



Forever a Hustler's Wife: A Novel (Nikki Turner Original)

By Nikki Turner

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The high priestess of the hood, Nikki Turner, is back with the novel fans have been feenin' for: the sequel to her #1 bestselling novel, A Hustler's Wife.

Des, Virginia's slickest gangsta, is about to become a dad when he is charged with the murder of his own attorney. But with Yarni, his gorgeous wife (and a brilliant lawyer), now calling the shots, Des isn't going back to the slammer without a fierce fight. Even with the heat on, Des manages to take his game to the next level and finds a new hustle, one that will allow him to possess the three things all major players desire: money, power, and respect. He becomes a preacher. Reluctantly, Yarni stands by her man as he trades in his triple beam scale for a Bible and a Bentley and makes his Church of the Good Life Ministry a welcoming place for all sinners to step up to the altar.

But when Des's nephew is killed in the high-stakes heroin trade and Des learns that someone close to him okayed the hit, the dyed-in-the-wool gangsta sets aside the Bible for the gospel of the streets—even if it means risking the one person who's always had his back.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Yarni Taylor, a successful lawyer who has dedicated herself to helping "minority men caught up in the wrath," fights to keep her hustler husband out of prison in this anemic tale of treachery and dedication among the rich and ghetto-fabulous. After spending 10 years in prison for a murder he didn't commit, Des Taylor is pardoned, released and makes Yarni a wife and a mother. Des also returns to a life of hustling, and after two years of freedom is framed for another murder. Yarni swears to exonerate the man to whom she has devoted her life. As the couple work to keep Des free, they also contend with a myriad of minidramas—an attempted rape, a kidnapping and the murder of a loved one. Turner (*A Hustler's Wife*) spares no cliché in this thin story (the bling quotient is staggering), and readers may feel frustrated at the author's constant and simplistic explication of her characters' thoughts and actions. Fans of Turner's earlier works may find something to appreciate, but the uninitiated will have serious trouble. (Apr.)

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About the Author

"Forever a Hustler's Wife is one of the most-anticipated sequels of this century. Nikki Turner has once again taken street literature to the next level, further proving that she is indeed 'The Queen of Hip Hop Fiction.'"
—Zane

"Always surprising, Nikki Turner's prose moves like a Porsche, switching gears from tender to vicious in an instant."

—50 Cent

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Chapter 1

A Million Damn Dollars

As Yarni Taylor entered the old courtroom and searched for a seat toward the front, she couldn't help but overhear clients arguing with their attorneys as well as the chitchat of folks waiting for their loved ones' cases to be heard. "I wish they'd hurry up and get this started, because I got to go to work," one person said. Another asked, "So you think that Boo-boo gon' come to court and testify on Freddie Boy?"

She tried to control the sway of her ample behind as she walked down the aisle, but all eyes were on her. Yarni wasn't sure if it was the confidence she exuded or her exotic looks—almond-shaped hazel eyes, high cheekbones, and caramel skin so smooth you wanted to lick it—which were complemented by her cream-colored Tahari suit that, like a little red Corvette going a hundred miles per hour on the highway, hugged every curve. Diamond studs glistened in her ears, and a huge six-carat rock weighed down her left hand. She wasn't a stranger to the courts. A successful attorney, she had won many cases in the very room in which she was now taking a seat. This time, though, Yarni wasn't there to defend a case.

If it wasn't for all the bad luck, there would be no luck at all, Yarni thought as she sat there trying to be strong, holding back the tears that threatened to spill from her eyes. The system had railroaded her man, Des, once again. The last time was almost fifteen years ago, but no matter the outcome, just like before, she was

going to hold her man down through it all: rain, sleet, hail, or sunshine . . . bad, good, happy, or sad . . . win, lose, or draw. One thing was for certain, and two things were for sure: She had Des's back, and he had hers—through hell or high water.

