

T. A. TERRELL PRESENTS

The J. A. White Series

Volume II

Published by
Episode Publishing
P.O. Box 2649
Woodbridge, VA 22195
www.thestorycontinues.com

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ISBN-10 0-9652680-2-0
ISBN-13 978-0-9652680-2-8

To my children

To my friends and readers:

I just wanted to take a moment to thank everyone for their support. This book wouldn't have been possible without your encouraging words and positive feedback about the first book in the J. A. White series. So I'm thrilled to be able to bring you the second book in the series. Enjoy the story!

*Take care,
T. A. Terrell*

Special Thanks

To Vicki Griffin, Sylvia Moore, and Gwendolyn Bailey. Your efforts to my success didn't go unnoticed and is greatly appreciated.

Before you continue!

This book is the second book in the J. A. White Series. I recommend you read the first book in the series, "I Crossed the Line," the journey begins... before you continue.

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A Novel

Things aren't always as they seem

T. A. Terrell

1

The warm sunlight illuminated the bedroom, but the brilliant light beaming through the large window couldn't penetrate Jacks's broken heart, which was eclipsed by a cold misery. It was her sister, Maxine's, wedding day, and it was the worst day of Jacks's life.

Jacquelyn White's five-foot-six-inch hourglass frame stood like a Beverly Hills store being renovated. Her outward appearance was the storefront, which under normal conditions would be beautiful, inviting, but intimidating to those who didn't feel wealthy enough to enter. However, today she looked like a store that was going out of business as she stood behind her sister, longing to reverse positions.

Maxine struggled as she tried to fasten the white satin buttons on the back of her wedding gown. "Jacks, can you help me with this?"

Jacks forced a smile. "Max, I would be honored," she said, relieving her sister from the difficult task. She fastened the long trail of pearl-sized buttons on the back of her sister's gown. Trying to cloak her jealousy, Jacks commented, "Miles is just going to die when he sees you in this." Jacks bent down and smoothed out the six-foot train across the hardwood floor. She felt nauseous as she continued to shove her emotional pain deeper inside.

Maxine stood in front of the mirror and checked to make sure her hair was still in place. "I don't want him to die; I want him to be horny," she joked, carefully applying the cinnamon red lipstick to her lips.

Maxine was soft-spoken and a year older than Jacks. Her slender

face normally seemed sad, as if she had just lost her best friend, but today it wore signs of love. Her big brown eyes sparkled like a child anticipating the arrival of Santa Claus.

Jacks continued standing behind her, admiring the detailing on her sister's white wedding gown. The heart-shaped neckline gently framed her bustline as the pearls and lace made her look like a princess.

"So, you and Miles haven't made love yet?" probed Jacks, closing her eyes, praying the answer was no.

"No. He wanted to wait until our honeymoon," she answered with a deep, disappointed sigh.

"How romantic," exhaled Jacks. As a sign of relief brightened her face, she asked another question she really didn't want the answer to. "Do you know where Miles plans to take you?"

"No, he's being mysterious," Maxine replied with a silly schoolgirl giggle.

"Well, you know you don't have to worry about the babies. I'm more than happy to watch the little princes."

Maxine's smile faded to a tense stare. "Jacks, that will not be necessary," mumbled Maxine, glancing down at her gown.

"Maxine, you know I love spending time with them."

Maxine avoided eye contact. "But don't you have a company to run?" she reminded Jacks as she moved closer to the mirrored dresser.

Jacks was becoming uneasy by her sister's inability to look at her. "My company runs itself. And besides, I have Peter there to keep me informed," said Jacks, moving closer so she could see her sister's reaction.

Maxine, feeling uncomfortable, quickly maneuvered herself away from Jacks. She scrambled over to the dresser and began searching for her pearl teardrop earrings. "You've been gone for over two months. Maybe it's time you start to put your life back on track."

Puzzled by her comment, Jacks said, "Max, my life is on track."

Maxine looked into the mirror as she put on her earrings. She whispered with dread as she dropped her head, "I wish I could say the same thing."

Jacks noticed her mood change. "Why? What's wrong? This is your wedding day. I thought Winston and I would beat you to the altar, but shit happens," she said with resolve.

Maxine turned to her sister. "Maybe now you and Winston can try to work out your differences," she suggested, hoping that Jacks would reconsider her relationship with Winston.

Jacks casually walked over to the mirror and pretended to check her makeup. "He walked out on me, remember?" she replied.

"Only after you pushed him away."

"It's water under the bridge," declared Jacks.

Maxine continued to encourage reconciliation. "So much was going on with you at the time. Now that the dust has settled, maybe things will work out."

Jacks was getting annoyed by her sister's persistence. "Things won't work out, because I hear he's dating someone else now. And I also heard it was getting very serious."

"Jacks, you're my sister, and I love you." Maxine paused as she searched for the right words.

Jacks sensed her sister's struggle. "Max, what's wrong with you? Are you sick? Do you want to call off the wedding?"

Maxine, knowing what she was about to say would hurt her sister's feelings, chose her words carefully. "Jacks, please, I'm very happy, and I hope that someday you'll be as happy as I am right now. This day is a new beginning with my family, and we need to be alone in order to adjust as a family."

Maxine's words were clear, but Jacks played dumb. "Well, when you come back from your honeymoon, I'll leave."

Maxine realized her subtlety was being ignored. "No! No!" she

said in frustration. “You have done more than enough. And I feel that you are becoming too attached to my children.” Again, Maxine knew what she was about to say would hurt Jacks’s feelings, so she paused for a moment to muster up courage. Realizing there was no way to spare Jacks’s feelings, Maxine blurted out the dreaded words. “After the wedding, I would like for you to leave.”

Jacks stood silent as her sister’s request strangled the air from her windpipe. Wanting to run crying out of the bedroom like a spanked child, she casually walked over to the window. She looked down at the driveway and watched the guests arrive as she tried to contain her feelings of rejection and disappointment.

Maxine noticed her sister’s reaction. “Jacks, are you all right?” she asked, regretting what she had to do.

Jacks wanted to keep her sister at a distance, so she nodded her head, reassuring her that she was okay.

“Jacks, I don’t want to hurt you,” apologized Maxine.

“Max, please, don’t insult me with your pity,” said Jacks as she continued staring out the window. “I knew it was just a matter of time before I would overstay my welcome. I just was hoping . . . never mind what I was hoping. Don’t worry, sis, I’ll be gone by morning.”

“Jacks, I’m sorry.”

Turning to her sister, she said, “No, Max, I’m sorry that I forced you to kick me out. I thought if anyone would have kicked me out by now, it would have been Mother.” She smiled, concealing her sadness.

Maxine was relieved the subject had changed. “Speaking of Mother, where is she?”

