

# **Life on the Outside: The Prison Odyssey of Elaine Bartlett Study Guide**

**Life on the Outside: The Prison Odyssey of Elaine Bartlett by Jennifer Gonnerman**

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# Contents

<a href="#">Life on the Outside: The Prison Odyssey of Elaine Bartlett Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Part 1, Chapter 1.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Part 1, Chapter 2.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Part 1, Chapter 3.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Part 1, Chapter 4.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Part 1, Chapter 5.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Part 1, Chapter 6.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Part 2, Chapter 7.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Part 2, Chapter 8.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Part 2, Chapter 9.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Part 2, Chapter 10.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Part 2, Chapter 11.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Part 2, Chapter 12.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Part 2, Chapter 13.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Part 2, Chapter 14.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Part 2, Chapter 15.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Part 2, Chapter 16.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Part 2, Chapter 17.....</a>	<a href="#">24</a>
<a href="#">Part 2, Chapter 18.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Part 3, Chapter 19.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Part 3, Chapter 20.....</a>	<a href="#">27</a>
<a href="#">Part 3, Chapter 21.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Part 3, Chapter 22.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>



[Part 3, Chapter 23..... 30](#)

[Part 3, Chapter 24..... 31](#)

[Part 3, Chapter 25..... 32](#)

[Part 3, Chapter 26..... 33](#)

[Part 3, Chapter 27..... 34](#)

[Part 3, Chapter 28..... 35](#)

[Part 3, Chapter 29..... 36](#)

[Part 3, Chapter 30..... 37](#)

[Part 3, Chapter 31..... 38](#)

[Part 3, Chapter 32..... 39](#)

[Part 3, Chapter 33..... 40](#)

[Part 4, Chapter 34..... 41](#)

[Part 4, Chapter 35..... 42](#)

[Part 4, Chapter 36..... 43](#)

[Part 4, Chapter 37..... 44](#)

[Part 4, Chapter 38..... 45](#)

[Part 4, Chapter 39..... 46](#)

[Part 4, Chapter 40..... 47](#)

[Part 4, Chapter 41..... 48](#)

[Part 4, Chapter 42..... 49](#)

[Part 4, Chapter 43..... 50](#)

[Part 4, Chapter 44..... 51](#)

[Characters..... 52](#)

[Objects/Places..... 55](#)

[Themes..... 57](#)

[Style..... 59](#)



[Quotes..... 62](#)  
[Topics for Discussion..... 64](#)



## Plot Summary

The Rockefeller laws set the scene for this novel. Once in effect, these laws stipulated minimum mandatory sentences for capital drug crimes. It does not matter that Elaine Bartlett has no prior arrests. She receives a harsh sentence (one that some people call cruel and unusual compared to other criminals serving half of Elaine's sentence for murder or rape). This story shows how incarceration reaches beyond prison bars and into the homes of the innocent victims left behind.

Elaine Bartlett spends sixteen years incarcerated for her first offense, a drug charge for carrying from Manhattan to Albany, New York. She had never been arrested for anything prior to this. Others arrested for drug related charges receive three year sentences, yet she gets twenty-years to life. Her boyfriend, Nathan receives twenty-five years to life and didn't even carry the drugs. Elaine's four children are left to be raised by her mother, Yvonne.

Lacking a good upbringing herself, Elaine carries a bag of cocaine from Manhattan to Albany to make \$2,500. This money will be used to buy Thanksgiving dinner for her family. She does not realize she is being set up and carries just enough cocaine to constitute an A-1 felony (minimum fifteen years to life) according to the Rockefeller drug laws passed in the 1970's.

Elaine, not knowing any better, decides to go to trial and turns down an offer from the state attorney for five years. She does not know about the Rockefeller drug laws, nor of anyone who serving more than three years for a drug-related charge. She talks Nathan into doing the same thing.

To her and Nathan's surprise, she is sentenced to twenty years to life and he receives twenty-five years to life. Shocked and dismayed she serves her time until finally a clemency is granted to her after sixteen years. What she discovers are years of damage that have taken their toll on her young family during her years of incarceration.

Her mother struggles to raise her four children, along with her other children and grandchildren. The tiny apartment holds thirteen people surviving on Yvonne's welfare checks. Their struggles are hidden every visit to the prison to see Elaine, because they don't want to add to her grief on the inside.

Upon Elaine's release she unwittingly anticipates picking up right where she left off, but years-worth of resentment from her own sisters and her two daughters unfolds and seems to get worse with every day. Elaine's life on the outside starts feeling like another prison. It takes her months to get a job and trying to keep it while living in the tiny, filthy apartment is no easy task.

Through the years, Elaine loses one brother to AIDS, another is stabbed and dies in the hospital, her mother has a heart attack and dies and her other siblings are falling apart.



This is the only family that Elaine's children have, so it affects them deeply as well, creating a non-stop cycle of grief and misfortune.

Elaine does the best she can, struggling each day to put the pieces back together. She grows stronger with each day and each accomplishment, no matter how small. She does end up getting her own apartment and her children build new relationships with her. They are not the relationships Elaine had dreamed of, but they are real.



# Part 1, Chapter 1

## Part 1, Chapter 1 Summary

The Rockefeller laws set the scene for this novel. Once in effect, these laws stipulated minimum mandatory sentences for capital drug crimes. It does not matter that Elaine Bartlett has no prior arrests. She receives a harsh sentence (one that some people call cruel and unusual compared to other criminals serving half of Elaine's sentence for murder or rape). This story shows how incarceration reaches beyond prison bars and into the homes of the innocent victims left behind.

Elaine Bartlett's apartment is located in a Harlem housing project in Manhattan. Elaine's decor encompasses ideas from photos clipped out of fashion magazines. She loves her plush carpeting (in every room, including the kitchen). She lives in the apartment with her boyfriend (Nathan) and her four children (two daughters and two sons). Her daughters, Satara and Danae are three and one years old. Apache, her oldest son, is ten and Jamel is six. Elaine hopes to have Thanksgiving dinner at her apartment this year. She is very proud of it and wants to show it off to the rest of her family.

Elaine holds a job at a local beauty shop three blocks from her apartment. She does not hold a license to do hair. She has worked there for nine years and her wages are paid "under the table." Elaine also collects welfare to support her family.

The locals and her customers called her "Big Red." The beauty shop is notorious for attracting drug dealers, numbers runners and stolen good peddlers. Most of the customers are black. One white man, Charlie, has been hanging around the beauty shop for a couple of months. He propositions Elaine to carry a package containing four ounces of cocaine from New York City to Albany for \$2,500. Needing the money, she decides to do it (against Nathan's better judgment) on November 8, 1983.

She gets up early, dresses the children and herself, and drops off the children at their respective grandparent's houses (the girls with Nathan's mother and the boys with her mother). She takes a cab to Grand Central Station where she meets Tracy (Charlie's friend) to retrieve the cocaine, packs it into the front of her pants and proceeds to Albany with Nathan (Nathan follows her to the station and insists on going with her).