When Yarni first met Des, he was already a street legend, and she was just a high school girl who had been raised by a single mother. Her mother had given Yarni every opportunity that a girl like her could ever want, all in hopes of her growing up to be a strong, independent woman, but once she met Des, Yarni didn't care about anything her mother had given her or instilled in her or any of it. Yarni and Des fell in love with each other hard, but their perfect relationship was put through the test of fire when Des was arrested and convicted for a murder he didn't commit. For ten years after that, Yarni rode for her man, never losing hope, and eventually got his sentence overturned. Yarni later became a lawyer to help other minority men caught up in the wrath like Des had been. And now here they were again, facing another murder rap. Yarni sat on the edge of her seat while waiting for her husband's case to be called. But first, another defendant was up for a bail bond hearing, temporarily distracting Yarni from thoughts of Des.

“Samuel Johnson, you are being charged with three counts of murder, threatening a witness, tampering with state's evidence, conspiracy to commit murder, shooting in an occupied dwelling, possession of a firearm while a convicted felon,” the court clerk stated as she looked up at the man standing in front of her before taking a deep breath and continuing, “use of a firearm in commission of a felony, kidnapping, torture, abduction, malicious wounding, felonious assault, and use of a firearm near a school zone.”

Yarni thought the clerk should have taken a bow after putting her vocals through so much work. Instead, the clerk looked out into the packed courtroom, which was so quiet you could have heard a mouse pissing on the carpet. The sheer number of charges forced every single spectator to direct his or her undivided attention to this particular case, curious as to how one person could have so many indictments against him. Damn, I haven't heard anybody with that many charges since the Briley brothers, Yarni thought, recalling a 1979 case involving brothers that were sentenced to death for an eight-month string of gruesome murders in Richmond.

“Your Honor, we're here to ask for a bond for Mr. Johnson,” the defense attorney said. “He's a father and a Little League coach.” The attorney walked around the oak table where he and his client were sitting and approached the judge at the front of the courtroom. “He has always lived here. His roots are here, Your Honor.”

The judge's hands were folded as he glared at the defendant through his glasses, which sat on the tip of his nose. Samuel Johnson fidgeted in his orange jumpsuit, his eyes never meeting the judge's stern gaze. Just looking at the man, Yarni felt that Mr. Johnson was being taken for a ride. Instead of the nice trim or touch-up on the jailhouse braids most attorneys made sure their male defendants had before appearing in court, Samuel's hair was in a nappylike 'fro. He hadn't shaved, his goatee was raggedy, and it didn't help that his fair skin accentuated his dark shades of hair. He turned around to glance into the audience and to make matters worse, his gray eyes were blinding, like sun rays around his pupils, making him appear almost devil-like.

The first thing I would have done was buy that man a pair of brown contact lenses, Yarni shook her head at her thoughts.

The defense attorney was trying to pretend to have confidence, but because of the number of charges, he knew he really didn't have a leg to stand on. He hadn't even done the proper research to prepare for the hearing. What was the use? “Your Honor, he isn't a flight risk.” The attorney went through the motions.

“I beg to differ,” the feisty prosecutor interjected, rising from his chair. “These are very serious charges, Your Honor. With serious consequences. There’s no reason for the defendant not to run.”

The judge looked at the defendant and then at his defense attorney and bluntly said, “No bond. Next case, please.”

The defense attorney turned, walked back behind the table, and began gathering his paperwork. “I’m sorry,” he said, unable to look his client in the eye. “I did all I could do.” When his client did not respond, he shrugged his shoulders and added, “I don’t know what you were expecting. With all those charges, you were fooling yourself thinking that a bond would come out of this.”

“I was expecting what the fuck you promised,” Samuel snapped. “You promised me a bond, motherfucker. You sold me and my girl a fucking dream.”

The bailiff was slowly walking over to escort Samuel John- son out of the courtroom, and before anyone could stop him, Samuel spit on his attorney. Next, he drew back and punched his attorney in the eye. The lawyer fell to the floor holding his face. Snatching up a chair, Samuel screamed, “Succckkk my dick!” and hurled the chair at the judge. It missed, but as the judge was running for his chambers, his black toupee fell on the ground.

For a few minutes the courtroom was completely out of control, and although the deputies were trained to handle situations like this, they were shocked themselves and very slow to react. Two of the three deputies looked like they had been eating a few too many Twinkies, which was probably why they weren’t too swift on their feet.