Jacks seized the chance to leave the room. “I don’t know. The wedding is going to start in about fifteen minutes, so I’m going to check to see if everything is running on schedule. And maybe I can find Mother so you can have your woman-to-woman talk.” She gently

hugged her sister, then like a flash exited the bedroom.

Jacks walked down the long narrow hall to the nursery. The large nursery was decorated in bright blues and yellows. The three babies' beds were lined along the Mother Goose-themed wall. And it was obvious by the lavish surroundings that the boys would want for no material possessions.

Susan, the nanny, was feeding one of the baby boys, who was dressed in a soft blue terry-cloth sleeper. The other two baby boys were sleeping in their blue lace bassinet.

"May I hold him?" Jacks whispered as she entered the room.

Susan smiled. "Sure, if you don't think he will soil your beautiful dress."

Reaching for the infant, Jacks asked, "Are you going to attend the wedding?"

"I would love to, but I don't think Nicholas will let me," she answered with a caring smile.

Beaming as she gazed upon his face, Jacks cooed, "He thinks he will miss something." She gently cradled the little coffee-heavy-on-the-cream-colored baby. "Look at you, so beautiful. I bet you don't know your mother is going to get married to my best friend in a few minutes. Well, she's not your real mother, but she's the best mother for you. She'll love you and your brothers as if you were her own."

The baby wrapped his small delicate finger around Jacks's pinkie finger while she watched him nurse the bottle. "I just came to say good-bye, my little prince. I must go home and take care of my business before things get out of hand. You know the work of a business tycoon is never done. Now, you must promise me you and your brothers will always look out for each other. And always remember that even though your mother gave you up, not loving you wasn't one of the reasons."

Jacks clutched the small child to her bosom. Tears began to

trickle down her cheeks as an overwhelming sense of loss blanketed her soul.

“Susan, please take him before my makeup ruins this dress,” she said as her voice began to quiver.

Susan carefully removed the baby from Jacks’s arms; then Jacks gently kissed the baby on the forehead.

Concerned by the tears, Susan asked, “Are you all right?”

Jacks rushed over to the changing table and grabbed a soft white tissue and began to dab the tears. “I will be once this day is over. Weddings always make me emotional. And this one is beginning to take a toll on me.”

Jacks softly kissed Nicholas, Neal, and Nathaniel on their cheeks, then made a hasty exit from the nursery. She closed the door and stood in the hallway as if she had just left a funeral parlor. She slowly began to move down the hallway, regaining her composure with every step away from the door. She noticed the wedding consultant walking toward her.

“Is everything ready?” inquired Jacks.

“Everything is ready, except your face. Honey, what happened to you?” asked Diane, examining Jacks’s face as if she had just been in a fight.

“The mascara is irritating my eyes,” explained Jacks, rubbing her eye.

“Well, go clean yourself up, because you can’t go anywhere looking like that.”

Jacks thought she had managed to conceal her sadness, but she soon found out she was wrong as tears began to cloud her vision. Not wanting to be seen in her fragile condition, she dropped her head and made a mad dash to her bedroom. However, her evasive action came to an abrupt halt when she bumped into Miles as he was leaving one of the guestrooms.

Miles used to be like Jacks's convenience store, always open and nearby. He was in his early thirties. He worked out, so his physical appearance was toned and muscular. His olive complexion, coal black hair, kiwi green eyes, and thick eyelashes gave him an exotic islander's appearance. His boyish smile was charming, alluring, and ignited thoughts of passion.

Miles Stallone was dressed in a black penguin-style tuxedo with a gray vest.

"Hey! Jacks." He reached out to her as he tried to block a collision.

Jacks was caught off guard. "Oh, Miles, I'm sorry. I didn't see you."

"That's okay." He smiled. "What's your hurry?"

Wiping the tears from her eyes, she replied, "The wedding is about to start, and my eyes are bothering me."

Miles gently moved her hand away from her face. He examined her eyes like a doctor. "Yeah, they do look a little puffy," he said.

She pushed his hand away. "So now you see why I must go," she said, darting into her bedroom.

Miles followed her and shut the door behind him as he entered the bedroom. "Don't stop what you're doing. I just wanted to talk to you alone before I walked down that aisle."

Jacks felt like a trapped animal. She was afraid that her love for him would take control of her good sense. "Miles, I don't think this is a good idea," she cautioned him as she slowly backed away.

"Why?" he asked, moving toward her.

Jacks felt her body tensing up. "You're about to marry my sister," she replied.

"This has nothing to do with your sister. This has to do with two best friends who are about to be separated."

"Miles, we've been separated for some time now."

“We’ve been apart, but not separated,” he said, gently taking her hand.

His touch was like a live wire shocking every part of her being. She jerked her hand away as she tried to swallow the thoughts of passion. “Miles, can’t this wait until after the wedding?” protested Jacks.

Miles was surprised by her reaction to his touch. “No, this can’t wait,” he insisted. “Because I know you won’t be here after the wedding.”

Jacks, caught off guard, tried to pretend she didn’t know what he was talking about.

“I know Maxine asked you to leave. I want you to know I had nothing to do with it. For some reason, she feels threatened by your presence, especially when you’re around the babies.”

“Miles, it’s okay. I have things to take care of at home.”

“I wish that you could stay. Ever since that day I picked you up off the concrete sidewalk, I wished that you would stay in my life forever,” he confessed, slowly moving closer to her. “I had hoped you would be wearing the wedding dress as I stood patiently at the end of the aisle waiting for you to join me until death do us part.”

Each beautiful word Miles spoke was like a double-edged sword, because she loved him as much as he loved her. But the reality was he was about to marry her sister, and his adulteress words caused her to feel sorry for her sister, because she knew her sister’s future husband’s heart was not completely hers.

“Miles, if you don’t love my sister, then why are you marrying her?”

“She’s giving me what you will not, or cannot, give me—her love and a family.”

As much as it hurt her, she knew he spoke the truth. “Well, I hope you two will be very happy,” she said halfheartedly.

Miles didn’t want the moment to end. He gently took Jacks by

the hand. A surge of forbidden love and fear ran through them. They glanced at each other but tried not to make direct eye contact. They were unsuccessful; their eyes connected and Miles drifted closer and closer to her. Her intellect told her to get the hell out of there, but her feelings for him hungered for one last kiss. Passion erupted and their lips collided like two freight trains on a dark wooden bridge. They both felt the foundation of their lives falling from underneath them, but they did not care, because for one more brief moment, they had each other.

Standing in the doorway with her arms folded, Mrs. White witnessed the good-bye kiss. "Well, I thought the groom was supposed to kiss the wedding party at the reception." She smirked.

