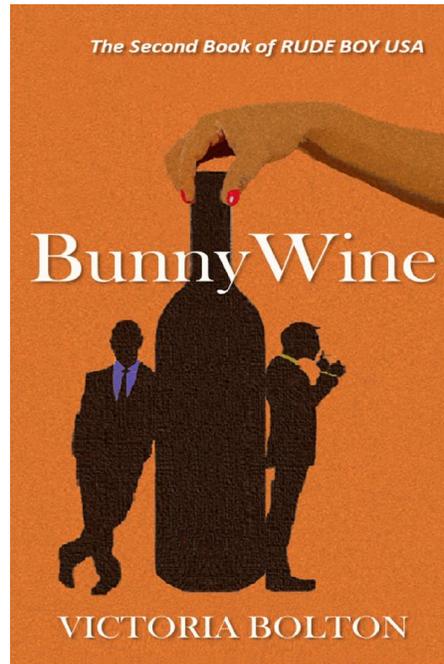


Bunny Wine

(Website Sample Chapter)



VICTORIA BOLTON

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my mom and my religious friends, sorry about all of the curse words.
For everyone else, enjoy!

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His eyes, full of curiosity, look at her. She glances back at him with visceral excitement.

“Okay, I want you to listen to me. First, hold it firmly.”

He put his hands over hers. “You don’t have to squeeze hard. That will make us both nervous,” he added.

“Make sure your arms are right and your shoulders are relaxed. Lean forward, and don’t pull on it. How you grip it is important. You don’t have to force it, but do it enough, so you feel some resistance.”

She looked at him as he continued to explain. “Keep your eyes on it, and start by pressing back without moving anything else. If you jerk too hard or flinch, it may go somewhere else.”

The words made her eager to go. Their hearts began racing simultaneously.

“Relax,” he added.

She held her breath while his body temperature and manhood started to rise. Looking at her in this position made him excited and nervous. She had never done this before.

She held up the gun and fired. The bullet landed right between the legs of the target in front of her. John had messed up her focus. The position of the round made him flinch.

“Okay, we are going to try this again, but this time, I will be behind that window over there while you shoot,” he said while pointing to the bulletproof double-sided glass.

“It is hard to fire a gun over this stomach. Every time I fire it jerks me back,” Bunny replied.

“And that’s why you need to practice,” John answered. “Try again,” he added as he walked behind the glass.

Bunny pointed the gun, aimed, and fired. It landed on the shoulder of the target. “Much better,” John said.

Bunny LeBlanc, formerly known as Celia Jones, had become adjusted to her new life in Jamaica. Moving there was one of the best decisions of her life. Jamaica was the most beautiful island in the Caribbean and living there with the man of her dreams, John LeBlanc, made it better. When she became a citizen of the island, she changed her name. Celia Jones was her maiden name back in New York City. She felt that she was no longer the person who associated with the agnomen. She had made it to the big time, and she needed a big name to match. John called her Bunny because when he met her, she was a waitress at the Playboy Club in New York.

The next plan for Bunny after her arrival was to become acquainted with the island. Before she married, she had spent a year getting to know the area. The mountains that scraped the clouds and the rivers made getting up every day a treat for her eyes. The sun was a welcome departure from the freezing winters and oppressively humid summers in New York. Bunny felt that this setting would change her energy for the positive. Settling down with John afforded

Bunny the luxury of not having to work, but she chose to get a job part-time and continue her schooling. She eventually finished with a degree in music. Bunny thought things would have been different at first. When she decided to marry and go into business with John, she thought she would be out with him doing the inner workings of the mob. She had known for a long time what kind of work he and his former colleagues participated in years earlier. She found the life fascinating but was not a fan of the excessive violence. To her, it was all power, glamor, and mystery that made it appealing.

Being the wife of a former mob associate was not what she thought it would be. Instead of the adventure, John kept her away from it and had her focus her time on community-based activities. He cut back on the most of the illegal activities he used to do but retained the business aspect of the life. He was saved after his baptism at the family church in Jamaica. He refrained from most of the illegal activity that he once participated in. John wanted to keep Bunny sheltered, innocent, and her role in any of his business practices minor. Women who were wives, daughters, or sisters were to be protected. Even though John was not fully active anymore, he held on too many of the traditions and principals of the code.

Being idle was not in her blood. Bunny did not like too much down time. She felt that she would get fat and lazy if she did nothing but shop and clean house all day like other married women in the area. Bunny considered herself to be a trailblazer along with the others in the women's movement who were making moves for themselves. John initially protested to her working and wanted her home twenty-four seven so he could keep an eye on her. He was worried about her safety and the constant admiration from other men because of her good looks. Bunny was seven months pregnant with their second daughter, but that did not deter attention from men in the area. Everywhere she went there was one or two who did not hesitate to hit on her. She even got letters from one particular man who was in prison back in the states. Both Bunny and John knew who he was, but John intercepted those letters before she ever got to see them. John did not want her in contact with any other men, especially this man. He felt there was no need to revisit the past.