Samuel charged toward his attorney, who had gotten up and was trying to make it to the door. Unfortunately, the attorney wasn’t the track star he used to be, so he wasn’t fast enough either. Samuel grabbed him by the neck and hit him three times in the back of the head before the deputies got a hold of him and pulled him away. The bystanders were in a frenzy. While Yarni didn’t agree with all of the defendant’s actions, she could understand his frustration. His lawyer appeared to have given up on him.

There was a brief recess not only to get the courtroom back in order but also to get the judge’s toupee back on and straight. Once all was calm, the bailiff announced the next case: “The state of Maryland versus Desmond Taylor.”

Yarni’s heart raced and skipped a few beats when the deputy sheriff brought in Des. He, too, had on a bright orange jumpsuit, but Des’s dark chocolate complexion, compact muscular body, and swagger made him stand out. Yarni’s heart melted as her eyes met Des’s for the first time in more than three weeks. The last time she saw him was when he jetted out the hospital room after the birth of their first child, Desi Arnez Taylor.

“Your Honor, this defendant is being charged with the murder of his former attorney,” the prosecutor stated. “We recommend denying bail because this man is a serious flight risk.”

“Excuse me, Your Honor, but the prosecutor is mistaken,” said Mark Harowitz, Des’s new high-profile attorney. He was a commanding presence in his custom-made navy pinstripe suit and elaborate bow tie. His cockiness let everyone in the courtroom know that he was not some public pretender who was on the same payroll as the prosecutor. It wasn’t hard to imagine that his bank account held quite a few more zeroes than the judge’s.

“Desmond Taylor has a stable residence in Richmond, Virginia, where he was born and attended college,” Harowitz said.

The prosecutor leaned back in his chair, placed his folded hands over his stomach, and countered, “And Virginia was the place where he served a ten-year prison sentence for murder, Your Honor.”

Harowitz cleared his throat then calmly voiced, while holding his hundred-dollar ink pen, “A murder that he did not commit and for which he received an unconditional pardon.” He turned to look at the prosecutor. “He was robbed of ten years of his young life.”

“How ironic is it that two years after he is released from prison his attorney, who Mr. Taylor feels railroaded him, is murdered in cold blood,” the prosecutor responded. And we have evidence that the defendant was less than forty miles from the scene of the crime on the same day.”

Harowitz stood and looked directly at the judge. “Technically this evidence as well as any mention of prior crimes is inadmissible in a bail hearing. We’re here only to prove that he isn’t a flight risk, which he isn’t, and to determine what is a reasonable amount for a bond,” he said calmly.

“My client has strong ties to the community. He has a newborn daughter and a large family that loves and supports him. He and his wife have a lucrative luxury-car dealership, which he manages himself. His wife is a very successful attorney, who is here today in the courtroom.” He turned and briefly made eye contact with Yarni; she offered a small smile to the judge before looking at Des. Des smiled at her, and her heart melted again.

“We’re not here to discuss his wife,” the prosecutor said in an irritated voice. “We’re here to discuss your client’s checkered past.”

Harowitz was about to let loose a verbal onslaught on the prosecutor, but the judge finally stepped in. “Sidebar.”

Both attorneys approached the judge’s bench.

“Fellas, this isn’t a boxing match.”

“Your Honor.” The prosecutor jumped in, determined to have the first say. “I’m making it known that this guy is an ex- offender and doesn’t deserve a bond.”

“Ex-offender?” Harowitz said. “No. He was railroaded in the previous case, and by law he’s indeed innocent until proven guilty.”

“Which I intend to do,” the prosecution said, lacking conviction.

“I’d like to see that happen when the only evidence you have is a measly gas receipt charged to his company credit card from some station forty-eight miles away from the murder scene. On top of that, any one of his twelve employees could have used the card to purchase gas. Where are your witnesses? Your exhibits?” Harowitz looked at the prosecutor, who seemed to be tongue-tied and unable to respond. “Cat got your tongue? Or better yet, did a law change and someone forgot to send me the memo? My client deserves a reasonable bail.”

The prosecutor looked to the judge, his Shriner buddy, for some help. "Your Honor, the only reasonable bail in this case is no bail."

"I hear you both, and you both have good arguments." The judge sighed. "Bail is going to be set at a million dollars."

