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## *Chapter 6 - Come And Get Her*

### *Jamal*

**N**ot much had changed by 1998. Jada was 11 years old, and I had come to grips with the fact that I was nothing more than a wallet. Tracy made it clear that my opinions regarding Jada's upbringing carried very little weight. The only time Tracy welcomed my opinion on an issue was when it didn't differ from hers. This frustrated the hell out of me because it seemed like the only time Tracy gave a damn about what I felt was when she needed me to pay for something she couldn't afford.

I took a leave of absence and drove to New Orleans to attend a parental conference with Jada's teacher. I actually arrived at the classroom before Tracy and the teacher did. I smiled proudly as I stood in the classroom amongst the miniature furniture waiting for everyone to arrive. I looked around to make sure no one was looking, and then I tried to sit at one of the desks. It was so small that my legs got stuck. I wrestled my way out of the chair and then started looking at the decorations on the wall. I noticed graded book reports displayed – Jada's report wasn't one of them. My mood changed as I remembered why we had been summoned – Jada wasn't performing well in school.

Tracy and the teacher walked into the classroom together. They were laughing as if they'd already had a meeting. The teacher introduced herself, and proceeded to tell me how Jada had been struggling, and would benefit from a smaller classroom environment.

I sat through the twenty minute meeting with the teacher wishing that the teacher would make her points and shut up. I felt that she was patronizing me – I was convinced that she and Tracy had discussed some things I wasn't being told. When Tracy and I got into the parking lot I was convinced of it. We got into a discussion about Jada's education – the discussion clearly highlighted our difference in philosophies and priorities in the area of education.

“Next school year Jada is going to attend Hillcrest Academy,” Tracy proclaimed, as we stood in the schools parking lot.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because I believe it would be a good environment for her.” Tracy boldly responded.

“That makes no sense. Jada has been struggling in the public school she attends. The curriculum at Hillcrest Academy is much tougher. I think that putting her in that environment would be setting her up for failure.” I replied.

“I disagree. I believe that she would get more attention in a private school setting.”

Once again, I wanted to tell Tracy to shut up. I tried to hold back but I couldn't.

“Tracy spare me! You want Jada to go to Hillcrest so that you can brag to your fake ass - wanna be diva coworkers. Everybody you work with sends their kids to those same private schools for one reason and one reason only...for bragging rights.” I continued, “I don't buy that shit about needing to go to a private school to make it out of New Orleans. I got my Bachelor Degree, my sister got hers, and your sister and brother got their degrees. You know what we all have in common? We all went to public schools! The school doesn't make the person – those who work the hardest usually succeed! That's where the focus needs to be – on her work ethic. Until she develops that – it doesn't matter where she goes to school.”

“I disagree,” Tracy replied as she examined her manicured fingernails.

“What do you mean you disagree? Tracy, I can take a child from out of the St. Bernard projects with a 4.0 GPA, and put her up against any of those private school graduates. Once they all get to college, their level of success is not based on whether or not they went to a private or public school - their level of success in college is based on one thing and one thing only...how bad do they want it!”

Tracy just stood there and listened to my little speech. I assumed that her silence was an admission that I was right. I decided to capitalize on my perceived momentum. I figured there was no better time than the present to ask Tracy for custody.

“I've asked you before, and I'm gonna ask you again, are you gonna let Jada come and live with me for one school year? I know I can get her GPA up to at least the 2.50 level. My schedule is more flexible than yours and I can work with her more than you can,” I watched intently as Tracy appeared to give my proposition some consideration.

Considering the fact that Jada's teacher had just told us the child needed help, I knew that Tracy had no choice but to consider my offer. In an effort to seal the deal I even tried to appeal to Tracy's selfish side.

“Look Tracy, if it's the money you're worried about – you can stop. If you let her come and live with me I won't even ask you for child support.” At the risk of sounding phony I even pretended to be concerned about her lifestyle. “You've been saying you wanted to go back to school – well if Jada's with me you won't have to worry about her while you handle your business.”

Tracy looked at me and then down at the ground. For a second, it appeared that I'd finally won her over.

“I don't know – I gotta think about it,” she replied.

“What do you mean - “you gotta think about it?” Damn girl, can’t you see our child isn’t doin’ well in school?” I yelled and slammed my hand on the hood of my car for affect. “I don’t understand you! There are men out here that don’t give a damn about their children – mutha fuckas ain’t paid child support in years, and don’t even know how the inside of their child’s classroom look. Here I am practically begging you to give me a chance at raising “our” child, and you’re lookin’ at me like you’re retarded.”

Even if I was getting close to convincing Tracy I was right – my outburst blew it. She rolled her eyes and started looking in her purse for her car keys. I could sense I was loosing her so I went for broke.

“You’ve had six years to get her grades right, and this child has struggled every single year in school. You’d rather watch her struggle before you let me take a shot at getting her straight. What’s wrong Tracy? Are you scared I’m gonna actually do a good job and make you look bad?”

Tracy avoided making eye contact with me as she blew a bubble with the gum she was chewing. She stared across the parking lot at a group of kids, and purposely tried to look like she was oblivious to my little diatribe.