Margaret White was an attractive and very proud woman in her midfifties. She felt like she had sacrificed her life with no appreciation, so she hardly ever smiled. Appearance meant everything to her, so she was never without her makeup, and her short graying brown hair was always in place.

"Mother, we were just saying good-bye," Jacks stated, adjusting her clothing.

"And from my angle, what a good-bye!"

"What good-bye?" Maxine inquired as she appeared in the doorway.

"Maxine, don't come in here." Jacks rushed to the doorway to prevent her from seeing the groom before the wedding ceremony. She shoved Maxine back into the hallway, shielding her from Miles.

"Jacks, what's going on in there?" Maxine asked as she tried to look around her.

Standing in the doorway as a buffer, Jacks said, "It's bad luck to see the groom before the wedding." Jacks gave her mother a dirty look. "Isn't that right, Mother?"

Even though Mrs. White didn't give a damn about Jacks, she didn't

want to ruin Maxine's wedding day by telling her what she had just witnessed, so she gave Jacks an I'm-warning-you stare.

"Come on, Max, let's get the show on the road," said Jacks, escorting her sister to the top of the staircase.

Miles went down the back staircase so he could go through the kitchen to enter the living room. He took his place beside the minister, who stood in front of the fireplace adorned with red and white roses. The wedding march began. Mrs. White, dressed in a pale pink dress, began her descent down the spiral staircase. At a steady pace, Jacks followed behind her mother. Jacks paused before entering the living room. She glanced around the room. It was stuffed with family, friends, and business associates. Jacks plastered on a warm cheerful smile. Her mother took her seat, clearing the view to Miles. Jacks tried to avoid staring at the handsome man standing proudly at the altar.

Suddenly she felt sick as the realization of the day's events began to pulverize her heart. She felt faint, her legs began to tingle, but she was determined to make it to her place beside her sister. Crumbling inside, Jacks stood less than two yards away from the man she loved.

Her sister, escorted by her uncle, made her grand entrance. All eyes except the groom's were on the bride. Jacks felt his eyes upon her. She glanced in Miles's direction. As she feared, he was staring at her as if it was their ceremony. Quickly, she averted her attention back to the bride, hoping the groom would do the same.

Finally the bride was united with the groom. Maxine glanced at Jacks. She gave her a sisterly wink, and the ceremony began.

With each word from the minister, Jacks could feel her heart pounding against her breastbone. Pounding, pounding, and pounding until it began to reduce her circulation.

"If there is anyone who knows of any reason why these two people should not be united, please speak now or forever hold your peace," said the minister. He glanced around the room for signs of objections.

The room was so quiet you could almost hear Jacks's silent screams of emotional misery. Her heart wanted to cry out, "He loves me, not her," but her head was saying, "Right now you can't give him what he needs, so step aside." Her intellect won as her heart remained imprisoned for a life of wanting loneliness.

"What God has brought together, may no man put asunder. You may now kiss the bride."

Jacks looked toward the floor, unable to witness the holy union. Tears began to form in her eyes as she listened to the new couple kiss. The bride and groom made their exit to the foyer. She quickly composed herself and then exited the room.

The new couple, Jacks, B.B., and Mrs. White were standing in the foyer as the wedding coordinator directed the guests to the garden area, where the reception was being held.

"It was a lovely ceremony," said B.B., wiping the tears from his eyes. "I hope that someday Mr. Right will come into my life," he stated as tears of joy flowed like a river. "Oh, come here, Max." B.B. grabbed Maxine like she was a rag doll and locked her in a bear hug.

B.B., which was short for Benjamin Banks, could have been the poster boy for stereotypical gay man of America. He was a lanky, six-foot-tall, dark-skinned black man in his late twenties with a happy spring in his step.

Jacks stood silently at the base of the staircase hoping no one would notice her.

"Jacks, come on and give your sister a hug!" encouraged B.B. as he dragged Maxine toward her.

"Stay right there," said Jacks as she tried to keep her emotions under control.

Mrs. White noticed Jacks's discomfort. "What's wrong with you?" she asked with a smirk. "If I didn't know any better, I would think you were in love with your sister's husband," she said with malice.

Jacks looked at her mother with contempt. “He’s just a friend,” she said through clenched teeth.

“Yeah, right. And we’re as close as mother and daughter. I have tolerated you for long enough. I want you out of my house. The sooner the better,” she ordered.

“For once, Mother, we agree with each other.”

“Okay, everyone, line up. It’s time to greet the guests,” the wedding coordinator announced.

As Jacks observed the happy couple preparing to greet the guests, she began to feel short of breath. As beads of perspiration danced across her forehead, she felt as if she was about to topple over. “B.B., can you come here for a moment?” she asked as she held on to the banister as a crutch.

“Come on, Jacks. The wedding party awaits,” said B.B. as he strolled over to her.

“Tell them to go on without me,” Jacks gasped as she began to hyperventilate.

B.B. suddenly realized his friend was in big trouble, so he rushed to her side.

“Jacks, girlfriend, what’s wrong?” he asked, holding on to her quivering arm.

“Just catch me because I think I am going to faint,” mumbled Jacks as she fell to the floor.

“Jacks, honey, wake up,” said B.B., gently shaking her.

Disoriented, she awakened. “B.B., what the hell are you doing?”

“Honey, you were dead to the bed. One minute I was talking to you; the next minute you were fast asleep.”

“So it was a dream?” she whispered, confused but relieved.

“What was a dream?”

“Miles and Maxine’s marriage. It was only a dream,” she replied.

“No, they aren’t married yet. Jacks, are you all right? You look a little flushed.” B.B. touched her on the forehead. “The engagement party is about to start.”

“It was only a dream,” Jacks said.

The confused B.B. asked again. “What damn dream?!”

Sitting up, she replied, “Never mind. So where is everyone?”

“Down in the garden.”

Getting off the bed, Jacks realized her dream was her subconscious telling her to leave. She had been there for over two months, and she was becoming attached to Maxine’s soon-to-be family. “Well, since I’m up here, I might as well pack.” Jacks sighed as she strolled to the dresser.

B.B. looked befuddled. “Jacks, honey, are you all right?”

“Yes, why?”

“Because your only sister’s engagement party just started. And I’ve seen a nice piece of brown sugar down there named Ronald, waiting to be charmed by me,” he boasted.

Jacks walked over to the large window that overlooked the backyard garden. She took a deep breath, then peeked out. Miles and Maxine were smiling as they greeted their guests. Jacks felt an overwhelming sense of loss as their happiness made her feel like a broken third wheel.

Choking back the tears, Jacks said, “B.B., I’m ready to go home. Can you be ready in five minutes?”

B.B. was stunned by her decision. He asked with disappointment, “You aren’t going to the party?”