"Your Honor!" Harowitz exclaimed. "A million dollars? That's a bit excessive, don't you think?"

"That's my ruling. It is what it is. Let's not forget that I'm the judge, and I make the final decisions in this courtroom." With that, he struck his gavel once and signaled with a nod for the attorneys to take their places back behind their tables.

"Thank you, judge," the prosecutor said as he walked away with a smile of victory on his face and a bounce in his step. Although his Shriner brother had set a bond, he had still, in effect, ruled in his favor. As far as the prosecutor and the judge were concerned, no black man besides an athlete or entertainer could ever make that kind of bail.

Both attorneys positioned themselves behind their respected tables facing the judge. When Des observed the big smile plastered on the prosecutor's face, his first thought was that he was conquered, but his gut told him differently, and his gut was usually right. Harowitz didn't give him any indication of what was said during the sidebar, so Des just focused in on the judge as he began to speak.

"Bail will be set at one million dollars cash."

Chills went up Yarni's spine, but she tried not to let the ruling affect her. She focused only on what the judge had to say. "The rules on this bail are as follows: You can put up one million dollars cash, or if you own a piece of property valued at least three times the one million dollars, that can be put up to secure your bail."

At least there was a bond, so Yarni knew there was hope. She struggled to hold back her tears. She didn't want to break down, not now at least, not in the courtroom. Des gazed over at her as he whispered in his attorney's ear. Yarni quietly moved her lips to say "I love you," and nodded, offering him a small smile, which Des returned.

Because of the last episode, it seemed the bailiff was moving much faster. Before Des was even finished speaking to his attorney, the bailiff pulled him away. A few minutes later, after Harowitz gathered his case files, he made his way outside the courtroom to where Yarni was waiting.

"So, a million dollars?" Yarni said as he walked over to her.

"I'm sorry, Yarnise. I wish it wasn't so—"

"I know. You did really well in there. We both know that it could have been so much worse."

"The prosecutor is a complete asshole, and he knows he doesn't have a case. The bail is so high only because they're the good ol' boys."

"I kind of figured that." She paused. "For the record, Mark, I will help with any research that you need. I really appreciate this. I can't tell you how much."

“Oh, I know you will, but I’m going to put my best foot forward. I’ll handle this. You just take care of that little baby girl of yours.”

Yarni’s face lit up at the mention of her daughter. “Taking care of my little Desi is mandatory, but I will not kick back and let my husband fall victim to this system again. I can’t. I won’t,” Yarni stated with determination. “I’m simply not going to let that happen.”

“I know,” Harowitz said, placing his hand on Yarni’s shoulder. “We’ve just got to be on top of everything, and it starts with a million dollars.”

“I know.” She glanced down and then looked back up at him and repeated, “A million dollars, huh?”

He nodded slowly and echoed, “A million dollars. I know it’s a lot of cash, but I think it would help us prepare for the case if Des was out of jail.”

“He won’t be in jail,” Yarni assured Mark.

A million dollars wasn’t going to stop Yarni from having Des with her. Des was her all—he was her everything, her world, her heart, her mind, her soul, her husband, her baby’s father. A million dollars, though a lot of money, was not enough to stand in the way of her being with her man.

“Keep me posted. I’ll call you tomorrow to check on you.”

“Thanks, Mark,” she said as he started to walk away.

“Oh,” he said, snapping his fingers as if remembering something. “Desmond said to tell you to come visit him before you make any moves.” The word moves sounded funny coming from Mark. “He says he really needs to talk to you.”

“Okay. Thanks again for everything.”

“I’ll be in touch,” he said over his shoulder, heading for the elevators.

Yarni went directly to the jail to try to see Des, only to be informed that her visitation rights with him were revoked because years ago she had been a convicted felon. With the help of a lawyer she had worked for, her record had been expunged before she went to law school and now she was a working attorney, but no matter how many ways she tried to explain, they still refused to let her see Des. Yarni finally realized that there was no hope in getting through to them. She didn’t want to get all worked up, so she thanked them and left, but she wouldn’t give up. She knew that there was always more than one way to skin a cat. And she was about to skin one alive.