Once in Albany, their train not heading back to New York City for another two hours, Charlie meets them at the station, takes them via cab to a local hotel, and rents them their own room. After a while Charlie knocks on their door and invites them to his room where they met his friend, Rich. They fall asleep and awake to see Ken and Sue (the buyers) weighing the cocaine on a scale and Sue goes to get the money from their car in the parking lot. Sue returns with the money and after a few minutes there is a knock at the door and shouts of "Down on the floor," ring from the doorway as a bunch of men burst in with pistols drawn.



## Part 1, Chapter 1 Analysis

The story starts prior to Elaine's arrest. It gives the reader a sense of how naive and vulnerable Elaine is at 26 years old raising four small children, willing to do whatever it takes to create a happy Thanksgiving for her family. Elaine's innocence is portrayed in this chapter. She clearly has no formal education and doesn't even hold the appropriate license to work at the beauty shop, but experience counts for something, so they pay her under the table.





# Part 1, Chapter 2

## Part 1, Chapter 2 Summary

Charlie is not actually Charlie. His name is George Deets. He was caught at the Albany Airport with heroin and would have received 8 - 25 years in prison but made a deal with the police (Troop G) in 1981 to reduce his own sentence. He ended up with five years of probation and turned informant. Rich is also an informant. George and Rich worked together since the 1970's selling drugs, starting small with marijuana and working up to heroin and cocaine. George and Rich continue dealing in drugs and use their informant status to conceal their dealings.

One of Rich's friends gets caught with marijuana and calls Rich to get him out of trouble by using his connection with Troop G. Rich makes his friend cough up \$10,000 and then makes a deal with Troop G to get his friend off. George and Rich promise Troop G they will get them a big time dealer (meaning the highest-level felony, or cocaine/heroin of four ounces or larger).

Charlie (George) proceeds to knock on Elaine Bartlett's door to get her to carry the goods. Neither the police or George and Rich care who gets arrested. The only thing that matters is the amount of drugs. It has to be four ounces or more of cocaine or heroin. Albany County is making a name for itself with high incarceration rates. George and Rich take it one step further and steal some of the cocaine while Nathan and Elaine sleep, replacing the stolen cocaine with inositol (a popular cutting ingredient). Nathan Brooks and Elaine Bartlett appear in the paper under the title, "Couple held in cocaine sale."

## Part 1, Chapter 2 Analysis

Elaine realizes she and Nathan have been set up. George and Rich continue their long-term arrangement with Troop G. Albany County uses the arrest as yet another notch in their proverbial belt of convictions and incarcerations.

Part two continues to portray Elaine as naive, docile and harmless in her non-confrontational state, asleep and unarmed when the police arrive to make the bust. She discovers later that her willingness to trust the law does not pay off.



# Part 1, Chapter 3

## Part 1, Chapter 3 Summary

The town courthouse is closed so the Judge's house doubles as the local court. The Judge reads Elaine and Nathan's charges to them at his kitchen table and tells Elaine she can make one phone call. She should have picked her children up hours ago. She calls her mother, who lectures her about where she has been and what she has done.

Elaine's Mother (Yvonne) is originally from Birmingham, Alabama. She has two children by her boyfriend, Frank Bartlett: Frank Jr. and Frances Elaine (Elaine). She leaves Frank and enters into a relationship with a white man named Ronald Windsor and has four more children: Ronald Jr., Kenneth, Sabrina and Donjuan.

A few years later, Ronald dies of a cocaine overdose and the family is poverty stricken. Yvonne is caught cheating the welfare system and her benefits are taken away. Elaine and her brother Frank Jr. end up in foster care, while their mother tries to raise the other children. After three and a half years the welfare system restores Yvonne's welfare privileges and Elaine and Frank Jr. come back home to their mother. Elaine grows up, meets Bobby and has two boys (Apache & Jamal). She leaves Bobby and meets Nathan and has two daughters (Satara & Danae).

## Part 1, Chapter 3 Analysis

The chapter summarizes how Elaine and Nathan are taken to the Judge's home because the courthouse is closed, then focuses on how poverty stricken Elaine's upbringing is. Originally the focus is on Elaine's mother, describing her abusive relationship with her first boyfriend, then her second boyfriend. She is stabbed and beaten up.

Elaine and her brother are placed in foster care and then returned to their mother after almost four years. Elaine's path of boyfriends is similar, yet not quite as grim as her mother's history. However, the pattern of abuse repeats in each generation.

# Part 1, Chapter 4

## Part 1, Chapter 4 Summary

Prior to Elaine's incarceration, Nelson A. Rockefeller fought to pass a law for life sentences for drug pushers. In 1972 William Fine, at Rockefeller's request, went to Japan to find out why they had minimal drug problems. Fine returned telling Rockefeller that Japan had lifetime incarcerations for drug crimes. In 1973, as Governor of New York, Rockefeller wanted to introduce such a law in New York. In the 1960's Rockefeller had established the Narcotic Addiction Control Commission (NACC) which failed. He viewed life sentences for drug pushers as a way to redeem himself from the failure of the NACC. Rockefeller didn't ask for his staff's input, just insisted on their support. The "Rockefeller drug laws" were signed on May 8, 1973 mandating a minimum sentence of fifteen years to life for the highest-level felonies. Elaine was 15 years old at the time.

## Part 1, Chapter 4 Analysis

This chapter covers Rockefeller's "hard" campaign to get his anti-drug laws passed at all costs. He neither asks his staff for their input nor approval. Despite objections and concerns, he moves forward and achieves his goal. Instead of passing a life in prison sentence for drug crimes, the new laws mandate fifteen years to life for the highest-level drug felony.

This action taken by Rockefeller is both shocking and unrealistic to some of the general public. These stern sentences are harsher than those for murderers and more severe criminals. What follows is a strikingly high percentage of the population entering the prison system.



# Part 1, Chapter 5

## Part 1, Chapter 5 Summary

Elaine and Nathan spend nine weeks in jail before going before Judge Clyne, who people referred to as "Maximum John," or "hanging judge." Elaine's believes because she has no prior record of selling drugs, especially in Albany, that she and Nathan should go to trial rather than plead guilty. Without \$250,000 for bond, they cannot afford attorneys either, so are represented by court-appointed attorneys. Turning down an offer to plead guilty and serve five years, Elaine talks Nathan into going to trial with her.

The jury consists of white people. The prosecution makes their opening statement and proceeds to introduce George Deets and Richard Zagorski. George Deets goes first and as Elaine hears George lying about how the cocaine sale was set up by Elaine, she starts to fear the worst. Elaine had no idea up that she was set up by these two informants. Neither Elaine's nor Nathan's attorney says a word in their defense. Elaine thinks she will have an opportunity to tell her side of the story the next day. Closing statements are made by the attorneys without Nathan's or her input. Nathan's attorney presents him as an innocent lured into going to Albany with Elaine and Elaine's attorney presents her as set up by two informants. The jury takes forty minutes to decide both Nathan and Elaine are guilty.