Jacks glanced out the window once more at the happy couple. “No. I’m no longer wanted or needed here.”

“Did you and Maxine have a fight?” asked B.B., digging for a good explanation for why he had to leave his Ronald.

“I’m trying to prevent one.”

“Did she ask you to leave, because I was feeling she was about to.”

“Why do you say that?”

B.B. blabbed like the neighborhood gossip. “Whenever you were around Miles and the children, Miss Thing would just roll her eyes at you and go talk to your mother. I heard them whispering. The only thing that I could hear as clear as a bell was your name.” He moved closer to Jacks and whispered, “What did you do to her?”

Jacks didn’t know whether to be angry with B.B. for telling her what she already knew or angry with her sister for not being honest with her.

Taking a deep cleansing breath, Jacks stated firmly, “B.B., I’m ready to go.”

“But—” he objected.

“I will finish my packing in five minutes. Have the car ready.”

“But . . . I have to pack,” protested B.B. like a defiant child.

“Then you have three minutes to pack, because I want you and my car in the front in five minutes.”

B.B. pointed his nose to the ceiling, rolled his eyes, and marched out of the bedroom.

With a heavy heart, Jacks threw her clothes in her luggage like they were rags. She walked over to the dresser and wrote a short note, saying she had a business emergency. She placed the note on the bed, then sneaked out of the home like a thief in the night.

Still upset because he had to leave, B.B. stood waiting by the limousine in front of the large colonial house. He pouted as he watched Jacks struggled down the sidewalk with three bags of luggage.

B.B. was tired of watching her struggle with her luggage and decided to help. “I bet Peter will be glad to see you.” He grabbed two of the bags out of her hand and tossed them in the trunk.

Out of breath, she replied, "Yeah, I guess so." She tossed the last piece of luggage in the trunk.

B.B. took his place behind the wheel of the black Mercedes limousine. He adjusted the mirror and watched Jacks try to hold in her emotional pain.

"You love him, don't you?" asked B.B. like a big brother.

"What?"

"You love him. Come on, honey, you can tell me. Remember, I'm B.B., your friend," he stated. "Even though you ordered me to the car like some servant and made me miss my one chance of happiness," he mumbled.

B.B.'s words of friendship gave Jacks permission to unleash her torment. Tears began to flow like a leaky faucet. Her voice quivered. "B.B., he was my best friend."

"So those are tears of joy?"

"Yes, damn it!" sobbed Jacks, grabbing a soft pink tissue.

"Yeah, right, and I was born in the morning, but it wasn't this morning. No one cries like that over a best friend unless they are in a coffin."

Jacks snapped at him. "B.B., what are you now, my psychiatrist?"

"No, I'm a friend who knows when he's being lied to."

Jacks fell back in the seat, and said, "B.B., I'm ready to sleep in my own bed. How long will it take before we'll be home?"

"Ten hours if you don't care about tickets."

"Just slow down in redneck counties."

"Well, I guess I'll be doing the speed limit from here to Virginia."

2

Reclined in the backseat of the limousine, Jacks watched her old neighborhood of large colonial and Georgian-style homes as they whisked past her window.

“B.B., take a right here,” yelled Jacks.

B.B. hung a sharp right. “Where are we going?”

“To visit a relative,” she explained with reserved enthusiasm.

B.B. drove about a mile down the street, then approached a large well-manicured cemetery.

“Pull over right here!” she commanded. Tugging on the door handle, she jumped out as the limousine came to a complete stop.

B.B. was confused as he watched Jacks fade over a hill.

Jacks, emotionally drained from the events of the day, sat by her father’s white marble headstone for comfort.

“Father, I just came by to say hello before I leave for Virginia. Max has gotten herself a wonderful man. He cares about her and will never stray. I guess you’re wondering how I know so much about this man. Well, he used to be my best friend. And today I handed over my best friend and the man I love to Maxine. And right now I just want to crawl into your casket and die. But I know no one is to blame for my unhappiness but me. I refused to marry a white man no matter how wonderful he is. Because as much as we love each other, there will always be a very important part of me that he will never understand. How it feels to be black living in a society dominated by white fear that breeds hatred and intolerance. How could I marry a

man who could never understand my frustration, my struggle, my essence? I know love is supposed to conquer all, but like all powerful conquerors, they, too, have their Achilles' heel."

The events of the day haunted her like a recurring nightmare. She tried to keep a brave front, but sadness began to squeeze her heart like a clamp. "Now, because of my hang-up, he's gone. I know I will never find another man like him. Father, I feel so alone. Soon Maxine will be married and Mother is . . . you know." Feeling abandoned, Jacks sat quietly evaluating her life's choices for over an hour.

Worried about his friend, B.B. scanned his surroundings. Seeing no immediate threat, he cautiously opened the door and stood beside the limousine, debating if he should look for Jacks. Mustering up courage, he began to whistle as he strolled over the hill into the graveyard. Locating his friend, he gently placed his hand on her shoulder. "Jacks, is everything okay?"

She shook her head. "No," she mumbled, staring at her father's headstone.

B.B. squatted to be eye level with her. "Is there anything I can do for you?" he asked.

Snuffling her nose as she fought back the tears, she whispered, "No."

"Do you want me to shut up and leave?" he asked, praying she would say yes.

"No, I want you to join me."

He glanced around at the sea of headstones. "Here?" B.B. trembled.

"Yes, here," she answered, yanking him to the ground.

Shivering as if he had just felt a draft, he said, "I don't know, Jacks, the sun is beginning to set, and it's creepy around here."

"Oh, B.B., stop your whining," demanded Jacks, grabbing his hand to comfort him.

Wanting to flee, B.B. reluctantly stayed beside her. He was

constantly looking over his shoulder for goblins as he tried to hum an upbeat tune.

Staring at her father's headstone, she said, "B.B., do you know what it's like to feel you have no real family?"

Bewildered by his boss's glum mood, he asked, "What are you talking about, Jacks? You have your mother and sister."

"They're not my family," confessed Jacks with a heavy sigh.

B.B.'s interest increased. "Oh, I . . . I didn't know," he said. He scooted closer as if he was about to receive juicy gossip.

"Only a few people know," she said.

"Well, your secret is safe with me," declared B.B.

She smiled and patted him on the leg. "I know, B.B.," she said. "I was just sitting here feeling for the first time in my life as if I do not belong. Like I have no roots. Like I have no real place to call home."

"Well, maybe you should try to find your mother."

Continuing to stare at the white marble rock, she said, "She's dead."

"Oh, honey, I'm so sorry to hear that. Maybe you can find your father?"

"You're looking at him."

B.B. looked at the headstone, then at Jacks. "Jacks, I'm confused. I thought you said you were adopted."