Yarni exited the jail and conjured up her plan over a leisurely lunch. The reality was that no man, woman, or child, no bars, walls, or fences, and damn sure no underpaid, paper-pushing deputy sheriff was going to keep her away from seeing her man. She made a few phone calls to kill time until after 2:30 that afternoon, when the shifts changed at the jail. At 3:05, she returned with her briefcase in hand.

“Yes, ma’am,” greeted the female guard with short dreds, looking her over. “Can I help you?”

“Yes,” Yarni replied. “Attorney visit with Samuel Johnson.” She handed the guard her business card.

After looking over the card, the guard said, "Just one moment, ma'am."

Yarni smiled.

"It's nice to see a sistah as an attorney," the guard said.

"Thank you," Yarni said aloud in a gracious tone, but to herself she said, I am so glad that the new millennium Angela Davis is working today. She looked up at the ceiling and smiled.

It only took a few minutes for them to point her to the visiting room where Samuel was waiting for her. When she walked into the room, he looked her over and rolled his eyes and asked her with much attitude, "Did that bullshit-ass attorney of mine send you?" He didn't try to hide the attitude in his voice.

"No, he didn't," Yarni answered his question. "Do you really think he's thinking about you right now? I mean really?" Yarni pouted and tilted her head sideways as if he had just made the dumbest comment of the year.

"He just ought to be thinking about my black ass. My peoples paid that motherfucker top dollar."

"You actually paid him money?" She burst into a roar of laughter. "You can't be serious. I would have sworn that he was court-appointed."

He looked up at her and said with hostility, "Well, who the hell are you, and what the fuck do you want?" Still disgruntled, he asked, "You police? Because if you are, I ain't do shit, and I ain't telling a motherfucking thing. So, beat yo' feet, baybee."

Yarni chuckled a bit, but she knew she had to throw professionalism out the window and get straight gully with this guy. "Look, I'm not trying to rob you with or without a gun. I'ma say it like this because Dougie couldn't have said it any better, 'Cut that zero and get with this hero.' "

He laughed. "It's going to take more than a pretty face to beat my charges."

"Look, I'm the cream of the crop. I've worked for and with the best, and have beaten, the best."

Samuel leaned back, looked Yarni up and down, then smacked his lips. "You ain't no lawyer. Shawdy, go 'head wit' dat bullshit and stop playing wit' me."

"It isn't a joke," Yarni said in a very serious tone, leaning forward. "I don't play games. I win games. I had a baby just three weeks ago. You think I got time to come down here and play games with you when I could be at home with my baby?"

Samuel gave Yarni the once-over again and began nodding while tilting back on two legs of his chair. "What can you do for me that the other attorney can't?"

"Can't or ain't? Which one? Because there's a difference," Yarni said.

He looked at her and, without answering, let out a slight chuckle.

"Look, the bottom line is that your attorney is bull-motherfucking-shit, okay?" She continued to let him

know what was real in the field. "All he's going to do is plead you out." She moved her head back and forth and let the words roll off her tongue as if they were a song. "He's going to come to visit you all of a total of thirty minutes, if that, throughout the entire case. He'll spend five minutes talking to the prosecutor, and, before you know it, you gonna be standing in front of the judge, your family, and your loved ones saying the word guilty to a lesser charge in exchange for about forty to fifty years."

Samuel was shocked that Yarni was giving him the rundown like she was doing, so he couldn't help but listen as she made him buy into her vision. She saw she had his attention and continued to lay it on thick.

"Then the next thing you know," Yarni continued, "you look at yourself in the mirror and that fro you got now will be long processed curls, and you'll be answering to the name Samantha." He was about to say something smart to her, but she cut him off before he could even get started. "I know you ain't going out like that, but, brother man, forty years is a long time for you to try to rumble. You a light-skinned dude, small and frail, too. You know how it goes. You been down before. You're not going to the boot camp this time, so this time it's straight to the big house, my darling."

He nodded and listened to her because he could tell she was a woman who knew some things, most likely some things that could help him.

"And how would you be different?" he asked, still slightly doubtful. "What could you do?"

"I wouldn't take any shit, and I'd come out fighting." She gave him a compassionate stare. "If there is a way for you to be exonerated, I'll find that way."

"Look, I ain't got no mo' money. That other jive-ass lawyer got it all."