## Part 1, Chapter 5 Analysis

Elaine, with no knowledge of having been set up, watches her future unfold as George Deets takes the stand. She is shocked and dismayed as the trial gets underway. She believes in the system and the fact that she has known people who received three-year sentences for drug crimes. Clearly they will not see her as a drug "king pin." She cannot not imagine serving a five-year sentence, so she goes to trial. Found guilty after only forty minutes, she returns to the back of the courtroom awaiting transport back to jail and sobs.

If Elaine was more knowledgeable about the passing of the Rockefeller laws, she might have been more prepared for the outcome of her trial and sentencing.



# Part 1, Chapter 6

## Part 1, Chapter 6 Summary

A few months later, Elaine and Nathan go before Judge Clyne again for sentencing. This time, as their mothers arrive, Elaine announces that she will wed Nathan. Marrying will permit them a few privileges (talking on the phone twice per year and a visit before being sent away to separate prisons). Elaine's mother is not happy and refuses to attend, remaining in her seat as Elaine and Nathan approached the judge. Once he marries them, the judge sentences Elaine to twenty-years to life and Nathan to twenty-five years to life. Elaine is permitted to speak prior to her sentencing and takes the opportunity to denounce her selling of the cocaine, stating she never handed it to anyone, nor received any money. Judge Clyne states that it was the intent and proof provided by the prosecution that made her guilty as charged.

## Part 1, Chapter 6 Analysis

Grasping at a last remnant of normalcy, Elaine and Nathan are married by the same Judge who sentences them to twenty-years to life in prison. They hope that the measly married privileges will allow them to remain in limited contact. They are both shocked at the severity of the sentence handed down to them.

Once married, they are separated and sent in opposite directions. Their lives change forever.



## Part 2, Chapter 7

### Part 2, Chapter 7 Summary

Elaine arrives at Bedford Hills prison with five other women. They are transported via a gold paddy wagon. The inmates yell obscenities such as, "Look at the fresh meat!" as the women enter the prison. Elaine is told to strip and get into a shower. She refuses, then meets Miss Dixon. After Miss Dixon hears Elaine's story of a first offense getting twenty-years to life, she realized why Elaine is so angry.

In Rockefeller's day, Bedford Hills is a reformatory of sorts for women. It is made up of cottages with linens and tablecloths. However, the rising number of prisoners entering the system requires more prisons, so the reformatory is turned into a regular state prison. Elaine is considered a "long-termer" and serves her time with Jean Harris, the former prep school headmistress who murdered her lover, Judith Clark, involved in a robbery of a Brinks truck where three people, including two policemen, were killed and Kathy Boudin, involved in the Brinks robbery. Elaine wonders if she will even recognize herself after twenty years.

### Part 2, Chapter 7 Analysis

The change of Bedford Hills from reformatory to prison was caused primarily by Rockefeller's harsher sentencing laws. The reformatory failed to produce the desired results and more than 60% of inmates were returning after their release. More beds were necessary so more prisons were created, with Bedford Hills reserved for women with the longest sentences.



## Part 2, Chapter 8

### Part 2, Chapter 8 Summary

Elaine's first months in prison are the hardest. She cries during the nights, not used to sleeping alone. She starts every day at 5:30 a.m. The guard makes all of the women place a hand against their cell window, so they can do their morning count. She is locked back in her cell every evening by 10:00 p.m. In the early years of her imprisonment Elaine attends classes for her GED and helps out in the kitchen. She adapts to a very different life. No more laundry, dishes, taking care of the children, prison is mostly a waiting game. She learns to steal. Women are given a limited number of maxi-pads each month. When they run out, they run out. So, she and the others steal packages of maxi-pads to get them through the remainder of their menstrual cycle.

The children and her mother visit her almost every weekend. It's a sad situation, Elaine seeing the toll it is taking on her children by looking into their eyes. Jamel takes it the hardest and sometimes wrapping his arms around her legs and refusing to leave after a visit. This weighs on Elaine's heart. Shortly after she is arrested, her old boyfriend, Bobby takes Elaine's mother to court for custody of his two boys and wins. Bobby fears that if his boys are raised by her, they will end up in prison or on drugs. The court mandates that Bobby bring the boys to see their mother every other weekend. At first Elaine refuses to speak to Bobby during visits and he sits at a different table than they do. A few years later he is taken back to court by Elaine's mother when she finds bruises on the boys. She wins custody back from Bobby.

One person had been at the prison longer than anyone else. Ruth "Ma" Brown had died of a heart attack at age seventy-seven, just a few months after Elaine arrived at Bedford Hills. Ma Brown held a knife and stood next to a man who killed another man in New York in 1931. She was originally sentenced to the electric chair, but later was sentenced to life in prison.

### Part 2, Chapter 8 Analysis

This chapter portrays Elaine's grueling daily waiting. She has nothing to do except think about what everyone in the free world is doing while she is locked away. Despite seeing her mother and her children almost every weekend, the situation is very hard for her and her family. The children love seeing their mother, but Elaine can tell it affects them deeply to be away from her.

Elaine struggles with the dual life she leads in prison as the prisoner who, during the week, steals and smokes marijuana to escape the reality of her situation and the caring, loving mother whose children come to see her on the weekends. She wonders every day why she was sentenced to such a long term for a first time offense. This continually occupies her mind.



## Part 2, Chapter 9

### Part 2, Chapter 9 Summary

When Elaine goes to prison her mother Yvonne lives in the Wald House in apartment 13B. This is one of three public housing projects on the Lower East Side. The New York Times names their neighborhood's Avenue D, "one of the meanest streets in America, a narrow corridor of poverty and violence." The small three bedroom, one bath apartment houses thirteen people: three of Yvonne's children, Sabrina, Ronald and Michelle; Sabrina's daughter; Michelle's husband; Michelle's two daughters; Donjuan's daughter and Elaine's four children). Yvonne pays \$153 per month for the apartment.

Yvonne's son Shyan is in and out of prison and is a big influence on Elaine's two boys. He carries a gun around and sometimes let Jamel hold it. Shyan brags about his drug dealings, illegal jobs and the many women he gets pregnant. He finally lands in prison with a life sentence for five murder charges in Massachusetts. He is eligible for parole in 2019. Shyan influences Jamel, with Jamel ending up performing tasks for the local drug dealers to make a quick \$100. He buys his first gun at age 12. Apache, luckily, has sports talent and plays basketball instead of running the streets. The local dealers watch Apache play ball and know he is good. They cheer him on and encourage him to keep a ball in his hands. Yvonne supports him and scrapes together money to send him to a Catholic school with a basketball program.

As Apache grows one way, Jamel grows another way. Yvonne waits up at night for Jamel to come home, makes him throw the drugs away and spanks him. Jamel visits his mother in prison where she shares her story with him for the first time. She tells him exactly how she ended up in prison and to stop what he's doing or he'll end up there too. He does not listen, and on the next visit she punches him in the face and they both end up in tears.

