept." She closed the portfolio. "I—"

"Ms. Morgan, I apologize for interrupting, but if you give me this column I'll be an asset to the Plain Dealer. I have at least three years of material ready to go. I'm a fast learner and I don't have an editing complex."

"The comic page could use a new Black face. It's a two-year contract that pays close to fifty thousand in six equal payments over the term of the contract."

GP smiled.

"Your strip will be syndicated. When we run the Street Prophet, he'll receive national exposure. But there are some minor changes that will need to be made."

"Cool. What kind of changes are we talking?"

She leaned forward and rested her forearms on the polished desktop. "Morals and integrity doesn't sell newspapers. The public wants the dirt, violence, and political corruption. I need you to portray the Street Prophet as challenging, outrageous, politically opinionated, offensive to the point of being censored. I need him to play the race card. I want most of the truth in this paper ..." She pointed to a newspaper that was encased in glass and mounted on the wall. "... to come from the Street Prophet's comic strip. He needs to be the voice that screams at the injustices designed by the government." She took a deep breath and smiled. "You pull this off and I promise you that this type of controversy will draw you more media attention than Aaron McGruder's *Boondocks*." She produced a contract from her desk drawer and pushed it toward GP. "All rights to the Street Prophet must be signed over to the Plain Dealer. You'll retain the artistic rights."

"I can create you a character to fit your requirements, Ms. Morgan. I'm sorry, but the Street Prophet is not your man."

* * *

"We're in no position for you to be turning down jobs, GP." Kitchie stuffed a T-shirt and some Street Prophet stickers in a bag then thrust it at a customer.

"I apologize for that." GP collected the money from the man.

"I don't believe you would do something so stupid and irresponsible."

"Get the hottest Street Prophet gear right here." Secret walked back and forth in the front of the booth holding up a T-shirt. "Special on customized airbrushing until one o'clock. Get your issue while it's hot. Don't be unhip and go home empty-handed." She had heard her parents solicit the crowd a thousand times.

"That child is s'posed to have her tail in school." An older woman lugging a Gap bag nudged a heavy-set woman wobbling beside her.

GP stuck his finger through Kitchie's belt loop and pulled her to him. "I'm not gonna argue with you in public. Period. They wanted me to sign over all the rights to the Street Prophet. I'm not about to give my life's work away like that."

"But it's okay for us to be out on the street? And don't forget that \$4,700 is a lot of money to come with in the next few days. GP, we don't have but a couple hundred to our name."

He took out a hundred dollars from his breast pocket. "Jewels gave me this to buy some dress shoes."

The pay phone rang.

"Get that, Secret." Kitchie leaned against the table.

"Ninth Street Artwork, home of the Street Prophet. Secret speaking, how can I help you?"

"Secret, baby, what's the deal?"

"Hey, Aunty Jewels. When you coming to get me?"

"We'll go catch a flick or something when I come back from New York."

"Ooh, bring me something back."

"You already know I am. Did your crusty father get the job?"

Secret glanced at her parents and saw Kitchie talking with her hands. "I don't think so. Him and Mommy trying to pretend like they not arguing, while I'm hustling."

"Why you ain't in school?" Jewels tied her wave cap on.

"Had to kick some butt. I put that move you taught me on this big-mouth girl named Kesha. I got suspended off the bus, and I didn't have a ride today."

"She knows what time it is now, right?"

"Yeah."

"You don't sound too sure. Let me hear you say you motherfucking right she know."

Secret put a hand over the mouthpiece. "You motherfucking right she knows what time it is."

"Give me that." Kitchie scowled at Secret then snatched the phone. "Jewels, I asked you not to influence my child to cuss. She's too grown for her own good as it is."

"How you know it was me?"

"I'm on to y'all. This stubborn husband of mine turned down a decent job today. He act like he doesn't understand we're having bread-and-butter nightmares."

"You got to be fucking joking. I just talked to that knucklehead yesterday about taking care of his business. Put him on so I can bite his head off."

Kitchie let the receiver hang. "Jewels wants to talk to you." She rolled her eyes at GP then walked over to Secret and popped her on the lips. "Watch what the hell you let come out your mouth, girl. Cuss again and you're gonna get your ass whipped."