Bunny did not like to travel with security. She believed that walking around with big, burly bodyguards brought unnecessary attention to her. All she wanted to do was blend in with the locals. To ease John's fears, he encouraged her to keep a pistol on her at all times when she ventured out. If she were going to defend herself and live up to the oath she took, she would have to learn how to use a gun. The area was just too violent. Frequent trips to the gun range were necessary because Bunny needed a lot of practice. She wasn't very good at handling firearms, and this was a big concern for John. He felt that even if he remained fully active in the mob, she would not fare too well. She had a very long way to go. She was not quite ready to be a Donna, the female version of the Don. The first incarnation of John's old family Chimera used the term for women who were involved in the Cosa Nostra as accessories, and they were more common than many people realized.

After John and Bunny had married a few years back, she became pregnant, which was a surprise for the both of them. The thought of having his own child never crossed John's mind in the beginning. He did not see himself fathering children due to his lifestyle, but when Sophie was

born all of that changed. Holding her reminded him of when he held his deceased best friend, Jerome's, son for the first time as his godfather. It brought a mix of emotions for John as he relished in this little girl who looked just like him and the thoughts of missing his best friend. Sophie was John's biggest accomplishment, and her little sister to come was just another gift to him. John decided that he and Celia would have as many kids as she would allow.

Their married life together had been peaceful as John began to rebuild the business that he and his former associates created from the ground up but this time with a different focus. John wanted to leave behind the days when he walked around as the boss of the organically built crime family, Chimera, and instead become the boss of his natural and growing family. John kept the name and rebranded his company as the New Chimera Group. He was the CEO, and he hired managers to run the daily operations of the smaller businesses.

His second in command, President of New Chimera Corp., Lawrence Bellinger, was a tall, six foot seven, dark brown man born in Houston, Texas but raised in New York City. John and Lawrence met while John was in the aftermath of the original Chimera Investment group and mob family. This was not too long after the death of his best friend, Jerome Dexter, under questionable circumstances. John felt that he had no close friends left besides Bunny but needed some support from fellow brothers in the area. John may have been diverse in his appearance, and he may have a light complexion that appealed to all races, but on the inside he was part of the black community, and he always knew this despite how much he tried not to show it in his early years. They struck up a friendship that soon turned into a business partnership. Lawrence was a known black businessman in Manhattan and the New Jersey area. John admired Lawrence's connections in the business world, both legit and underground. He was impressed with how far Lawrence was able to make it in a turbulent racial environment. Lawrence produced the numbers, and John had convinced him to leave his post at Johnson & Wilson Pharmaceuticals to join him. Lawrence and a few others were instrumental in helping rebuild the New Chimera group, as they are known today. Lawrence attended John and Bunny's wedding and helped usher her entrance in the Omerta. He was not in the mainstream mob but was affiliated with his own group of brothers who had their own activities in the area. Many of these men had dealings with the Jet Mafia, a subgroup that John recruited from Philadelphia in his early days as boss of Chimera to help him.

Violent crime was no longer the anchor for New Chimera. Keeping the legacy of his late surrogate father and boss, Bernie Banks Rhodos, who built the original Chimera Group from the ground up, was important to him. Making this firm a highly respected and successful venture was John's way of honoring him. New Chimera's first focus was the Playboy Hotel in Ocho Rios. The resort was unique to the family because it was where he and Bunny tied the knot. The grounds were beautiful and made a great magnet for corporate events. Playboy Enterprises always had a special place in Bunny's heart, and it upset both of them when they decided to close the resort due to a devastating hurricane and unrest in the area. The price for repairs and increased security was more than the company was willing to spend. They also felt that it was no longer safe for their employees. The building remained empty until New Chimera inquired about gaining ownership and rebranding the resort. The amenities were perfect to turn it into a family vacation spot and tropical corporate event host once the political unrest subsided.

John's other business, BunnyWine, was growing in popularity in the area as well as in the states. The formula was tweaked slightly from its first introduction in New York in 1973. When Lawrence was hired as manager, he and John redesigned the bottle to be all black with a smooth matte finish. They removed the symbol of Bunny in her suit and just had the name BunnyWine in big bold letters up and down on the bottle as well as the production year. The critics in 1980 ranked the wine as the single greatest wine they had ever tasted. Several critics rated the wine one hundred out of one hundred. They scored it high because of the balance of alcohol, unusual fruity flavor, and dense texture, a combination they never tasted before. *Thick, chewy and incredibly sweet, yet still fresh*, the critics raved. In celebration, the wine was officially rebranded as BunnyWine 1980. John was proud of his accomplishment of finally finding his dream bottle and running a winery business. He was also proud of the source in which the wine flavor was created, his wife's orgasm. John never revealed the source to anyone outside the original creator of the wine and Bunny. He wanted to keep it that way despite numerous inquiries from Lawrence and others. That was part of the allure and popularity of the wine, along with its flavor and value. The businessman in John kept the price for the drink high, giving BunnyWine the exclusivity he felt it deserved. He may not have had any college degrees, but he understood business, and that was one of his strongest points. BunnyWine remained in Kingston and employed many of the residents. Keeping the winery was their way of giving back to the local community during tough periods. At a time when businesses were leaving Jamaica in droves because of the socialist policies, John and Bunny decided to stick it out. The move made them popular with the locals.