"Well, let's just say my mother adopted me."

"Maybe you can find his parents?"

Jacks looked at B.B. like his suggestion was stupid, but she knew he was only trying to help. "His parents are dead," she replied with gloom. Suddenly, a glimmer of hope shifted Jacks's mood like a warm breeze. "Or maybe I can find my mother's family!"

B.B. was confused. "What?"

Jacks leapt to her feet. "Come on!" She rushed back to the limousine.

Puzzled about what had just transpired but not about to be left behind, B.B. followed her closely.

“Where to, boss?” asked B.B., winded, plopping behind the wheel.

“To downtown Atlanta to find a hotel!” she answered with enthusiastic optimism.

3

The next day, with renewed hope and a good night's sleep, Jacks would begin her search for her birth mother's family. The five-star hotel they checked in to was like a small luxury apartment. It had white marble floors in the bathroom and fireplaces in the living room and bedroom. Jacks got off the four-poster bed and found a plush white hotel robe in the closet. She wrapped herself in the robe and walked into the living room. There she spotted the wooden antique desk. She perched herself behind the desk, then pulled open the drawers to find a telephone book. Searching the yellow pages, she found the number for the local hospital. She called them, but they referred her to an adoption agency.

"C and S Adoption Agency, can I help you?" said the woman answering the telephone in a less-than-enthusiastic tone.

"Yes, I hope so. My name is Jacquelyn White, and I'm trying to find information concerning my birth mother."

"Do you know how many calls I get requesting that information?" she asked sarcastically.

Jacks, realizing the woman hated her job, firmly answered, "No."

"Well, a lot."

Becoming frustrated, Jacks tried to conceal her emotions. "So can you help me?"

Seemingly taking pleasure in her answer, she said, "I'm sorry, but those records are sealed."

Knowing she was being jerked around, Jacks tried to stay calm.

“Well, can you tell me if you have my adoption records?” she asked, clenching her jaw.

The woman took a deep breath like she was bored. “I guess so,” she replied. “What are your parents’ names?”

“Margaret and William White.”

“All right, hold on,” grumbled the woman, dropping the receiver on the desk.

Finally, the nut cracked, thought Jacks, rolling her eyes.

A few minutes later, the rude woman returned. “You said William and Margaret White?”

“Yes, that’s right!”

“We have a file, but for some reason most of the information is gone. All that’s here is the name of the hospital, County General. That’s all, sorry.”

The words that’s all echoed in Jacks’s mind. Once again, she felt alone in the world. As the tears of loneliness began to puddle in her eyes, there was a knock at the door.

Jacks held back her tears. “Yes, who is it?” she yelled across the room.

“It’s me, B.B., honey, can I come in?” yelled B.B. through the door.

Taking a deep breath, Jacks walked over to the door. Talking through the door, Jacks’s voice quivered. “B.B., I really don’t want any visitors right now.”

Standing his ground, B.B. folded his arms. “Honey, are you crying?”

Leaning her head against the door, she pleaded, “No, please, just go.”

“Honey, I’m not going anywhere until you let me see you.”

Jacks knew B.B. meant what he said, so she checked her eyes for signs of redness in a nearby mirror, then inhaled and reluctantly cracked the door.

She flashed a smile and said, "See, B.B., I told you, I'm fine."

He eased his way inside the room. "Fine?" he questioned, grabbing her chin. He examined her water-glazed eyes like a concerned parent. "I bet if I said BOO! you would break out in tears."

She pushed his hand away. "B.B., please leave me alone. I can't handle this right now," she declared as she walked back into the living room.

B.B. followed her. "I know, and that's why you need to tell me what is going on. I'm here for you, girlfriend," he declared, giving her a bear hug.

As they embraced, B.B. looked over Jacks's shoulder. "Your room is a lot nicer than mine. What is this, a suite?"

A slight smile brightened Jacks's face.

B.B. took Jacks by the hand and led her to the sofa. "I need an upgrade," B.B. joked with a wink.

Laughter filled the room as he cracked Jacks's armor of depression.

He cradled her hands in his. "So, Jacks, what's going on?" asked B.B. like a probing talk-show host.

Jacks recalled the disappointing conversation she just had; her voice began to tremble as she spoke. "I called the adoption agency, and their records are incomplete," she answered.

"Well, you would think the state would have those records."

A spark of hope shifted her hopeless mood. "You know, B.B., I didn't think of that! I'll bet you're right. The state does keep records."

Jacks bolted over to the desk and picked up the phone to dial information. "Information, I need the number for . . . I'm not sure what number I need," she rambled.

"Well, tell me what you do need and maybe I can help," said the pleasant telephone operator.

"I need a copy of a birth record."

"I'll give you the main state information number," said the operator. "Now, hold for the number," she continued, transferring her call to a recorded message.

As the recording gave her the number, Jacks quickly jotted it down. She dialed the number and the long recorded menu at the state department instructed Jacks through a maze of numbers. After what seemed like an eternity, a possibly useful number came up, vital statistics.

After making her selection, Jacks waited on pins and needles as she was transferred.

"You have reached the office of vital statistics. If you need a copy of your birth certificate, press ONE," said the recorded message.

Following the recording instructions, Jacks pressed ONE.

"Because of the confidentiality laws, we are unable to release any information without written authorization, so please leave your name, address, and daytime telephone number, and an application will be mailed to you within ten business days. Please speak clearly after the tone."

"Ten days!" Jacks slammed down the telephone. "I can't wait ten days! I'm going to dial that number again. This time I want to talk to a person," she proclaimed, redialing the number.

"You have reached the office of vital statistics. If you need a copy of your birth certificate, press ONE," said the recorded message. "If you would like to speak to a representative, press TWO."

Once again, Jacks followed the instructions and pressed TWO.

"You have reached the office of vital statistics. All lines are busy. You can hold or try your call again."

Frustrated to the boiling point, Jacks started to slam down the receiver when B.B. took her hand.

"Honey, don't do that," he reprimanded as if she was a child, and grabbed the telephone. Placing it against his ear, he listened to the music.

“On hold, I see.”

Dropping her head in defeat, she said, “B.B., I guess it just wasn’t meant to be.”

“Oh, nonsense, girl,” reassured B.B. “I’ll sit on hold for you. This music isn’t half bad.” He nodded, trying to move his head to the beat.

Three minutes passed when a male voice came on the line. “Vital statistics, can I help you?”

B.B. smiled from ear to ear. “Ooh, you have a sexy voice; you can’t help me right now, but maybe later—”

Jacks jerked the receiver from B.B.’s hand. “Hello, I apologize for my friend,” she said, rolling her eyes at B.B. “I’m adopted and was wondering if I could get some information on my birth mother.”