“Tracy you’re either gonna be part of the solution or part of the problem. Right about now, you’re lookin’ like a woman who doesn’t give a damn about her child’s education. All you’re worried about is how you’re gonna look as a mother...that’s some selfish shit!” I yelled, as I pointed my finger in his face. “Actually, I think it’s worse than that. I didn’t want to believe this, but the way you’re actin’ I believe Greg was right – all you’re worried about is getting’ those damn child support checks.”

“Whatever! Why are you so set on havin’ her come live with you?” Tracy asked. “Sounds like you’re lookin’ for a way to get out of payin’ child support. And how can Greg comment on somethin’ with his “deadbeat” ass? You’re stupid for listenin’ to anything his “dog” ass has to say!” Tracy yelled as her nostrils flared and veins protruded from her temple.

As we both stood there with our arms folded, a school security guard drove by on a golf cart, and asked if everything was okay. Tracy said, “yes” and the security guard drove away.

I knew that Tracy had already made up her mind to send Jada to Hillcrest, but I was determined to make my position on the issue known.

“Do you know how much that school cost? The money it’s gonna cost to send her to Hillcrest could be placed in a college fund. Besides, how are you gonna pay for Hillcrest? You don’t even earn ten dollars an hour?”

Tracy just stood there silently. Her body language sent me into another verbal assault.

“Ya see Tracy, that’s part of your problem. You got champagne taste on a Kool-Aid budget,” I yelled.

“I’m gonna use the child support check to pay for Hillcrest,” Tracy mumbled as she continued to look away.

“Ain’t that a bitch?!” I shouted. “So what you’re really sayin’ is that I’m gonna pay for Hillcrest. You’re gonna take the money I send you every month, and use it to pay for a school that I don’t want her to go to. Then you’re gonna walk around here with your damn chest stuck out tellin’ everybody (including Jada) that you’re the one paying for that damn school when you know that you’re using my money.”

At that point, I was yelling so loud that the security officer made another drive by.

“That money is for me to take care of her. If I use it to send her to the best schools than that’s my business,” Tracy yelled – with one hand on her hip and neck swaying from side-to-side.

“Bitch you must have fell and bumped your head. You ain’t talkin’ to one of your tired ass girlfriends. I know better than anybody that you’ve never gave a damn about that child’s education – you’re just worried about “keepin’ up with the Jones” and whoever else you think you can impress. If you cared about her education you’d be tryin’ to do what’s right.”

“I do care about my child’s education!”

“Yeah right. So let me ask you this - should I expect another child support increase real soon? I know how you operate. You’re gonna use my hard earned money to send her to a school that I don’t want her to go to, and then turn right around and hit me up for more money.”

Tracy just stood there with her arms crossed. It was plain to see that she didn’t care about my protest. I could feel myself drifting out of control. I snatched Tracy’s car keys out of her hand to make sure I had her attention.

“Jamal give me back my keys.”

“I ain’t givin’ you shit until you agree to let her come live with me.”

“Nigga you got five seconds to give me back my keys or else I’m gonna call that security guard.”

“I don’t give a fuuuuuck! Call that old ass guard. I know one thing – you’re gonna answer me.”

Before Tracy could respond I could feel someone grab my right arm – it was Jada’s teacher. She had been watching the exchange from her classroom window.

“I’m not tryin to get in ya’ll business, but ya’ll really should take this argument somewhere else. I just heard a parent tell someone to call the police,”

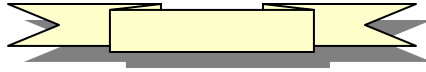
“Thank you Ms. Tillman. I’m sorry about the confusion,” I replied.

When Ms. Tillman turned and walked away, I turned to Tracy and said one more thing.

“This child has not proven that she has the self discipline to study, and you are terrible at making her study. You are sending her to Hillcrest for all the wrong reasons and the shit ain’t gonna work out. Jada should attend a public school for the seventh grade, and work on improving her grades. If she shows improvement then it makes more sense to spend the money to send her to Hillcrest.”

Tracy rolled her eyes, snatched her keys out of my hand, and walked off - leaving me standing in the parking lot.

“She’s going to Hillcrest Academy!” she yelled, as she opened her car door and got in.



## **Tracy**

Jamal always felt he knew more about what was best for Jada than I did. I would have probably listened to some of his suggestions if he didn't talk to me like I was some kind of an idiot.

All he talked about was his money. Sending her to Hillcrest had nothing to do with money. Everyone in New Orleans knows that the public schools are terrible. Hell, everyday on the news there's a story about some child getting jumped or robbed on the school grounds.

I ain't gonna lie, I relied on his child support money to help get me through it. But he acted like he was giving me thousands of dollars. That little \$500 he was sending at that time wasn't enough to last.

I'll bet if Dawn had insisted that Jamal, Jr. attended a private school, Jamal wouldn't have protested. Nope, his hen pecked ass would have written that check without blinking an eye.

So, I didn't care about him getting mad. I'm the one who lived with Jada each day. I knew what she needed at that time. His ass was a long distance father, but if you let him tell it you'd think he was with Jada everyday. Besides, Jada was an unruly child; she needed the type of discipline that the nuns give them at Catholic schools. The public schools were overcrowded – Jada couldn't get the attention she needed.

Ultimately, I was the one who was responsible for her on a day-to-day basis, so you damn right I felt like my opinion carried more weight.