In 1980, Kingston Jamaica was in great turmoil. It was election season and since John and Bunny's arrival on the island, political violence ruled the day. Ideological and policy divisions in the political system caused nearly one thousand people to be killed in political clashes. Manley was ousted because of his democratic socialist policies that had become increasingly unpopular. The United States labeled it communism, and the heavy economic sanctions imposed by the US government crippled the economy. The US government did not appreciate the friendly relationship between Fidel Castro of Cuba and Manley. The penalties made it hard for the residents without means to survive and live comfortably. This contributed to the clashes of the locals. BunnyWine survived because of its growing international popularity and the respect it had from the people there. John was initially excited to move there with Bunny but, after a while, the love affair living in the heart of Kingston soured a little bit.

The Jamaican Labor Party won the election in 1980 and violence erupted. Downtown Kingston was hit the hardest as well as Trenchtown and Tivoli Gardens. The JLP right wing party was headed by Edward Seaga, who was a former music promoter. He secured the election which won the favor of the United States and the CIA. They were successful in throwing Manley, who was head of the People's National Party, out of office. The money Seaga attained through this favorable relationship with the US was used to buy guns that were dispersed throughout the ghettos of Kingston. They paid groups of youths to fight those who were supporters of the PNP. The kids included small children who were trained to use the firearms. These guns were used in the eruption of violence that happened soon after and lasted for nine months. Many of the gunmen eventually became yardies. This was to discredit the sitting

government abilities to keep the peace in Jamaica. Parties on each side battled each other for votes. The violence reached everyone. Amidst the violence, someone affiliated with the CIA used a flammable petroleum jelly that was not available in Jamaica to set fire to the Eventide home where hundreds of elderly women resided. More than one hundred fifty of them perished in the fire. Their phone wires were cut so they could not call for help, and the exits were blocked. The place burned down in less than ten minutes. Bunny was out one evening with her mother when a fierce gunfight broke out between clashing groups in the area. They were huddled in one of the homes of a local for hours until the gunfire ended. The bullets did not discriminate. They hit houses, trees, and anything in their path. One of the bullets went through the wall of the house, ricocheted off of a desk, and missed Bunny's head by inches.

John loved the people, but political unrest and violence became an issue for him and his family. The sound of gunfire became just as ordinary as the traffic sounds would be back at home in New York City. He made the decision to move the family to a higher income area due to the turbulence. He felt that it was safer for them. John still wanted to give back to the community because his daughters were now natives. He wanted their birthplace to be a little better. He had a good relationship with the police, but he did not want to chance things by crossing them.

John had his own political ideas on how things should be run. His decisions were heavily influenced by Bunny. When she arrived, not only did the great weather and excellent tourist atmosphere attract her, but the passion of a government that put people first. That philosophy had changed over the past decade, and corporate interests were taking over once again. Bunny and John were part of the corporate machine although they did not outwardly reflect that to the community. Their hearts were behind Manley, and they made sure to take care of their people. John considered a run for political office, but first, he decided to invest in local community projects as well as some back home in New York. He imagined being like Manley, who at one point used to be picked up in crowds in Jamaica by those who celebrated him. John had the looks and the ability to convince even the toughest critic that he was a good guy. There were doubters, and John knew that he had to work on them a little longer.

When it was time for the kids in the area to return to school, John and Bunny sponsored back-to-class backpack and school supply drives and giveaways. He built basketball courts and recreational buildings on school grounds, and in Bunny's name established a music center and filled it with brand new instruments and other music equipment for the local schools there. Bunny volunteered her time to teach the school kids, especially the girls, the fundamentals of music writing and playing the piano. They were heroes. John was able to live peacefully here without the fear of the law, and he appreciated that. Karlus, an established local church minister, benefitted greatly from the LeBlanc family. He had married them and baptized John. His church got a new building with updated Bibles and other materials. By the time Sandra, their second daughter, was born Bunny and John were ready to reinvent themselves as heavy political influencers.

To solidify their future political ambitions, John and Bunny decided to take a chance and return to New York. John wanted to start a foundation to help the underserved youth in New York City. He knew he had a reputation for years before, but his strategy was to show them that

he was a changed man and that he did not run with organized crime anymore. He wanted to use his life as a testament to earn the favor of the people. The foundation would run along the same lines as the one they had established in Jamaica. He had Mariana Dexter in mind to run it. Mariana was Jerome's widow and mother of their son, Jerome Jr. John felt that this foundation would be a good thing for the both of them and give their son something to have for the future. John contacted Mariana about the idea and after hours of conversation and impromptu planning, the Dixon Rhodos Scholarship Foundation was founded. The name is in honor of both Jerome and Bernie. Their first line of business was to hold a fundraiser for business people who they knew would contribute. While John and Bunny made their plans to return home to New York, Mariana got on the phone with friends of the family who could help. She got the word out to everyone that John and Bunny were having a homecoming.