“Were you born in this state?”

“Yes. Do you keep birth records of adopted children?”

“We keep records of every child born in this state. I must tell you, though, if you want to obtain a copy of your birth certificate, you have that right. But it will only have the names of your adoptive parents on it. The rest of the information is sealed.”

“Are you telling me you do not know my birth mother’s name?”

“Oh, we know it, but I can’t give it to you. Look, you sound like a nice lady. If I were you, I would try one of those agencies that specialize in finding birth parents.”

“But that could take months,” Jacks complained.

“Unless you know the governor, I suggest you start with the agencies. I hear they are really good sometimes.”

“Thanks,” she said with defeat.

“Good luck,” said the customer service agent.

On the verge of a nervous breakdown, Jacks clung to her sanity by a shoestring.

Noticing the anguish on his friend’s face, B.B. said, “I guess things

didn't go so well. Jacks, you know there's more than one way to skin a cat."

Taking out her frustration on him, Jacks lashed out, "B.B., I don't want to hear any more of your chipper little sayings!"

Angered by the tone of her voice, he said, "Well, I was just trying to help, Ms. Thing."

Grabbing him by the hand, Jacks yanked him toward the door. "Well, you are not helping, now get the hell out," she commanded, shoving him out into the hall.

"The nerve of—" B.B. objected.

Slamming the door in his face, she began to sob as she slid down against the door. "I have no one," she wept as thoughts of suicide ran through her mind.

The ringing of the telephone interrupted her suicidal thoughts. It rang, rang, and rang, but she didn't answer it. The ringing stopped for five minutes; then it began again. Still Jacks opted to sit in her self-pity instead of answering the screaming phone. A two-minute intermission, then the telephone rang once more. Unable to ignore the obnoxious ringing any longer, she stormed over to answer. "What!" barked Jacks.

"Jacks, it's me, Peter. Are you all right?"

Peter Carlton was Jacks's vice president at White Inc. He had come to work for her company when it was just beginning to make a name for itself. Over the years, he had become her confidant and lover. He had an olive complexion, coal black hair, and dark brown eyes. His polished good looks, broad shoulders, and washboard stomach drove the women in the office wild.

Annoyed by the interruption but happy to hear a friendly voice, she tried to conceal her emotional pain. Taking a deep breath, she said, "Peter, I'm fine. Did B.B. call you?" She exhaled.

"Yes. He said you were having a bad day. And something about

you being mean to him and throwing him into the hall and telling him to go to hell.”

With her voice shaking, she replied, “It won’t be my last bad day, and B.B. is exaggerating.”

“Jacks—”

“Peter, don’t—”

“Peter, don’t what, be a friend?”

“Peter, I’m fine.”

“Jacks, you are not alone. You have B.B., Bertha, and me. We’re your family, and we love you. Hang in there.”

“B.B. has a big mouth.”

“B.B. doesn’t like to be thrown out into the hall.”

“Peter, it has been a rough morning. I think I’m going to take a nap. I will be leaving here tomorrow around noon. I’ll see you when I get back into the city.”

Jacks hung up the telephone and went into the bedroom. She threw herself across the bed, and it wasn’t long before she fell into a restless sleep. The events of the day taunted her as she dreamed. She kept hearing the words “If you knew the governor . . . if you knew the governor.” Suddenly she sprang up in the bed. “I don’t know the governor, but I know the mayor.”

She hurried to her purse and retrieved Mayor Daniel Jones’s telephone number. Nervously dialing his number, she said a quick prayer. “Lord, please let him be able to help me.”

Daniel Jones, an old lover of Jacks’s, was a tall, distinguished man twenty years her senior. Before becoming the mayor of Atlanta, he had been a very successful attorney. He was like a classic black Rolls-Royce, timeless and made of sturdy material.

“Mayor Jones, can I help you?” answered the mature voice on the other end.

“Daniel, it’s me, Jacks.” Her voice shook, even though she tried

to sound upbeat.

Happy to hear her voice, he said, "Jacks, my dear, how are you? I heard your sister was back in town."

Jacks didn't want to chat about her sister. "Daniel, I'm fine."

"Will I get to see you this visit?" inquired Daniel, hoping to hear yes.

"That would be nice, but I'm leaving early tomorrow afternoon."

"Well, maybe we can go to dinner tonight?"

"That would be nice, but I'm really tired."

Daniel noticed his old friend was making excuses not to see him instead of telling him the real reason for her call.

"Jacks, we go back a long way; we lived together once, remember? And since you don't want to see me, is there something you need?" he asked.

"Well, Daniel . . ." She hesitated.

"Jacks, I would love to talk to you all day, but I'm the mayor, and I have work to do."

So Jacks blurted out, "Daniel, I'm adopted."

"What?" Daniel was shocked by her confession.

"I'm trying to find my birth mother. I found some love letters my father wrote to her; I think her name was Paula."

There was an awkward silence on the other end of the line.

"Daniel, are you all right?"

Daniel cleared his throat, then asked, "Who told you you're adopted?"

"I heard it straight from the horse's mouth."

"What horse?"

"Does it really matter?"

"Well, I guess not. So I guess I'm back to my original question. Is there something I can do for you?"

“The reason I told you I was adopted was because I need a big favor.”

“Anything. You know all you have to do is ask.”

“I need a copy of my adoption records. I want to know who my mother was.”

There was a brief pause on Daniel’s end of the line. “Jacks, I can’t get that information for you.”

Daniel’s words felt like a slap in her face. “So you won’t help me?”

The disappointment in her voice hurt Daniel. “If I could get that information, it would be an abuse of power. I’m sorry,” he apologized.

“I’m sorry, too, but I’m not surprised. As we both know, this isn’t the first time you have let me down,” she stated, slamming down the phone.

Feeling that all her avenues were blocked by bullshit, Jacks slipped into a deeper depression. Wanting to forget the events of the past forty-eight hours, she picked up the remote control from the nightstand and turned on the television. She flipped through channels until she landed on a classic black-and-white movie. Unfortunately for her, it was a love story. “I love you but I must marry another,” said the beautiful actress. “Why? You don’t love him,” said the dashing leading man. “I’m carrying his child,” confessed the woman. Jacks wanted to shut off the television but was compelled to know the outcome. When a commercial came on, she walked to the bar to get a stiff drink to calm her emotions. She drank one glass, then another, and another. Beginning to feel relaxed, she grabbed the bottle, then returned to her television-watching in the bedroom. With every touching scene in the movie, Jacks took a sip of the liquor to numb her emerging sadness. As the movie concluded, so did her bottle.