"Don't worry about that. You can pay me in another way."

He got quiet and put his chair back down on all fours. "How?" he asked with a confused look on his face. "I just told you I don't have no money."

"I'm going to have you be the go-between for me and my husband. He's the guy whose case was heard right after yours today in court. You're going to need to let him know that I'm your attorney now. Also tell him to make sure that he calls me at eight o'clock tonight. Can you handle that?"

"Yeah, but what about if your husband gets out? Are you going to forget about me?"

"A deal is a deal: My word is law and my word is my bond. And your deal is more than a fair deal."

He thought for a minute before asking, "That's all I gotta do?"

"Yes, that's all you have to do. Now, is it a deal?"

She extended her hand. After hesitating for a moment, he smiled and shook Yarni's hand.

She grabbed her briefcase and stood up. "There's one more thing."

"What is it?" Samuel asked, knowing this was too good to be true.

“I need to know that I can trust you.”

“You can, like my life depends on it.”

“Don’t talk to anyone but me about anything regarding your case. There are a lot of people trying to make deals to get out of jail.”

He smiled. “I know what’s up.”

“Anything we discuss is between us. Don’t talk to any cell mates, homeboys, girlfriends, baby mommas—none of that. They’re all suspect and can be broken.”

“I gotcha.”

“Now, let me warn you. This is going to be an uphill battle. I’m going to start by flooding them with paperwork. I’m going to file for a change of venue, as well as a discovery motion, and I’m going to continue to push a ton of paperwork; they are going to get intimidated. They hate that. Prosecutors have small offices and don’t have the time to respond to large briefs,” Yarni informed her newfound client. “All in all, if that doesn’t stop them, then I’ll just put my gloves on and box it out with them.”

“I hear you, Layla Ali.” Samuel smiled, glad to have this woman as his attorney.

“No, I’m a heavyweight.” Yarni winked.

Once their visit was over, she went back to the front desk, where there was now another guard working.

Thinking quickly, Yarni said to the guard, “You can send in my other client now.”

“And who is he?” the guard asked, too busy looking at a tabloid magazine to pay much attention to her.

“Desmond Taylor.”

“Okay, no problem,” he said.

“Thank you,” Yarni said, then returned to the same room she had just left.

Before long, Des walked into the room. A huge grin swept across his face when he saw Yarni sitting there.

News always traveled quicker than a wildfire in the penal system. Des had heard about her first failed attempt to see him, but he knew that Yarni would figure out a way to come see him somehow. She always did and always would. Yarni stood when she saw Des and ran over to him. He embraced her with a tight hug, and as soon as he did, she couldn’t fight her battle anymore, the tears just poured from her eyes and onto his shoulder.

“I love you, baby,” Yarni said as Des kissed her on her head and rubbed her hair, trying his best to comfort her.

“I love you, too,” he replied, and Yarni lifted her head to look him in his eyes. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good, now that I’ve gotten a chance to talk to you. How are you and my baby girl doing?”

“She’s good, just big and fat.” Yarni gave a dry chuckle, but Des could tell it was only a way for her to keep from crying again.

“Baby, I’m sorry for leaving y’all like that.”

“No problem. I know you’re married to the game,” she said, unable to resist taking a shot at him for leaving her and their baby at the hospital to take care of business.

He looked into her eyes and grabbed her hands, pulling her even closer to him. “No, baby, I’m married to you and our baby girl.”

Yarni sighed and walked away. “Look, baby, this isn’t even the time for us to get into this.” Frustrated with the whole situation, she put her hand on her forehead. “We’ll discuss this when you get out of here. Right now, let’s focus on making that happen.”

“Look, I know we got over a million stashed,” Des said, following her, “but that is what they’re waiting for. We ain’t giving them no million dollars.”

“Oh, I know that,” Yarni agreed, letting him know that they were on the same page. “I already made the phone call about the deed.”