It had been years since John and Bunny returned to the states. They were off the radar for some time; both of them thought it was safe to go back for a while. John, Bunny, the kids, and her mother left and boarded a plane back to New York City for the first time in seven years. While Bunny decided to settle in a room at the residence where Mariana and Jerome Jr. lived, John returned to the Bronx to meet with Mariana and Jerome Jr. He and Bunny tried to convince her to move to a better section of the city and offered money for her to leave the area. John thought that it was his duty as Jerome Jr.'s godfather to do so. He and Bunny offered Mariana a high-level position at BunnyWine, Inc., but she would have to move herself and the baby to Jamaica. Mariana declined the offer. She wanted to stay with her extended family that still remained in the South Bronx. Being a widow was hard for her, and she missed Jerome dearly. Her family provided comfort for her as she had her moments of postpartum depression. She never imagined raising a baby alone. Bunny and John would send Mariana gifts for her and Jerome Jr. for Christmas, birthdays, and when it was time for Jerome Jr. to go to kindergarten. The gifts came with a condition that she would not be too flashy due to the area she lived. People may would think she was loaded, and that would put her and the baby at risk. Mariana loved the Bronx. Despite its drawbacks, the Bronx had the most clubs, the most musicians, and the place was spiritual to her and her family. South Bronx and East Harlem were where her heart laid and where she lost her husband to violence. Her soul was there, and she could not bring herself to leave. She felt that way every time she stepped off the number 2 train.

Returning to the area was a shock to John. He and Bunny had been in Jamaica for only a few years but during that time, some things had changed back home. The area was desolate when he left, but it seemed it had become worse in just a few short years. Garbage was everywhere. Bikes were chained to poles, but some were missing their tires. Biker groups had joined the ranks of gangs in the area. The partially boarded, abandoned, and burned out buildings were still there, but the amount of them had multiplied to where there were entirely burned out blocks. In the late Seventies, the South Bronx had practically burned to the ground. However, he saw kids bring mattresses and pieces of furniture into some of these buildings. They were building their own hangouts from the ashes. The kids did this because the city sold some of those abandoned buildings for a dollar and, in turn, they built their own clubs. Kids would spend days there, many times many mothers were looking for their kids because they spent so much time in these rundown makeshift clubs. Sprinklers were opened with kids playing in the water; graffiti remained on the trains but had gotten worse. The entire city was covered in colorful scribbles.

One of them he noticed said “broken promises” and another row of train cars spelled “criminals winning again.” Virtually every train in the city was covered with elaborate spray painted designs on the outside. Inside the trains, every inch had something written on it. The cars used to be clean, and everyone who rode was dressed nicely. Now it seemed that the people who rode them were downtrodden or carefree. The handwritten décor had become part of ordinary life but also brought fear to some people who rode them. The people who painted the murals took pride in their work and considered it getting up, a way to get their name known in the city. Basketball was big, and kids were playing in every open court in the park or a makeshift court in the street with a hoop made from a milk crate that was hoisted and tied to a pole.

One thing John noticed, the music seemed to unite some of the various groups in the area. Assemblies of teenagers jammed in the parks, breakdancing on flattened cardboard boxes while rap music played on boom boxes. Some of them had their own systems setup with speakers, amplifiers, turntables, and records. They were hotwired to the streetlight poles to power the equipment. Many people assembled outside to watch the DJ battles between the groups. Everything was cool between the b-boys, as they were called, as long as no one stepped on anyone else’s Adidas. The atmosphere was enjoyable, but the music was not something John could relate to. There were fliers for DJ events everywhere. Fab Five Freddy’s sounds were attractive, but John did not understand the rap music and thought that it lacked real instruments and deft. It was nothing like the SKA, Rocksteady, and Blues that he loved. John grew up in a different era. He attributed it to getting older. He no longer saw pockets of Irish and Jewish residents. It seemed they had all fled the area. The flight was attributed to the construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway. It was the roadway that allowed these families to practically drive away from the deteriorating area for good. When President Ford visited the area and subsequently told New York City to drop dead a few years before, the area never seemed to recover. They never got the aid they needed to get everything back on track.

Bunny and Mariana had met up for the first time in a while. They were happy to see each other. Bunny gave Jerome Jr. a big hug and a kiss. He was a sweet and healthy child with an excellent temperament just like his father had. He looked just like Jerome Sr. except the little boy had his mother’s skin tone and looser textured hair.

“He is so sweet. What is it like to have a boy?” Bunny asked Mariana.

“Boys are entertaining. They are rough, and they love to get filthy. I am constantly trying to keep this boy clean,” Mariana said.

“John always wanted a son. I hope it happens. We already have two girls. He wants more testosterone around. He’s outnumbered,” Bunny said.

“Are you going to try for another one in the future?” Mariana asked.

“It’s happening now,” Bunny responded.

“Are you serious? You just had one. Give your uterus a rest, why don’t you,” Mariana joked.

“This one feels different. I think it may be a boy this time. I’m going to tell him soon, but I want to make sure. I am only a few weeks, so I will have to get to a doctor to make sure. It’s very early. I was instantly sick with the first two. This time, I’m all right.”

Mariana starts counting on her hands. “Your baby girl isn’t even a year old yet. Sandra isn’t even in kindergarten yet. You gotta have a gap in between kids so you can snap back or else you won’t get your shape back. You are not showing right now, but you are going to blow up and stay that way if you keep doing that.”