### Part 2, Chapter 9 Analysis

This chapter spans the 1980's when the streets on the Lower East Side of New York are overrun with cocaine and heroin. Drug dealers are on every corner and junkies holding beer bottles lie in the lobbies of the housing projects. Yvonne's neighborhood is portrayed as an extremely poverty-stricken place where no children should have to grow up. Yet, Elaine's children have no choice. Their grandmother struggles to feed the thirteen people who inhabit her small apartment. Yvonne's children are in and out of incarceration. At one point, four of her children are behind bars at the same time.

The influence of the Uncle (Shyan) on Apache and Jamel is painted as damaging yet obviously is just a way of life for them. With nowhere to turn and a deficient upbringing and environment, one boy turns to life on the streets with his peers and the other chooses the escape of basketball.





## Part 2, Chapter 10

### Part 2, Chapter 10 Summary

When Apache is fifteen years old the prison has a new program where parents in the surrounding community foster a prison child for a week. The child spends nights with the foster family and days at the prison with their mother from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Arlene and Pat O'Connor sign up for the program expecting a four year old girl and are surprised when they end up with a very tall, fifteen year old boy. They take him for Chinese food the first night and like him immediately. He speaks lovingly of his mother and family and how he needs to be the example for his younger siblings. He shares his worry about his younger brother and sister and how they are heading down the wrong path and may end up in prison if they do not change their ways.

Apache plays basketball with Pat O'Connor using Pat's basketball backboard that he almost threw away before meeting Apache. The O'Connors welcome Apache several more times and one time Apache takes Arlene to meet his mother in prison. Arlene feels honored and thinks Elaine is very loving and thoughtful. Arlene and Pat miss Apache when he leaves, but Apache returns yet another time with his two sisters who the O'Connors think are very sweet. The girls do not talk very much, but the O'Connors enjoy their company nonetheless.

### Part 2, Chapter 10 Analysis

Apache is an amazing fifteen year old. Despite his upbringing, his mother's imprisonment and his family, he strives to set an example for his siblings and loves his mother deeply. He speaks highly of her and can't wait to visit her in prison. The O'Connor's, who participate in the new prison program and foster Apache for a week, are amazed that he has turned out the way so well. Elaine is very proud of her son.

It is impressive that Apache, in the middle of all his surroundings, turns out the way he does. The violence and drugs on the street pass him by, but impact some of his siblings. Apache turns the other cheek and remains true to his mother's wishes.



## Part 2, Chapter 11

### Part 2, Chapter 11 Summary

While Elaine is at Bedford Hills, she works in the Children's Center earning 77.5 cents per day for almost ten years. She passes her GED after the seventh try and enrolls in the college at the prison. She spends a lot of time going over her trial transcript to the point where she almost knows it verbatim. She moves on to work in the law library and help other women get their records and transcripts, and slowly becomes like a mother to the younger prisoners. On holidays she collects food from packages sent to the women by their relatives and food they get from commissary, makes a big feast in the prison kitchen and includes everyone in the cell block. No one is left out.

Elaine talks to Nathan every six months and fills him in on the children. He has not received any visits from any of them. This makes him sad. At first Elaine receives letters from him several times a week. After a while she stops writing him back. She tells him to get women visitors to come and see him to make him feel better, which he does. He sends Elaine pictures one time and this infuriates her. Elaine actually is able to have a few boyfriends herself, but it never lasts long, once they find out she is not truly interested in having a boyfriend. She likes the fact that they occasionally send her children gifts.

Sad news comes during this decade. Elaine finds out that her sister Sabrina is smoking crack and her brother Ronald is extremely sick from AIDS. In 1992 Ronald dies of AIDS and four months later her only stable sibling, Frank, is stabbed and dies two weeks later. He is robbed leaving a video store and stabbed in the side. After attending the funerals, Elaine returns to prison very angry and fights with another inmate, landing herself in solitary confinement for sixty-three days.

### Part 2, Chapter 11 Analysis

The first decade of Elaine's imprisonment is tough. She struggles to balance her outside and inside lives. She receives phone calls and letters from Nathan who is distraught that she receives visits from the children while he does not. She works jobs that help her pass the time, becomes closer to the younger inmates and considers them her children.

Looking at her previous life, she determines to do better and earns her GED, yet bad things still happen that she can do nothing about. Two of her brothers die and her sister becomes addicted to crack cocaine. She remains in prison, trying to cope while the outside world moves on without her assistance.



## Part 2, Chapter 12

### Part 2, Chapter 12 Summary

Apache moves to South Dakota in 1992, heading for Pine Ridge, an Indian Reservation with a basketball team, with one semester left until he finishes high school. He decides to forgo finishing high school, as the coach promises him a job and a car. Once Apache arrives, he and another black boy are called names by the Indian basketball. He feels isolated, never gets the promised job or car and has no money to live on.

He writes to his mother and asks that she speak to fellow inmate Ms. Harris, the former headmistress. Apache hopes she can help. Yvonne has a mild heart attack, Apache moves back to New York, never finishing school or going to college as his mother hoped. Jamel gets arrested and sent to Rikers for one year. Satara is left alone with her sister at age fourteen. Apache spends some nights in the apartment with Yvonne and the girls, but most of the time he stays with a friend on Long Island. Jamel writes his mother from Rikers and promises he is going to get himself straight. However, after he gets out he ends up back inside, serving another year. Satara writes Elaine also. The children always tell Elaine how much they love and miss her and want to make her very proud.

### Part 2, Chapter 12 Analysis

As much as Apache wants to go to college on a basketball scholarship, it does not happen for him. When his grandmother has a heart attack, his sense of familial responsibility takes over and he feels as the oldest child that he needs to return home to take care of everyone. Jamel goes awry after his Uncle Frank's death and ends up serving one year in Rikers for robbing a cab driver at gunpoint. Jamel says he didn't even have a gun.

The portrayal of the children is one of strong attachment to their mother, yet they are lost in their real world without her. They struggle to live their lives on the outside and share little of that struggle with her when they visit. They take on a parental role and try to protect Elaine.



## Part 2, Chapter 13

### Part 2, Chapter 13 Summary

Yvonne's health deteriorates quickly. She is no longer physically able to help all of her neighbors by reading their mail, or feeding the homeless that stray in. She is on dialysis every week and walks with a cane. She visits Elaine and it nearly breaks Elaine's heart to see her wheelchair bound and looking so frail. Elaine vows to write to the Governor and see if she can be released early.

They have their picture taken together at the end of the visit. Neither woman is smiling and the fatigue is apparent in both sets of eyes.

### Part 2, Chapter 13 Analysis

Elaine's greatest fears surface as she sees signs of her mother's obvious decline. She cannot imagine finally getting out of prison and not having her mother there. If her mother dies while she's still locked up, she's not sure what will happen. So, she takes it upon herself to try and get out of prison as soon as she possibly can.

This chapter shows a turning point in Elaine's life. She looks back at what has happened thus far, and realizes that she must initiate the petition for her release. She can no longer rely on the system.