“I knew you would. That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Look, I got too much at stake here—my baby girl, you, my freedom. Shit, I just did ten years and finally got things falling sweet like I want ‘em.” He maintained eye contact with her. “And for real, I know you probably think that I had something to do with what they’re charging me with—”

“No, baby, and for real, it doesn’t matter to me. I’m on your team ’til death do us part.” She instinctively placed the palm of her hand over to the left side of her chest. Underneath her hand and the fabric of the designer blouse that she wore was a tattoo of a bejeweled seven-pointed crown, engraved at the top of the headpiece were the words Death Before Dishonor. And the inscription at the base was the name of the only man she had ever loved: Des.

She knew something wasn’t right, and all bulletins were reporting to Des, but whether he did or didn’t kill his attorney, that wasn’t her issue. She cared only about him and the life they had together. Fuck the evidence, the prosecutor, the crooked judicial system; screw the politics and politricks of it all—he was her only concern.

“I know, but I want you to know I didn’t do it.”

“I know,” she said, nodding. Des caught a brief glimpse of doubt in her eyes and could tell that even though she really wasn’t 100 percent sure, she was riding with him anyway.

“Look, like I said, I got too much to lose, and before you sign to get me out, you gotta know that once I walk out of here, it ain’t no turning back. They gonna take the house if I can’t prove my innocence. I’m not going through what I did the last time.”

“I know.” Yarni knew that Des would run rather than sit in jail again for a crime he didn’t commit. And as a

result they would lose their dream house.

“You sure you gon’ be able to handle that?”

“Boo, I don’t give a fuck about a gotdamn house. We’ll just get another one. You know I’m fine as long as we’re together. It’s just when we’re not together; that’s when I lose it.”

“I’m just saying, we worked hard getting that house built and decorated, and I know how much you love it.”

“Fuck that house,” Yarni said with sincerity. “It’s just a house. Like I said, it can be replaced.” She touched his cheek and trailed her fingers down his chin, drawing his face close to her, “But you, my darling . . . you can’t.”

He nodded and smiled inside. He knew that if anything was stable in his life, it was Yarni.

“Besides,” Yarni continued, “if I had to sell ten houses and the clothes on my back, then guess what? I wouldn’t leave you in here.”

“That’s why you’re my wife,” Des said, planting a kiss on Yarni’s lips.

“So we’re not going to burn this out,” Yarni explained to Des about the visit. “You know I had to finagle my way in here.”

“You still want me to call you at eight o’clock?”

“Damn, ol’ boy told you already, huh?”

“Which reminds me: What I tell you about bringing stray dogs home?” Des joked.

“You know I’m always trying to fix a wounded puppy.”

“I know, and you gon’ do it, too. I got confidence.”

“Thanks, baby.”

“Oh, and he didn’t do that shit. His man did it.”

“Huh?” Yarni asked, slightly puzzled.

“Your client. He didn’t do what they’re accusing him of. His man did it.”

“For real?” Yarni said, staring at him.

“Jailhouse gossip. He was with the people that did it, but he was passed out drunk in the car. He had nothing to do with it.”

“Good looking out.” She stood up and gave Des a hug and a quick, juicy kiss. “The paperwork should be done in twenty-four hours, and I’ll be back here to pick you up.”

“Make sure you bring Desi when you come.”

“I will.” Yarni smiled as she left Des to go watch the clock and await making his phone call.

Yarni pulled into her long winding driveway at 7:30 p.m. She didn’t go by Des’s mother’s house to pick up Desi because she didn’t want to take a chance on being late and missing Des’s eight o’clock call. After parking her platinum Bentley coupe in the driveway beside Des’s money-green Bentley coupe, she walked into the lavish home she shared with Des and their daughter. Yarni couldn’t help but take a moment to admire the columns, the archways, the beautiful decor, and the furniture, knowing that it might all be pulled from under her feet. The more she roamed from room to room, the more the possibility of the loss of her house bothered her. If it came down to doing more time or running, she knew what choice Des would make.

For all the time she had lived in this house, she had taken so much for granted, never really stopping to look at the beautiful original paintings she had purchased from a downtown gallery. Now, with the chance that she might lose it all, she noticed everything—even the smoke gray tissue-box holder that was in the half bath. When Yarni reached Desi’s room, she fell to the floor and began to sob, but as soon as the loud chimes on the huge grandfather clock struck eight, the pity party was over. The phone rang, and she wiped her tears and answered, knowing who awaited her on the other end.

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