“I know. If this is a boy, I’m taking a break,” Bunny said.

Mariana wanted to go out for the evening. A lot of places had opened up in the city since Bunny and John had left, and Mariana wanted to show her. She had her favorite places. Bunny was still able to go out before her body began to actually change.

“It’s been awhile. We need to go out. Don’t worry; I will take you to the safe places, got to protect the boy. I have some places to tell you about then we can choose.”

“I’m interested. Tell me about it,” Bunny said.

“Well, there is The Paradise Garage. It’s cold in there, but once you start dancing, you heat up. The lights are great, and the music is good. There is a decent mix of crowds on different nights. Then we have the big one, Studio 54. All of the stars go there. I know someone who works there, the guy who works the door so I can get in at any time. It’s good to have the connections here,” Mariana explained.

“Now that place sounds great.”

“You need to see this club. It’s big, like theater big. It’s pretty glamorous, dancing galore, fun people. They play Disco, but there are drugs, lots of drugs there. Be careful about going into the bathrooms because people have sex in there so you may want to pee before you leave, and don’t drink too much. I went in one of those bathrooms once and saw too much. Another night I went to the club, a naked woman on a white horse was riding everywhere in the middle of the dancefloor. Tits, ass, and everything bouncing on this horse while it rode around and everybody was enjoying it. She was like the club’s mascot or something. On another night in the downstairs room, the room where all of the secret stuff goes on, Mrs. Carter was there. I am not joking girl. The president’s mother was down there smoking a joint. I saw Jacksons, rock people, you name it. You would not believe the people who show up and sat down there. I’m gonna take you there,” Mariana boasted.

“Okay, that does not sound like a place I need to be. I have children.”

“I am a mother, too, but sometimes as parents, we need a break. Jerome Jr. is a great kid, but he can be a handful. He’s right about that age where they start thinking for themselves. He is too big for me to keep him on my lap now. I just send him over to my mom, and I go out to let off some steam. You can’t be in mommy mode all of the time. You would go nuts, especially here. It’s the 1980’s now, enjoy it before your fun goes away,” Mariana said.

“Well, I’ll think about it, but I won’t drink anything and just keep me away from the joints. I don’t like either. I don’t want to get roofied.”

“Okay, nun woman,” Mariana said, and put her hands together in a prayer pose.

“What else has happened here?” Bunny asked.

Mariana sat down at the table.

“You missed so much here. We had that blackout. Girl, everything got looted. It wasn’t sudden; it was like one by one stuff started going off. It was hot as hell that day, and we had like four fans running. The TV went off, and I thought we did something like overload the circuits. Then we went outside to go down to the basement and saw that everything was off. People started filling the streets and then just like that, people were out of control. People were running around; you heard glass breaking, guns going off and shit. It was only for like a day, but when it

was dark, you couldn't see shit around here. I had the baby in here hiding with me. We didn't want to get caught out there. They looted everything and then burned more stuff. We didn't have a functioning grocery store for ages after that. They robbed the banks, the department stores, everything. Even the white people were doing it. But guess what, I didn't hear about anybody dying. They were all too busy getting free stuff. My cousins brought back so much stuff; they had to store some of it in my apartment. They had brought a refrigerator full of stuff and then some other things," Mariana said.

"I've heard about that. I hope they didn't catch you with any of that stuff," Bunny said.

"Well, I didn't personally take anything. Like I told you I stayed in here with my baby, but he had enough clothes and shoes to last him for a bit. My cousins brought stuff back for everybody. I didn't like that they did that because stealing is wrong, but who was I to tell them to stop. Everybody was out there. I could do nothing but mind my own business."

"Good. I don't want to think that we are harboring a criminal," Bunny joked.

"Ha ha, very funny," Mariana said. She continued to talk.

"Then we had the killer. This Sam guy was running around just shooting random folks. He didn't have a type either, he just randomly picked people and shot them. He had all of us scared, even the gang bangers, at least, the ones in Manhattan. He didn't come up this way because I guess he didn't care about shooting us. He probably felt sorry for us over here. Either that or he would have been smoked in no time. That was also a few years ago."

"They caught that guy, didn't they?" Bunny asked.

"Yes, they did. Thank God for that."

"You know where I wanna go? I want to see the old building," Bunny said.

"What old building?"

"Chimera. I just want to see what it looks like now. I know it's not ours anymore, but I want to see it. I haven't seen anything about it since it burned down. I am thinking about taking John over there to see it."

"That's deep. How do you think he would take it?" Mariana asked curiously.

"I don't know," Bunny answered.

Brenda Wilson was just like every other citizen of the South Bronx. Like many Afro-Latinas in the area, she has been hardened by the circumstances of life and her choices. She and others in the area saw that her future was limited by her means. Brenda previously gained her funds by attaching herself to her male partners and whatever low paying jobs she could attain. This was the only way she knew how to survive. She has a son to take care of, and he required a lot of attention. Her self-declared boyfriend was in prison. His name was Ben Berardi, a former Mafia associate, and failed drug dealer. He was the biological father of her son, Junior.