## Part 2, Chapter 14

### Part 2, Chapter 14 Summary

Elaine writes the Governor for clemency. She has reference letters from Helene Holohan, her GED instructor, Officer Knox and Officer Jennings. Each letter explains how Elaine has matured and will contribute to society if she is released. A parole officer even visits and inspects Yvonne's home. Elaine waits and waited, but a letter of denial finally arrives devastating the entire family. To make matters worse, Elaine's sister Sabrina tries to drown herself by weighing herself down with canned goods and jumping into the river. Luckily, she is pulled out of the water and taken to the hospital.

Elaine now has two grandchildren (one by Apache and the other by Jamel). The children again make the trip to the prison for Christmas, minus Yvonne who is too sick to travel and Jamel who is in Attica prison). Another inmate at a nearby table is granted clemency and her family celebrates. This makes Danae very upset. She shoves her chair away from the table and starts berating Elaine with questions. "Why did she get clemency and you didn't? What are you really in here for? You can't be doing twenty years just for drugs. Who did you kill?"

### Part 2, Chapter 14 Analysis

Of the few hopes of a "long-termer" in prison is the hope out of eventual release. Hearing stories of other women receiving clemency, Elaine thinks for sure the Governor will hear her story and grant her clemency. After all, hers was a first offense for drugs, not murder. Her family feels the same way. Elaine follows all of the steps and gets help from others to increase her chances. Unfortunately, she is denied clemency and the family has to spend another holiday in the visiting room at the prison.

Morale is at an all-time low, but Elaine does not give up. She cannot give up. She must continue her quest to become a real mother to her children again.



## Part 2, Chapter 15

### Part 2, Chapter 15 Summary

Lora Tucker starts working at WomenCare, Inc. and is assigned to work at Bedford Hills. She has previously been an interior designer in Manhattan making nearly \$50,000 per year. This is a \$15,000 yearly pay cut for her, but she wants the change. She is supposed to teach a "mentoring" group session to the inmates. Lora is black, from a wealthy family and did not grow up in the ghetto. She is afraid at first of how the inmates will welcome her.

Lora is physically welcoming and warm the first few weeks, then becomes distant. Elaine notices the change and asks her what is wrong. She shares, against prison policy, that she has been diagnosed with AIDS. Elaine brings pamphlets and a friend who has been living with HIV for a long time to the next class. Elaine invites more and more women to attend Lora's classes and they grow large in size. Lora teaches one class after another ("How to Do Your Own PR and Marketing," and "Make Yourself a Name, Not a Number.") Lora decides Elaine should reapply for clemency and gets her children's phone number so she can contact them. She meets with Apache and he promises to try and get letters from all the children.

Lora researches the Rockefeller drug laws and joins a group called the Correctional Association on a trip to Albany. Lora shares Elaine's story with Anthony (Tony) Papa and Randy Credico who add Elaine's name to the list of people to help. Her name will be part of their next rally at Rockefeller Center boycotting the drug laws. Elaine is finally getting some outside help. However, her mother ends up in the hospital at age sixty-six. Elaine is escorted to the hospital in her chains and is allowed to visit her mother. Chains and all, she manages to climb into her mother's hospital bed and lie beside her, telling her mother that it is okay for her to die.

### Part 2, Chapter 15 Analysis

Lora's entrance into the prisoners' lives is bright, followed by dark shadows. Lora finally decides to quit her high paying, corporate job and do something that will make a difference in people's lives, only to find out weeks later that she has AIDS. Elaine and the others welcome and bond with her.

Lora is a vital part of Elaine's life now and teaches her and the others about making a difference in their lives. They in turn teach her that she doesn't have to look at AIDS as a death sentence. Lora starts talking to Elaine's children and even educates herself on the Rockefeller laws in order to help Elaine gain clemency. The wheels start to turn, but too late. Yvonne ends up in the hospital and Elaine goes to see her for the last time.



## Part 2, Chapter 16

### Part 2, Chapter 16 Summary

In May of 1998 the first rally takes place in front of Rockefeller Center, marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Rockefeller drug laws. Randy Credico is excited that there are many journalists in the crowd. He wants to talk to every one of them. Lora is there with Apache, Satara, Danae and Elaine's sister Michelle. They share a sign with Elaine's photo and information on her imprisonment. Tony and Randy have contacted a lot of families whose relatives are serving time for A-1 drug felonies. Since the Rockefeller drug laws were passed the annual prison budget has shot up from \$450 million to \$1.7 billion. People with murder charges served much less time.

Randy has rallies all over town and calls reporters from his personal cell phone to make sure they know where the rallies are so they can tape them. Over the next year Randy draws a lot of attention, which he shares with Lora, Elaine's advocate. Elaine decides to tell every reporter possible her story. Yvonne would not have approved, because she was a private person, but Elaine needs to be granted clemency to be with her family, so she uses every possible opportunity.

Charles Grodin, a journalist, pays special attention to Elaine's ordeal and airs a letter from Satara in 1998. Satara asks the Governor to grant her mother clemency. Satara writes about how she is a stressed out girl with sickle cell syndrome and has to be hospitalized sometimes. She desperately needs her mother home and thinks she has served too much time already. Apache comes home from a basketball game, turns the television on and hears his sister's letter for the first time. He cries after hearing it.

### Part 2, Chapter 16 Analysis

In this chapter things look up for Elaine, but the families' personal hardships are brought to the forefront. Elaine finally gets the outside attention she desperately needs to be granted clemency. Tony Papa and Randy Credico actively fight to have the Rockefeller Drug Laws overturned. Lora's meeting with them gains Elaine beneficial media coverage.

Someone who commits murder should not be released from prison prior to someone whose first offense is selling drugs. The rallies showcase this injustice. People learn more with the help of journalists like Charles Grodin.

## **Part 2, Chapter 17**

### **Part 2, Chapter 17 Summary**

After sixteen years in prison and three years since her last clemency hearing, Elaine walks into her second clemency hearing. She wears her best shirt and a skirt. Three other women fight for clemency as well, and it is like a competition between them. Elaine has moved from the prison block to the prison's "honor floor," then to Fiske Cottage, which is known as "super-honor." She does everything she can to strengthen her chances for clemency, including not being in the cell block with the other girls she likes so much. She offers to train guide dogs for the blind for no pay. When Elaine walks into the room for her clemency hearing she is ready. She is calm when asked, "how have you changed since your last appearance before the parole board? What programs have you been involved in?" And she answers simply, "education and the death of my mother."

### **Part 2, Chapter 17 Analysis**

The clemency hearing is like going to court all over again. Elaine is drilled by questions meant to test her. She remembers her first court experience, when she was defensive and hostile. She knows she has to maintain her self-control this time. She realizes that despite everything she believes in her heart about her situation, it is the media portrayal of her behavior which really counts.

Even though Elaine would rather to be in the cellblock with the women she called her children, she knows that moving into Fiske Cottage improves her chances. She makes sacrifices to be with her family again.