Intoxicated, Jacks staggered to the bathroom to relieve herself and to draw a whirlpool bath. Swaying like she was on a boat on rough

seas, she dropped her robe on the floor. Trying to balance herself, she slowly slipped into the swirling hot water. The sound of the water cast a hypnotic spell, relaxing her. Her eyelids began to feel heavy. Unable to keep her eyes open, she nodded off. She slid neck-deep into the tub until the splash of the water against her face awakened her for only a minute. Her head bobbed as she fought to stay awake, but the relaxing sound of the warm water combined with the alcohol was too much for her to overcome, and she drifted asleep again. As her head slowly descended into the water, Jacks felt at peace, as if she were floating on clouds. Her body relaxed, and she began to sink deeper into the moving water. Suddenly, her restful descent into death was snatched away.

“Jacks!” shouted the man as he pressed his lips over hers. “Jacks, come on,” he commanded, pressing down on her chest. “Come on, damn it,” he pleaded, covering her mouth and clamping her nose with his fingers as he forced air into her lungs.

Coughing as she regained consciousness, Jacks choked on water coming up from her lungs. Surprised by her hero, Jacks coughed between gasps for air. “Miles,” she struggled to say.

“Yes,” he answered, smiling in relief at his successful rescue.

“Am I dead?” she questioned, reaching for his face.

“No,” he said, smiling at her touch.

She looked around the room. “I must be dead.”

Miles laughed at his disoriented friend. “No, you aren’t dead.”

“Then what are you doing here?” she slurred.

“Saving you.”

Holding her head, she said, “I guess I fell asleep.”

“Jacks, when I came in, I noticed the empty bottle on the table. Is everything all right?”

“I feel better now that you’re here.” She smiled, caressing his face.

Pushing her hand away, he said, “Stay here. Let me get you a towel.”

Miles made a mad dash to get Jacks a towel. He returned and quickly covered her body. He helped her to her feet and led her to the bedroom. Jacks tossed the towel to the floor and sprawled across the bed. Her firm caramel breasts and nipples were pointing to the ceiling. Miles, becoming aroused, quickly snatched the towel off the floor and threw it over her.

Trying to contain his feelings, he said, “Jacks, if you are feeling better, I have to go.”

She sat up. “Go? But—”

Walking toward the door, he asked, “But what?”

“I want you to stay,” she begged.

He searched for the right words to let his mentally fragile friend down, but the only words he could find were the truth. “Jacks, I can’t stay.”

Becoming indignant, she said, “You mean you won’t stay.”

“You’re right; I won’t stay. I’m starting a new life with your sister, and I won’t start it off with an affair. I take my relationships seriously.”

“No one will know,” she pleaded.

“I’ll know,” explained Miles, and he continued walking out of the room.

As Jacks watched the man she loved once again walk out of her life, the alcohol and emotions took over her good judgment.

Miles was about to cross the threshold of the bedroom door when she made one more attempt to keep him there, if only to talk. “Do you like your boys?” she yelled.

Stopping in the doorway, he thought, *What an odd question.*

“Their eyes are hazel, just like yours,” she stated.

Knowing that the woman he loved needed him but being committed to his new life, he said, “Jacks, I love my boys, not because we

happen to have the same eye color, but because they remind me of my love for you, pure and unconditional. I can't tell my heart what to do, but my addictive need to hold you close every night must die."

Miles's words of love ignited Jacks's passion. It reminded her of what a big mistake she made by letting him go. Blinded by love and desperately wanting to correct her mistake, she started to declare her love and confess the web of deceit she and her sister had spun.

"Miles, I love you," she declared.

Miles, fighting back his urge to run into her arms, replied, "I know you do. But it really doesn't matter now, does it?" he lied, fleeing the bedroom before the truth convinced him to stay.

Jacks wanted to chase after him. "Miles!" she yelled. "Miles, my heart will only beat for you," she whispered, falling back on her pillow.

"What do you want with my fiancé?" demanded Maxine, who appeared in the doorway.

Surprised to see her sister, Jacks wrapped her towel tighter. "Where's Miles?" she asked, sitting upright.

Folding her arms and giving Jacks a dirty look, she remarked, "I sent him home."

"How long have you been here?"

"Probably not long enough. I thought you were leaving the city. Imagine my surprise when B.B. called and told us that you were having a difficult time. My fiancé insisted on helping you, like any good friend would. Being that it was our first night alone together as a couple, I had a problem with that, but my fiancé reassured me this would be the last time he saved you," Maxine commented smugly.

Jacks felt her blood pressing against her veins as she became furious by her sister's arrogance. "Then why are you here if you just sent your fiancé here to save your poor pathetic sister's ass?"

“Because I’m no fool,” stated Maxine, walking out of the suite.

Vengeful thoughts ran through Jacks’s mind as Maxine’s smug confident words stung like salt on an open wound. Suddenly, a dose of reality began to soothe her open wounds.

“You chose to let him go,” Jacks reminded herself. “Now let it go,” she reprimanded herself.

Feeling somewhat at peace with her decision but still light-headed from the rum, Jacks rolled over on the bed and quickly fell asleep.

Loving memories of Miles played in her dreams like a romance novel. Suddenly, it was interrupted by the loud ringing of the telephone.

Groggy, Jacks knocked the receiver on the table before picking it up. “Yes, who is it?” she asked with irritation.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, Ms. White, but there’s a Peter Carlton here to see you,” the front desk clerk apologized.

“Peter Carlton, that’s impossible,” she snarled, slamming the telephone down.

Hoping to recall her dream, she snuggled up to her pillow. The telephone rang again.

Snatching the receiver, she screamed, “WHAT!”

“Ms. White, I’m truly sorry, but he has an ID,” said the desk clerk nervously.

I must be dreaming, she thought. “If it’s Peter Carlton, then give him the damn key so he can let himself in. I’m going to sleep and I DO NOT want to be disturbed again.”

A few minutes later, Jacks felt tugging on her shoulder.

“Jacks, Jacks, I’m here for you,” he whispered in her ear.

Thinking it was Miles, Jacks reached out for him. “Miles, you came back.”

Giving her a gentle shove, he said, “Jacks, wake up. It’s me, Peter.”

Groggy, she opened her eyes to Peter's friendly smile. "Peter, what are you doing here?" she asked.

He slid beside her on the bed. "B.B. called."

"B.B. should mind his own business."

Looking into her eyes like a lover, he said, "B.B. cares about you, just like I do."

Jacks smiled at her friend.

Returning a mischievous smile, he said, "Now is there anything I can do for you?"

"Make love to me so for a few moments I can forget this day ever happened."