Brenda had to make some tough choices during her pregnancy. Her then-boyfriend, Jose, was murdered in a gang fight, and her affair with his roommate Ben left her unsure of the paternity of her unborn child. Until she was sure, she passed the child off to Jose's family as his. She did not have many choices. Ben was arrested shortly after Jose's death in unrelated circumstances. Ben could not provide any monetary support to her while in prison. When Junior was born, it became apparent to her who his father was, and she knew that she had to take measures to make sure her secret was not discovered unless Ben was able to make it out of prison early.

Brenda did not change much after the death of Jose and Ben's incarceration. She wanted to make sure that the boy connected with Ben at all costs. To not trigger suspicion from Jose's family, Brenda referred to the boy as Junior at all times. She told Jose's family that calling him Junior was better than calling him Jose. This way, calling the baby Junior around both Ben and Jose's family would not have her slip up with the names. She planned to tell Jose's family about the real situation one day but not before she got herself together and had a clean way to escape. Brenda was forced to get a day job to support herself. In her spare time, she enjoyed smoking reefer as a way to relax. Brenda never kicked the habit. Thankfully she never picked up the heavier drug habits that she learned from Ben during the time of their affair. She did retain the knowledge of how to produce heroin. She felt that she would put that useful info to practice if she had no other options.

Brenda did not have homemaking skills despite growing up with many brothers and sisters in a cramped apartment in Harlem. Her studio flat was a mess with toys and clothes scattered throughout. Brenda moved away from home shortly after Junior was born. With the help of donations from some of Jose's friends in the Ghetto Brothers, she was able to find her own place. The rest of her family could not help her, and there was no room in the small apartment for another person. Many of them had their own issues with life and the law. Her mother stopped speaking to her once she found out about the pregnancy because she felt Brenda was her best chance at having a successful child, but that proved to be a failure.

She often had her utilities shut off as there were times she only had enough to pay the rent and not much else. Her landlord took full advantage of her and showed no mercy for her situation. There were many other single mothers in the area in the same predicament. Why would Brenda be unique? The only consistent meals she could muster up and afford on her own were noodles, grilled cheese, peanut butter jelly sandwiches, and whatever she stole from her job at Caldor. Vegetables and dairy items were expensive, so she could not consistently feed him cereal or cook him full breakfasts and dinners. All Brenda could provide was soda and water for beverages. She knew that this was not proper nutrition, but it was all she could do on her own. Junior was old enough to understand that he was not being cared for properly at home. He preferred to go to his grandmother's house and eat. Grandmother would cook big meals for him. Junior would complain, "Mommy, I want real food." Brenda would sometimes snap at him. "Get a job. You're five years old? Well, then you will eat what I give you or starve!" She felt sick when she would yell at him and would make it up by offering him candy so he would feel better. It was all she knew what to do to keep him calm. Minor things out of order would often upset him. Junior had issues with tantrums, and she did not know why or what set him off. She was terribly worried that he was a special needs child, and she did not know how to handle that. There were not many resources available to poor mothers in the Bronx at the time. She would try to read to him but was often too tired to do so once she left work for the day. Junior's speech was not bad, but he lacked social skills. He was good when it came to begging. His favorite words were, "I want." He would be six years old soon, and she figured that he would start kindergarten shortly. Hopefully, whatever was going on with him and his development would improve once he started school on a daily basis. She thought it had to work since he would be there every day.

In the beginning, Brenda had one of her neighborhood friends, who stayed at home on welfare, to watch Junior for a small fee or some weed for payment. When she did not have the means to pay this babysitter, she dropped Junior off at his Grandmother Rita's apartment. Rita was Jose's mother. She was a traditional churchgoing Hispanic woman and had high hopes for Jose when he was young. Rita was disappointed in his choice to join the Ghetto Brothers gang. She wanted her son to get married and get a regular job but disapproved of his choice of girlfriend. Even under the best circumstances, Rita would have never allowed Jose to wed Brenda.

Rita was a reluctant babysitter, but she did it as a favor. For most of Junior's life, she thought that he belonged to Jose, but there were little things that made her question his paternity from time to time. Rita never trusted Brenda as she knew that Brenda was one of those girls who ran with the gangs on the street and was loose with her body. Jose's mother was still in deep mourning for the loss of her son and wanted any small part of him to remain active in her life. Rita was also a widower as her husband died when Jose was young, and Jose grew up as an only child. Rita, and the rest of Jose's family, would spend lots of money on Junior because they felt sorry for Brenda and him growing up without a father. Brenda was appreciative of this and took full advantage of the situation. At times, the gifts were so plentiful that she had money left over at the end of the month. Rita provided food, toys, and money to Brenda for Junior. Instead of saving the money that she earned from her job, Brenda spent it on herself. The sporadic hardships did not stop her from the occasional shopping splurge on herself at the stores in the Bronx, Orchard Street, Grand Street and Delancy Street, or "D-Street," as it was known in Manhattan. Brenda made sure she stayed in the latest designer clothes like sheepskin coats, bomber jackets, Bally shoes, and British Walkers for her and the baby. Appearance was important in the early Eighties. You could be poor but don't look poor. Brenda had the funds to pay for the items she bought, but she could never leave those stores without some haggling from the shop workers for whatever money she could afford to pay. She felt that she and Junior deserved it. Rita knew that Brenda was wasteful, and she was resentful of her irresponsible behavior. Rita would often have an attitude with Brenda as a result.