## Part 2, Chapter 18

### Part 2, Chapter 18 Summary

The news spreads fast through the prison that Elaine is finally going home. She has one month until her release on January 26, 2000 - ironically, the same day she was sentenced sixteen years ago. She has Lora send her a purple pantsuit and a black coat. A new bra and panties bought from Victoria's Secret and black boots are sent by Jamel's girlfriend.

Elaine's sister, Michelle, is resentful of having to raise nine children. She tells Elaine that upon her release she will have to take over so she can go on vacation. There is no food in the house, so Danae is losing weight and Satara is having problems with her sickle-cell disease and has to go to the hospital. Elaine does not let these challenges intimidate her. She struts out of the prison in her new outfit, turns toward the girls cheering her from the prison and waves goodbye.

### Part 2, Chapter 18 Analysis

This chapter delves into Elaine's emotional state at the thought of being finally released. She is excited, nervous and unsure what to expect on the outside. The only thing she is sure of is going home to be with her family.

For years she has envisioned her homecoming, but after sixteen years her the memories have become fuzzy. Not knowing what awaits her, she holds her head high and starts her life on the outside.



## Part 3, Chapter 19

### Part 3, Chapter 19 Summary

Elaine is given \$40 when she leaves prison. She sits in the back of a van driven by Lora, with Apache. She needs to report to her parole officer within 24 hours of her release, so Lora proceeds to drive to the South Bronx where his office is. He is not in and Elaine is told to return the following day. Lora then drives to Frank's widow Becky's house where Elaine runs out to hug her. Randy Creditco has arranged a welcome home luncheon for Elaine and two other female inmates. Elaine invites Becky to come. Becky states she has no money, so Elaine gives her \$10. Satara and her boyfriend met Elaine, Apache and Lora at the restaurant. Reporters surround Elaine to get her story.

Danae still has not shown up, so Elaine and the other children leave to find her. They find her on a basketball court at a local school. Elaine hugs her daughter and they all leave for the Wald House, apartment 13B where the children have been living with television cameras in tow. Once inside, Elaine is stunned to see the poor living conditions. She orders the cameras to stop taping immediately.

### Part 3, Chapter 19 Analysis

Elaine, after sixteen years, re-enters her children's lives and realizes that they may have had worse living conditions than those of prison these past years. Reality comes crashing in as a disbelieving Elaine assesses the situation which has surrounded her children for the years she was away. Imprisonment captured not only her, but her children and siblings as well.



## Part 3, Chapter 20

### Part 3, Chapter 20 Summary

Cassandra (Jamel's girlfriend) offers to drive Elaine to the store the next day. Satara and Danae came too. They drive to the bank first, where Cassandra goes inside and comes out with \$1,500. She gives the money to Elaine as a welcome home present. Elaine cannot believe her eyes. Cassandra was in a car accident and collected on an insurance policy, so she has money, but no one knows how much. She paid for \$5,000 of Yvonne's \$10,000 funeral cost.

They drive to Costco, a large supermarket selling groceries in bulk and all sorts of household goods and clothing. Elaine fills three carts full of food, against Satara and Danae's better judgment. Elaine does not care. She knows there is no food in the house, so she purchases a whopping \$868.94 worth of goods.

After a few days Elaine realizes that her imprisonment has taken many tolls on her family. When the apartment is dirty, no one cleans anything. Danae doesn't even live in the apartment, but a few doors down with a different family, and Satara rarely leaves the apartment at all. Elaine battles with Danae, even chasing her to the other apartment and making her come home. Her efforts do not work and she wonders what she will have to do to make things right again.

### Part 3, Chapter 20 Analysis

Elaine realizes that she left one prison only to end up in another. Her family has practically given up. She tries to return life to normal, but, having not been a part of their lives for so long, the children resent her coming in and telling them what to do.

The thought keeps recurring to Elaine that if she hadn't gone to prison, her children's lives would be very different. She cannot change the past and this is very hard for her to accept.



## Part 3, Chapter 21

### Part 3, Chapter 21 Summary

Elaine checks in with her parole officer for the first time. His name is Alfonso Camacho. Camacho is the parole officer who visited Yvonne's apartment during Elaine's first clemency request. He submitted a satisfactory report concerning his visit, but to no avail. Elaine asks Camacho if she can visit Jamel on Riker's Island. He says no. He pays a surprise visit to her apartment and she is home. At her next meeting she asks for permission to leave the city. Camacho authorizes the leave so Elaine can speak at the state legislature's Black and Puerto Rican Caucus. She fails to show up prior to the visit for her travel pass, then shows up two days late for her next meeting. Camacho lectures her, but does not take it any further.

### Part 3, Chapter 21 Analysis

This chapter focuses on Elaine's constant supervision now that she is free. She will be on parole for at least three years. Any violation of that parole can land her right back in prison. It will be a long road for her. She wants to do everything the right way, but it's tough to have surprise visits from Camacho and have to pee into a cup whenever he insists on testing her. Even though she is out of prison, these frequent visits make her feel she's not as free as she had hoped to be.



## Part 3, Chapter 22

### Part 3, Chapter 22 Summary

Elaine goes to Rikers Island to visit Jamel. She takes baby Tenea with her and boards the subway. She has a hard time remembering where things are since she has been away for so long. Everything has changed. The cigarettes are more expensive, food stamps are no longer coupons and subway tokens were a thing of the past. She hates going to Rikers Island, passing through the metal doors, taking her shoes off and being searched. However, she will not tell Jamel this. She loves him and wants to see him. Once inside, Elaine has to go through a few different waiting rooms and all the way to the back where they housed inmates in the "bing," where they spend 23 hours a day locked up for misbehaving. She is not sure what Jamel has done, but does not ask. She is led to a waiting room where Jamel comes out and guards lock them in a metal cage together. He wants her to bring his baby to visit him, but she tells him he will have to work out his problems when he gets out. Apparently the baby's mother's family do not care for Jamel. The visit goes by too fast and Elaine soon has to leave. They say "I love you" as they part.

### Part 3, Chapter 22 Analysis

Having to visit her parole officer, get permission to visit her son in Rikers Island and being told what to do all the time make Elaine feel as though she is still locked up. Sixteen years later her son is in prison for her exact offense.

Elaine wonders how things might have been different if she had never been imprisoned. Would Jamel be in prison right now? She will never know. All she knows is that she has to continue to visit him and hopefully make things right again for him once he gets out.



## Part 3, Chapter 23

### Part 3, Chapter 23 Summary

Successfully transitioning from being behind bars to a productive member of the working world is exactly what Elaine wants, but has not yet achieved. She knows two other women released around the time she was released have jobs already. She asks the few people she knows around the neighborhood if they know of any jobs but there are none available. Elaine finally goes to South Forty, an agency that helps ex-offenders get jobs. She meets George Lino, an employee of South Forty, but also an ex-offender who spent seven years behind bars. Elaine likes him. He asks Elaine if she can go home, change and come back, because a recruiter is coming in a little while. Elaine does not own a suit or a skirt, so George sends her to Dress for Success, a non-profit agency that gives used business clothing to women. She comes back outfitted in a red suit and black heels. The recruiter comes and presents mostly janitorial jobs. Elaine does not raise her hand for any, but thinks George can help her gain the employment she desires, as a counselor or with computers.

