

erly version of prison. But his boys didn't need to know that.

"You'd be lonely too if you was living in Hicksville, two towns over from the middle of nowhere!" Dawud said and laughed. A girl with braids roller-skated by and ignored them when they called to her.

"You gonna be down in one of those backwards towns like where all that Freddy Krueger stuff be going down. Little ass towns where people don't be locking they front doors and be knowing each other's name and be all up in your business," Howie said. "Better you than me."

"I'll be back before you know it," Jason said.

"Don't come back up here talking all that *y'all come back now ya hear*, know what I'm saying?" Justice said.

Smalls said, "This nigga gonna be square-dancing. Talking about yee-ha!"

"Gonna be listening to some Dolly Parton. He come back and be like, *Biggie who? Tupac what?*" Dawud joked.

Smalls said, "Least they got honeys down there. You know, them big-legged, cornbread-eating girls."

"Church girls," Justice said.

"*Yeah.*" They all said it.

"Good girls. Go to church on Sunday, turn you out on Monday," Howie said.

"Put a hurting on you," Smalls teased.

"Yeah, clear up all them bumps on your face. Skin be mad clear from all the play you'll be gettin'," Justice said.

let someone else get caught. Inside he turned to jelly each time while he waited to see if a police officer would come out from behind the door to the fake janitor's closet. He only sold weed to people he knew. He only broke into the public pool at night, when it was all full and no one would be able to pinpoint him specifically if the cops came and broke it up. He didn't go anywhere with his boys on the first of the month if he could help it. He wasn't into robbing old ladies and their home attendants for SSI checks. He was a punk in thug's clothing and he knew it and they knew it, but they were kind enough not to say it out loud. He was with them because there was nowhere else for him to be. He wasn't smart; he wasn't athletic or artistic or talented in any way. He played basketball and tried to freestyle because everyone else did, but he wasn't even good enough to be mediocre at either. He had no plans and no prospects. He was a black boy—without exceptional height or skill—who could not ball and who could not rap, and as such, no one cared what he did or where he went or what he became, least of all himself.

He didn't talk to his mother as they sat on opposite sides of his duffel bag and let the taxi take them to the airport. She cast worried glances at his profile; he pretended not to notice.

"I'm sorry I had to do it like this," his mother said, "but you know how you are."

Dawud said, “Won’t know what to do with yourself. Put some in your pocket and save it for later.”

“Maybe I’ll just airmail some back to you niggas. Be all you ever get,” Jason finally said. He had let them go on at his expense because he had the feeling he would miss them, because he knew the jokes hid the envy.

*Better you than me.* They had all been thinking it when Howie said it. But even if they’d wanted to, none of them could have switched places with him. His mother wasn’t a crack-head. They were poor because she was raising him by herself, not because she was smoking her money up or giving it to some fool who was constantly going upside her head. Jason knew who his father was—every once in a while he even came by whenever his mother asked him to “talk some sense into” Jason. Many of his friends had Southern relatives, but none of them would ever be sent Down South. He and they were different. He didn’t relish the difference, but he recognized it. He didn’t think it made him better; it just set him apart. And Howie and Dawud and Smalls and Justice all knew it, too.

Which is why they left him out of some things. They never asked him to walk to the store with them because they didn’t want him to see them using food stamps and their sisters’ WIC checks. He didn’t have any children either, but some of the boys his age already had two or three. He was almost six-