Peter, willing to accommodate his friend's request, stood up from the bed. Unzipping his pants, he peeled them off, exposing his well-defined tanned thighs. As his pants fell to the floor, he unbuttoned his white oxford shirt, revealing his washboard stomach. Jacks pulled back the covers to allow her lover in to satisfy her. As their lips met, Jacks's energy focused on pleasing the man in her bed. She pushed him on his back and began to kiss him gently on the forehead, then each cheek. Teasing him, she kissed across his neck, then down his muscular chest.

No longer able to handle her hot breathy kisses caressing his body, he flung her on her back as if they were in a wrestling match. Stroking her ample breasts like a bull ready to charge, he nibbled on her ear. Passion erupted as their eager bodies needed to merge. With each thrust of his manly rod inside of her, she lost herself in the pleasure of lovemaking.

They reached the point of no return as he collapsed on top of her. She gently wiped the sweat from his brow and kissed him on the forehead. "Thank you, Peter. I didn't realize how much I needed that."

"You were there when I needed a friend. I'm glad I could finally

return the favor.”

Peter kissed her on the cheek, and they held each other all night.

4

The following morning, Peter's slumber was interrupted by a banging at the door. Carefully removing himself from Jacks's embrace, he covered his body with a plush white hotel robe as he went to answer the door.

"I have a package here for Ms. White," said the messenger.

"Ms. White is asleep. Is it all right if I take it for her?"

The man shrugged his shoulders. "Sure, I don't care," he replied, and handed Peter the large light brown envelope.

"Wait right here. I need to get money out of my pants pocket."

"No need to tip me, sir. It has already been taken care of," said the messenger as he turned and left.

Curious, Peter briefly examined the package, then laid it on the arm of the white pillow sofa.

"Peter?" called out Jacks.

Startled by Jacks's call, Peter quickly turned around. As he rushed to be by Jacks's side, he brushed against the package and knocked it between the sofa cushions.

"Yes, I'm here, Jacks," he called out, returning to the bedroom.

Jacks sat up in bed and stretched. "So it wasn't a dream."

He walked over to the bed. "No, it wasn't a dream," he replied, kissing her on the cheek.

With a playful smile, she complimented him, "It was nice last night."

"It doesn't have to be over." Peter smiled, standing up to disrobe.

Placing her hand on his robe's tie, she said, "It would be nice, but I have a hangover." She moaned, cradling her head.

"Tell you what, we have a couple more hours before checkout. I'll order us some breakfast."

"That's a good idea," said Jacks as she slid off the bed.

Peter ordered breakfast, and Jacks shuffled off to the bathroom to take a shower. As the warm pulsating water gradually awakened her numb senses, the grim reality crept back in. Her life with Miles was over, and she must move on. For a moment, sadness was the dominant emotion as her tears of lost love were swiftly rinsed away. Feeling she had grieved enough, she thought, *I must pull myself together. No more looking back. No more I should have, I would have, and I could have. I shouldn't, wouldn't, couldn't for a reason.* Jacks's pep talk to herself coated her pain with a thick dose of denial.

"Jacks, breakfast is here," said Peter.

Refreshed, Jacks patted herself dry and went to join Peter at the dining area table.

Smiling from ear to ear, Jacks entered the room. "So, Peter, what do we have here?" she asked, sitting down at the table.

Pleased by her mood change, he grinned. "What a difference a shower makes."

"I'm tired of feeling sorry for myself. I made my bed; now I have to lie in it."

"I hear you, boss."

Jacks grabbed the butter knife. "Now, how did you get here so fast?" she inquired, buttering her toast.

"Well, when B.B. told me you were having a difficult time—"

"No, not why you are here, but how did you get here?"

"Oh, I have a friend who owns a charter company. He flew me down."

Placing her hand on his, she whispered, "I'm glad you did. I didn't

realize how much I needed to be close to someone.”

Taking her hand, he caressed the back of it with his soft lips. “You know I always got your back.”

Peter’s fingers softly brushed Jacks’s cheeks. He then replaced his hand with his lips. At that moment, Jacks felt a spark from Peter that touched her crying heart.

“Peter, where did we go wrong?” asked Jacks as the heat from his breath began to ignite her passion.

They both knew the answer to that question as their eyes met in agreement. Drawn like two magnets, their lips collided, erupting into a passionate kiss. They stood up, only to fall to the white carpeted floor. As Jacks began undoing Peter’s robe, there was another knock at the door.

Peter tried to ignore it. “They will go away,” he gasped between kisses.

After a minute, the knocking at the door switched into an obnoxious banging.

“Damn it!” yelled Peter. “I can’t . . .” he apologized to Jacks as he tore himself off of her to answer the door.

“Yes, who is it?” yelled Peter through the door.

“Peter, is that you? It’s me, B.B. Let me in,” he demanded.

“No, go away.”

“I’m not going anywhere. You let me in or—”

“Or what?” Peter dared.

“Or I’ll scream fire.”

Still on the floor, Jacks sighed in defeat. “Peter, let him in,” she said, because she knew that the nut would yell.

“I hate that fag,” protested Peter.

“Let him in,” demanded Jacks.

As Peter unlocked the door, B.B. shoved his way inside.

“Peter, thank God you came,” said B.B. “Jacks was such . . . may

I say it?" he whispered. "A bitch. She upset me so much yesterday I almost forgot to play my numbers."

"B.B., we were about to have breakfast," invited Jacks.

B.B. startled like he'd heard a ghost. "Who said that?" he asked, looking around.

Jacks stood to her feet. "I did." She chuckled.

B.B.'s eyes widened as if Jacks had arisen from the dead. Embarrassed, he leaned over to Peter. "Why didn't you tell me she was there?" he whispered through the corner of his mouth. B.B. walked over with apologetic arms extended. "Oh, Jacks, honey, are you all right?" he asked, throwing his arms around her. "You know, I was so upset after you threw me out yesterday, it took all the strength I had just to go play my lottery numbers," he confessed, pulling away.

Grinning at his concern, she said, "I'm fine. Peter took good care of me." She winked at Peter.

B.B. noticed Jacks's gesture to Peter. "Good care?" questioned B.B., placing his hand on his hip. "I bet he did." He eyeballed Peter like a disapproving father.

Patting the chair next to her, she said, "Come sit down. Peter and I were just talking about the good old days."

"On the floor?" questioned B.B.

Her playful smile revealed her sexual mischief. "I had a back spasm," said Jacks.

Peter didn't feel at ease around B.B., so he sat on the other side of Jacks.

Cradling Jacks's hand, Peter said with a touch of longing, "They weren't good old days; they were a special time that had to end."

Peter and Jacks locked their eyes on each other. With loving smiles, they reassured themselves that they each had no regrets.

B.B. noticed their touching moment. "So what happened?" he asked like he was about to hear a dark secret.

They both began to speak; then Peter gracefully allowed Jacks to start the story.