Several trips and classes later, Elaine still has not landed a job. Despite George's phone calls to local agencies, no one has any openings. Elaine is out of money and desperate to find work.

### Part 3, Chapter 23 Analysis

It's a scary thing to come out of prison with few job skills, a permanent criminal record and be out of money and need to provide for your family. Elaine has very few job skills from her life outside of prison, but plenty from her life inside. She is determined to find work.

Elaine's constant determination is highlighted in this chapter. She looks back on what she has overcome and is stronger for it.



## Part 3, Chapter 24

### Part 3, Chapter 24 Summary

Elaine is not happy with the way her sister Sabrina has lived since Elaine was in prison. Sabrina uses foul language, hardly ever brushes her hair and spends a lot of time in the bathroom, even eating while on the toilet. One night Sabrina starts yelling through the apartment, "who ate my cheese?" Elaine has not eaten her cheese, but yells "I ate your cheese" to quiet her down. This infuriates Sabrina and an argument ensues about more than the cheese. Both women have resented each other for years. Sabrina resents Elaine for going to prison and not taking the original offer of 5 years. Elaine resents Sabrina for smoking crack, cursing in front of the children and not taking better care of their mother.

Elaine's rage escalates, so she packs her things and goes to her sister Michelle's house in Harlem. Michelle has been married to Pervis for 18 years. They have five children and are also raising three of Sabrina's children. The apartment has four bedrooms and two bathrooms. Michelle is a very large woman at 300 lbs. and very much like Yvonne, arranging family gatherings and taking care of everyone. Elaine is only there four days and becomes angry with Michelle for no real reason. She leaves Michelle's house and walks around Harlem until 3:00 a.m. Finally she calls Lora Tucker. She takes the train all the way to Queens where Lora picks her up, takes her back to her place and they talk into the wee hours of the morning. The next day Elaine gets Danae out of school early and has a picnic with Danae, Satara and baby Tenea in the park where she celebrates Danae and Satara's March birthdays.

### Part 3, Chapter 24 Analysis

Elaine finds it harder and harder to suppress her frustration and rage. The outside world is not at all as she expected, and she's feeling more and more isolated from her family.

This chapter emphasizes Elaine's dysfunctional, rude and unbearable family. She has no choice but to live with them. Elaine feels like she has no place in this outside world.



## Part 3, Chapter 25

### Part 3, Chapter 25 Summary

Elaine moves in with sister Michelle again and shows up at South Forty for a review with George. She looks rough with circles under her eyes and her hair pulled up in a clip instead of neatly done. George realizes that if Elaine is ever going to get a decent chance at staying out of prison, he needs to do something. She has an interview for a counseling job and was extremely early. George asks her to write a thank you note to the employer. She hands George the note, written in pencil on school paper. He asks his assistant to type it up for her and proceeds to dial telephone numbers to cheap, temporary housing options to get Elaine a decent place to stay. George finds Elaine a place at the local YMCA. It is nice and clean. Elaine is excited and calls her boys, but does not call the girls to let them know where she is. A man she dubs "Shorty" asks her to come to a bar for a drink with his friends. She has not been to a bar in years. She orders a pina colada, because it is the only thing she can think of. She does not like the taste. Shorty says he likes Elaine and she replies that he does not know anything about her. She goes home after one drink and around midnight Shorty knocks on her door asking if he can come in. Elaine says no and goes back to bed.

### Part 3, Chapter 25 Analysis

Finally having a little peace and quiet, Elaine might actually have a chance landing a decent job and getting on her feet. The chapter describes Elaine's desperation and fear about finding and keeping a job. She needs this more than anything, and needs a break from the setbacks and disappointments that seem to surround her.





## Part 3, Chapter 26

### Part 3, Chapter 26 Summary

Elaine finally lands a job after three interviews with an organization called Project Renewal, which used to be a homeless center, located at 8 East Third Street. On her third interview Donald Myers asks Elaine, "Do you have any questions?" She replies, "Yeah, when can I start?" Donald likes her enthusiasm, so he hires her for the 4:00 p.m. to midnight shift. She gets permission from her parole officer to work the night shift. Her duties encompass answering the phone, searching men's lockers and watching their curfew. She is paid \$18,000 per year. Soon, Elaine is transferred to Kenton Hall, around the corner from 8 East Third Street and her shift changes to 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. This is the last step in the recovery process for the men. Elaine is back living in the apartment with Sabrina and having a hard time with her work schedule. Once she is an hour late, despite getting up two hours early, because Sabrina is lying in the bathroom and Elaine cannot get in to take a shower. Finally, Sabrina comes out and Elaine rushes in. She simply tells her supervisor that she had family problems and that was her reason for being an hour late.

Soon Elaine feels as if she is back at Bedford Hills taking care of her "children." The men sometimes call her Ma and she likes that. She overlooks certain things like finding chips and soda in lockers and lends cigarettes to those who ask. She is not supposed to do these things, but it is her nature.

### Part 3, Chapter 26 Analysis

Elaine Bartlett is slowly establishing herself. Despite all of her obstacles, Elaine manages to get herself to work and waits for the day she will live in an apartment of her own with her children. There is light at the end of the tunnel.



## Part 3, Chapter 27

### Part 3, Chapter 27 Summary

Of all Elaine's children, Danae is the last one with a chance to finish high school and go on to college. Apache coaches a girls basketball team that Danae plays on. Elaine visits the school one day to take Danae to lunch and witnesses her bad-mouthing a teacher. She enlists her in better school but must wait a few weeks for her to get in. Upon acceptance she learns that Danae has been skipping school. Michelle is listed as the contact for Danae, so the school contacted her. Elaine catches wind of this and goes out looking for Danae. She finds her sitting on a bench with Michelle and gets mad. She confronts Danae and punches her in the face. Michelle vows to never let Elaine touch Danae again.

### Part 3, Chapter 27 Analysis

In an echo of her own abusive upbringing, Elaine loses her self-control over her inability to control her children. She views Danae's yelling at her teacher as disrespectful and intolerable and punches her. "I know violence is not the answer, but the way kids are today and how disrespectful they are, they need to be knocked on their ass. That's the bottom line. They ain't got no respect," she said.



## Part 3, Chapter 28

### Part 3, Chapter 28 Summary

Nearly six months after her release Elaine and Lora have lunch together at Dojo on St. Mark's Place. They enjoy virgin pina coladas and talk about Elaine's non-existent sex life. Elaine flirts with men and collects their phone numbers, but has not found one that she is particularly interested in. Lora has written her first poem in two years and is feeling better about her AIDS diagnosis. She read her poetry aloud for Elaine and they revel in their happiness at having become such close friends.