While Brenda worked and shopped, Rita struggled with Junior. She made numerous attempts to bond with him by taking him to the park or church activities where other small children were playing. Junior would sometimes not make eye contact with other kids, and when he was pressed by them, he would snap and hit them. His tantrums were loud and distracting. This caused concern wherever they went, and there were a couple of times Rita was asked not to bring Junior around or to find him some help. The members of Rita's church group loved to gossip and talk about other people. A big topic of conversation was Junior's appearance. He was the whitest child in the entire congregation. The questions from the other women would be, "How did he get so light skinned? You must be happy with that straight hair." Rita knew something wasn't right. Jose was brown with coarser hair. She knew it was always a possibility of a baby having a distant relative's genetics, but both Brenda and Jose did not fit the bill. Junior's eyes were too light. They had a bluish tone, and that was unusual for brown-skinned people. His behavior was more aggressive than other babies in her family. She continued to care for Junior until one afternoon while walking down the avenue with a fidgety Junior and a grocery bag, another person on the street stopped her and asked Rita if she were babysitting for a white family. She

wanted to see if Rita would take other children to look after. This set Rita off, and she decided to confront Brenda once and for all. She'd had enough of the arrangement.

Rita waited until Brenda got off of work to confront her. When they arrived back at the apartment, Junior was having yet another afternoon of severe tantrums after Rita would not let him run around outside alone. Rita was at her wits end. She was so fed up that she pulled out a roll of duct tape from her kitchen drawer, ripped a piece off, and put it over Junior's mouth to shut him up. Rita made sure not to cover his nose because she did not want to kill him. She just wanted a few minutes of peace and quiet. He continued to cry and scream under the tape until his face turned red. He eventually stopped and went to the corner of the room to fiddle with some toys while the tape was still over his mouth. When Brenda arrived to pick him up, she saw Junior's state. She lost it.

"Why does he have tape over his face? Are you watching what he's doing?" Brenda asked as she went over to Junior to remove the tape.

Junior screamed that it hurt as she tried to pull it, but his snot and tears loosened the grip of the tape. She was able to remove it. Brenda left him in the corner with his toys, and he resumed playing as if nothing happened.

Brenda walked over and stood right in Rita's face. Her voice was curt. "What the fuck is your problem. Who tapes a baby's face?"

"I'm tired of this. Tell me the truth right now! This boy is not from us, is he? He is not Jose's son. He's white! Nobody has blond hair in this family! His eyes are blue, and you are too dark to pull that off," Rita told her.

"How could you say that about him? He's right over there!" Brenda snapped back.

"I don't care. He doesn't listen to me anyway," Rita yelled.

Junior knew that his mother and grandmother had another disagreement. He was young, but he knew when he was around people who were stressed. They were never quiet when they fought. "I don't care anymore! He's destructive; he throws things and has tantrums. He doesn't listen. None of the children in this family ever behaved that way. I could never bond with him, and now I know why. Did you know someone on the street, a stranger, thought I was walking around with a white baby? Do you know how much they talk about me in church? Don't you know how embarrassing that is? You bring in this baby and take advantage of this family. You use Jose's memory for your own gain. I bet you don't know who this child came from, you slut!" she screamed.

Brenda raised her hand and hit Rita across the face. Rita was too shocked to hit back.

"For your information, I do," Brenda snapped.

Stunned, all Rita could do was yell at Brenda. "Do not hit me! Get out of this house. Take that baby and get out of here! Go and find his real family. Until you can prove he belongs to us, you or that child don't ever come back here! If you do come back here, I'll call the police and tell them you hit me!" Rita yelled.

Brenda knew she messed up, but her pride would not let her apologize. She knew Rita was right about everything she'd said. She went over and grabbed Junior and his jacket, and left the apartment to never return.

“You were the worst thing that has ever happened to my son! He did not deserve you! He deserved better!” Rita yelled and cried at Brenda as she and Junior walked away from the family for the last time. “I want every penny we ever gave you back!” Rita continued to yell. “Nanah!” Junior said as he reached out to her. Rita slammed the door in his face.

Everything transpired so quickly that Brenda had no time to process what had just happened. She returned to her apartment and put a restless Junior in the tub for his bath. Brenda cried as she cleaned him. Junior sensed that she was stressed and calmed down for the first time in hours. He looked at her with a feeling of pity and confusion. “I’m sorry, Mommy, don’t cry,” he said to her, not understanding why she was in tears. She looked at him. “It’s okay. We’ll be okay. We don’t need her,” she told him and continued to clean him. Brenda was helpless and felt that the only person she could turn to for help was Ben. What was she going to do with Junior while she worked? She knew she could not go back to grilled cheese every day for her son. Brenda was angry at herself for messing up a good thing. She had to think of something quick. Brenda had friends who had resorted to turning tricks for a night or two to catch up on bills or in the case of an emergency. Once she finally put Junior to bed for the evening, she found a phone and called one of her friends. This was not a long term plan for her. She was doing this for her baby and had plans to give some of it to Ben in the commissary. Brenda was in a bind and couldn’t think of anywhere else to go for some quick money. She needed someone to watch Junior until she made other solid plans. Her access to weed was limited, so her neighbor would not be an option if she could not pay her anything else. Brenda managed to get her neighbor to watch him on an IOU for a couple of nights.