A White man with solid grey hair, wearing a business suit, came to the booth. He studied the various Street Prophet merchandise. He shifted his head as though intrigued by the Prophet's appeal. "Who's the artist behind the character?"

Kitchie pointed at GP. "Can I bag that up for you?"

"Yes, yes. I'll take one of everything."

"What size shirt and pants would you like?"

Secret passed Kitchie a bag.

"Any size, it doesn't make a difference. I like this guy. I want some friends of mine to see him—"

"Mr. Lee, we must be going or we'll be late," another man in a suit and tie said.

"Just a moment, Hartford. You can wait for me in the car. I'll be along in a moment." Mr. Lee paid for his purchase.

GP watched the exchange from the pay phone. "Come on, Jewels, you know it ain't even like that. That broad had me confused. I created the Prophet; he's supposed to work for me, not the other way around."

"You even talk like that damn drawing is real. Man, you bugging."

"He's real to me."

"I gotta let this conversation go before you piss me the fuck off."

"You do that, then." GP waved at the owner of the costume shop.

"I'm taking Ndia on a boosting spree in the morning. Use your spare key if you need my ride. We're taking the bus."

"Where are you going?"

"The Big Apple. I called to see if you needed anything before I left. I'll be gone for about a week, but if it's good to me, I'll be longer."

"I'm good. Bring the kids something." GP stared at his battered boots. "I might need you to loan me the balance of whatever I don't come up with on this mortgage."

"How much is it?"

"Forty-seven hundred."

"What you got on it so far?"

"Including the hundred I got from you ... about three hundred. And whatever we make today."

"You already owe me your life, but I got your back. Hit me on my cell; I'll wire it if I have to."

"I'm gonna pay you back one day, Jewels, I swear. I'm gonna buy you that diamond, too."

"I know. I'll carve your Black ass up if you don't."

* * *

Trouble nudged his partner when he saw Jewels sauntering down the avenue with a sexy woman on her arm. "How a butch snag a fine broad like that?"

Dirty took a gulp of beer from a 40-ounce bottle. "I don't know. Jewels did her thing. She got the finest bitch in the hood. If I had her, I'd be out here flossing with her, too." They both watched Jewels and her beautiful companion close the distance.

Jewels slid her arm around Ndia's neck and pulled her closer. "Listen here, baby. I'm gonna let you do what you do when we touch down in New York. I can't afford for the order to get messed up like the last move did." She caressed the small of Ndia's back. "When I get this money together, we'll be batting in the major league. These chump-change licks will be history."

"Jewels, you know I'm gonna do my thing and give it my all." She looked at Jewels with devotion. Ndia was a tall woman with boney extremities—model extremities. She wouldn't have made it on a catwalk, though, because her buttocks and thighs were much too big. Just as Jewels liked them.

Jewels squeezed Ndia's back pocket and kissed her cheek. "That's what I wanted to hear."

"We should have drove; this is going to be a long walk."

"Don't start complaining. I can't stand that shit. I enjoy a good walk every now and then. Besides, you already know I don't drive unless I absolutely have to. So what's the point in bringing it up?"

"I don't know why you even bought a car. Nine—"

"What is a pretty woman like you doing with that Amazon?" Trouble stepped out of the foyer of a building. "Come spend a few hours with me and let me show you what a real man's dick feel like. I know you're tired of the rubber she's packing."

Dirty stepped outside laughing as Jewels's face hardened.

Jewels turned her apple cap to the back. "I'm not with no disrespectful bullshit. These motherfuckers about to make me hurt something."

"Forget them clowns ... let's go." Ndia pulled on Jewels's wrist but failed to move the solid muscle.

Trouble leaned against the building and put a foot on the wall. "Ugly bitch, you ain't tough. Don't act like it ain't a pussy in them jeans." He touched fists with Dirty.

Jewels snatched away from Ndia. "They got me fucked up." She was swift as she closed the gap between her provokers. She staggered Trouble with a head butt across the bridge of his nose.

Dirty had a change of mind when she yanked a nickel-plated .45 from beneath a throwback jersey and pointed it at him.

She spat a razor from her mouth, caught it with her free hand, and held it to Trouble's throat. "What you say to me? I don't think I quite heard you right." She pushed the razor just enough to draw blood. "Go on, tough punk, fix your mouth and say it again."