A two-mile stretch of Jerome Avenue was the hotbed for prostitution, and this was the area Brenda was instructed to go to for her first trick. She would pick her customers and have them take her to the recommended motel on the strip which was The Jerome on 176th Street. This motel was the one that her friends told her to go to do her tricks. The late night staff knew about the women who would bring men there on a nightly basis as these were some of the same women every day. They kept quiet and let them use the rooms for a cut. The charge was twenty-five dollars for a short stay although they didn’t openly advertise this. The hotel was under investigation for promoting prostitution by police officials. The workers were scared of getting arrested if they knowingly let the women use the rooms. That did not deter the girls from using it. Unless the authorities closed the motel for good, the police would come, the girls disappear for a while and, once the radar goes off of them again, the girls return and bring their clients with them like clockwork. The customers went there because of the easy access to heroin, women, and anything else they wanted was right there on Jerome Avenue. Brenda’s friends told her that if she were good with her skills and delivered, she could bring in as much as three hundred dollars that night. They instructed her to be careful to not confront the other girls on the strip. Some were territorial. Brenda was used to showing her skills to men who she’d actually dated or knew in some way. She was not used to strangers and hoped that this one night that she needed the money would go smoothly and would be enough to hold her up for a while.

Brenda wore her most attractive club outfit. It was one of the skin-tight halter tops she wore when she went out looking for a man. It wasn’t flashy, but it was hot pink. Her miniskirt was short but stylish. She liked the skirt because it had back pockets that kept things secure. Brenda

was still attractive, so it did not take long for cars to pull up to her. She was selective in whom she chose to go with. If the car was cheap or if the man looked weird, she passed them up. Most of the men were this way, so Brenda was worried that this trip was a bust. She only needed one guy who was loaded. Not too long after she passed up a bunch of offers, Brenda got in an expensive BMW with a man who looked friendly, and they drove twenty blocks from her post. He insisted that he was taking her to a safe spot. He was dressed in a business suit and still on had his wedding band. They stopped at the side of a building in a middle-class neighborhood that had its streetlights half off. Brenda did not seem alarmed because the houses on the block looked well maintained. The customer parked his car, and the man handed Brenda a one-hundred-dollar bill. Brenda was happy about the large payment on her first try and decided to get it over with. This should be quick, she thought. Brenda inquired about why they were there and not the recommended hotel she mentioned. He told her that he knew people who worked there and did not want to be noticed. He had a family, and his reputation was important to him. Brenda took the money, folded it, and secured it in her back pocket. He immediately unzipped his pants and pulled out his penis. He grabbed the back of her head to get her to suck it. Brenda resisted. She told him to wait. The man got angry after ten seconds. He wanted her to start immediately and get it over with so he could go home. She asked him to put on a condom. He resisted because he did not want to use one. She did a quick examination to make sure nothing looked off about his penis and started, but stopped because she did not like his smell, and it made her gag. She put her head back up.

“Something else, let’s do something else. I have condoms, please,” she told him.

“I did not pay you for something else. I want this,” he said.

“I can’t do this.”

Brenda’s conscience was beginning to get to her. She knew it wasn’t a place she should be. She thought about Junior and wanted to return home to him. The man got angrier as he waited for her to perform and grabbed the back of her head to force it back down. Brenda fought, but he began hitting her in the head and pushing it down hard. She managed to bite him on his penis. He yelled and started cursing at her for taking his money and not delivering. He started grabbing her body in hopes of finding the hundred dollar bill he’d just given her. She tried to get out of the car, but he had started it and began to drive off. She managed to get the door open when he was halfway down the block and fell out when he turned the corner. Brenda hit her head on the car door and pavement as he drove off. She laid there for a couple of minutes on the side of the street. Her head was spinning. She closed her eyes for a few seconds then reopened them. She sat up and remained there until she managed to get up. She had blood coming from her mouth from her busted lip and a mild concussion. Her face had tiny scratches on it from hitting the ground. Her arm scraped on the pavement, her top torn, and she was dizzy and confused but managed to stand up. She did not know where she was and decided to walk until she found an open bodega to get help. She took her thin wallet out from her left back pocket, took out the twenty dollars she had at the beginning of the evening, and put the money in her right back pocket with the hundred-dollar bill, and threw it on the street. When she got there, the man behind the counter was mortified with what he saw. He asked her what happened. She told him she was robbed. She would never tell anyone that a trick had knocked her out of his running car. He told her to stay put while he called the police. This was the first and last night she would turn a trick for money.

Brenda decided it was not for her. Raising Junior was tough but not worth messing up her life by being a temporary prostitute.

Brenda was taken to the hospital where she treated and released. It was morning, and she called her neighbor and asked if she could keep Junior for the rest of the day. Brenda would pay her an extra ten dollars for the trouble. She went home and tended to her scratches. She was an expert in makeup application, so covering it would not be an issue for her.