"Jewels, baby, let's get out of here. They were just talking shit."

Jewels refused to take her eyes off of Trouble. "Check these lames for pistols."

"Jewels, come on."

"Do what the fuck I said!"

Trouble pressed his head against the brick building as hard as he could in an attempt to ease the blade's pressure on his Adam's Apple.

Ndia found a Saturday Night Special on Dirty and a Beretta .22 in Trouble's back pocket.

"Now what I want you lames to do is apologize to my lady for being disrespectful."

Dirty was moving too much for Jewels's comfort. She pulled the trigger and blasted a chunk of brick inches away from his ear.

"I'm sorry." Trouble was as still as paralysis.

"That you are." Jewels pushed the blade. "Sorry for what?"

"Being disrespectful."

Jewels stroked the handle of the .45 with a thumb and averted her piercing gaze to Dirty. "Something wrong with your noise-maker?"

"I apologize for disrespecting your woman."

"Now if you poor-excuses-for-men will excuse us, we'll keep minding our business." She considered something else. "On second thought, you look like you're gonna need a constant reminder of how you should address ladies." With one motion, she had left behind a cut across Trouble's cheek.

Dirty's heart beat quickened. The bones beneath his hips trembled. His eyes bulged. "Goddamn, Jewels. What ... Why did you have to cut him?" He spoke over his ringing ears.

After hearing the word cut, the left side of Trouble's rugged face began to burn. He covered the burning sensation with a hand. "You cut my face! On everything I love, you started some shit that I ain't never gon' let go."

"Shut the fuck up before I slice your bitch ass again," she spoke through clenched teeth with a scowl on her face. "Pussy, you don't stand a chance in hell fucking with me. Your soft ass better recognize." Jewels backed away and collected their guns from Ndia.

Trouble and Dirty watched as Jewels threw the first gun up on the roof of a nearby vacant building. When she launched Trouble's .22, her cell phone popped from her waistband and fell between two bags of garbage. She put her arm around Ndia and continued down the avenue.

Blood oozed between Trouble's fingers. "I'll be damned if I let that bitch get away with carrying me like I'm some chump. On my dead mama, Jewels is gonna feel me. That's my word." He tapped Dirty. "Go see what she dropped."

"You're gonna need a gang of stitches" He stalked off toward the garbage bags. *I'm glad it was his ass and not mine.*

* * *

Bright and early the next morning, a taxicab driver leaned on his horn outside of Jewels's apartment.

She lifted the window and stepped out onto the fire escape. "I'm coming dammit! Chill with the noise-maker." She pulled herself back inside. "Ndia, let's go before this impatient punk leaves."

Ndia came out of the bedroom carrying a pillow.

"What are you doing?"

"It's a long ride. Them Greyhound seats get uncomfortable after you sit on them a while."

They headed to the door. Jewels hesitated. "I still can't figure out where I lost my phone?"

The horn blew.

"Fuck it, come on. I don't need no one keeping tabs on me anyway." She patted Ndia's ass then picked up their luggage.

"Let's ride."

* * *

Trouble sat behind the steering wheel of an old Buick, picking at the stitches in his face. He frowned as he watched Jewels and Ndia get chauffeured away by Yellow Cab. After a few moments of thinking, he picked up the cell phone from his lap and pressed redial.

The phone rang twice.

"Ninth Street Artwork, home of the Street Prophet. Kitchie speaking, how may I help you?"

Trouble terminated the call, climbed out of the car, and made his way over to a man who was constantly peeping out of a stairwell door. "Slow out here this morning, huh?"

The frail man nodded his unkempt head. "Yeah, I ain't got high since last night. It'll pick up soon, though. The banks just opened and welfare checks is circulating." He checked out Trouble's urban attire and assumed that he was a go-getter. "Don't you hustle at the bottom of Cliffview? I've seen you before."

"You know the butch that just left?"

"Jewels? Sure, I know her. Whose asking?"

Trouble dug in his crotch and pulled out a sack of crack rocks.

The man's eyes widened.

Trouble took out a tiny rock. "How would you like to be my main man and make one of these every day?"

"What I gotta do?" He held out his hand.