### Part 3, Chapter 28 Analysis

Elaine does not have many friends left. Lora's friendship has always been special and has blossomed since Elaine's release. Lora now plays a vital role, both emotionally and physically, as outlined in this chapter.



## Part 3, Chapter 29

### Part 3, Chapter 29 Summary

Elaine moves into Apache's. She is not allowed to apply for public housing due to her criminal record, yet she is allowed to reside in an occupied unit, another "ridiculous" flaw in the system. She starts thinking about the man she believed was her father, Ronald Winslow Bartlett. Ronald Windsor was the white man Yvonne was with whom Elaine believed to be her father, but Frank Bartlett was her actual father. Yvonne made a combination of both, and when Elaine finds her birth certificate with father listed as Fred Bartlett she didn't know what to think.

A lot of people tell Elaine to obtain a smaller apartment, then move up. She cannot leave without her children no matter how old they are, and she continues to be frustrated with the fact that her A-1 felony status prohibits her from applying for public housing until she finishes parole and waits six more years. Things take a turn for the worst when as the apartment gets hotter during the summer. Attitudes heat up with the weather and Elaine gets into an argument with Satara. The cops are called and the report reads, "Both parties involved in verbal altercation over bedrooms. Settled w/o incident." Elaine hopes Satara understands the seriousness of what could have happened.

### Part 3, Chapter 29 Analysis

No matter how many months pass and how many hurdles Elaine overcomes, the reality of her incarceration and A-1 felony will follow her for the rest of her life. This fact reemerges when she gets into an argument with her children or any of her siblings and world gets involved as a vivid reminder of where she is and how she got there.



## Part 3, Chapter 30

### Part 3, Chapter 30 Summary

Elaine finally gets to see Nathan in mid-July. He is happy to see her, but she does not greet him with a big hug. She lectures him that it took him too long to come out. He did not realize Elaine was there to see him, thinking it was another friend of his in the waiting room. Nathan had written Elaine a few months before she was released saying that he had remarried. A few years prior to that he served her with divorce papers, which she just put away and never looked at again. Now she is face to face with him wanting an explanation. He explains that he met a girl, a friend of another inmate's girlfriend, and they slowly grew close. She visited him on a regular basis for nine years. She found out one day that she had HIV and Nathan asked if she wanted to get married. She said yes. Before their first overnight visit, she died.

Elaine listens intently to his story and softens inside. She understands and Nathan leans in to kiss her face. They stroll outside and have their picture taken together. When she finishes her visit, she knows she still loves him and will come back again.

### Part 3, Chapter 30 Analysis

Seeing each other again after many years makes Elaine and Nathan realize that they have been through too much together to just let go. They still love each other very much. The reality is, however, that they will have to wait a long time before they can actually be together once again outside of prison walls.



## Part 3, Chapter 31

### Part 3, Chapter 31 Summary

The first Thanksgiving that Elaine is home will be a great success; she is sure of it. She gets money from Apache, her savings and her new friend Gary Williams and makes enough food for fifty people. She cleans the apartment, buys a new toilet seat and takes the bed sheet down which has been hanging in the living room. She, Apache and Satara cook until 5:00 a.m. They have ham, turkey, duck, roast beef, roast pork and all the fixings. They eat around 3:00 p.m., because Elaine has to work at 4:00 p.m. Danae does not show up, nor Michelle or any of her family.

### Part 3, Chapter 31 Analysis

Elaine tries her hardest to bring back the Thanksgivings of the past. She works all night and into the morning with two of her children. It was pleasant, but it wasn't one of Yvonne's famous Thanksgiving feasts.

Elaine remembers how wonderful Thanksgiving was for her growing up. Her effort and work goes un-rewarded as people come in, eat, and then leave again.



## Part 3, Chapter 32

### Part 3, Chapter 32 Summary

Gary and Elaine get into a car accident a few days before New Year's Eve. They hit a guardrail and Elaine's airbag deploys. Her face is a mess, fractured bones and the loss of her front teeth. She recuperates at Michelle's house using one week's vacation and another week's sick leave. She returns to work and everyone applauds her. Elaine returned to the apartment to find Sabrina in a sad state. Looking sick, Sabrina fades in and out of consciousness. Elaine calls 911 and they take her to Beth Israel hospital for two weeks. Upon her return, she starts acting weird again. Another call to 911 lands her is back in the hospital. The doctors tell Elaine that they found traces of antifreeze in her blood. Elaine thinks this is silly, considering they didn't own a car. The doctors say the substance can also be found in cleaning solutions. Elaine, Satara and Star (Sabrina's daughter) visit her in the hospital. Elaine sadly strokes her sister's hair as she lies there under a white sheet.

### Part 3, Chapter 32 Analysis

All Elaine can think of is getting her life back and getting out of prison, while her sister Sabrina wants to end her life. Elaine cannot understand this extreme change in Sabrina. Elaine's perspective is that if Sabrina knew how tough it was for her in prison all of those years, she might be thankful and start living life to the fullest.



## Part 3, Chapter 33

### Part 3, Chapter 33 Summary

Elaine attends more rallies with Randy Credico. On the way home from one rally the bus driver gets lost and they end up coming home hours. Attending and talking at these rallies is therapeutic for Elaine. In front of the Queens County Courthouse, Elaine gives one of her strongest speeches. She always speaks extemporaneously. She speaks of how she spent sixteen years for a first offense and should have been handed anything except that. They could have put her on probation or something else. When she finishes she receives great praise from the audience. She holds a poster with Nathan's picture on it and smiles at her accomplishment. Donna Charles, a friend from prison granted clemency just a month earlier, shows up at the rally. They hug and have lunch for the first time together outside of prison walls. Elaine tells Donna that she will try to get her employment where she works.

### Part 3, Chapter 33 Analysis

Although Elaine gets a boost of confidence from the rallies and seeing Donna Charles again, it still does not replace her distraught feelings. She wonders if she will ever be the same again. She thinks maybe she has spent too much time on the inside and will not make it on the outside.





## Part 4, Chapter 34

### Part 4, Chapter 34 Summary

Jamel is getting a work release and the entire apartment is excited about seeing him again. It is nearly 10:00 a.m. and there is no sign of him, so Elaine calls his girlfriend. She informs them that they are mistaken and he will be getting out a day later. The following day his friends drop him off at the apartment shortly after 8:00 a.m. Everyone is very excited to see him, especially Danae. Elaine is still sleeping, so he jumps in the bed with her.

Jamel asks his girlfriend, Tisha, to buy his outfit for when he got home. He picked out the items in magazines. He enters the bathroom and when he comes out he is wearing almost \$500 worth of red sweatshirt, pants, leather jacket and boots. He knows he will have to wear prison clothes for work, but for now he is free and enjoys his new wardrobe.

### Part 4, Chapter 34 Analysis

Elaine's concerns that Jamel will go back to prison escalate in this chapter. She will have to persuade him to keep off the streets and out of prison. Elaine's focus continues to be on her children, especially Jamel. She wondered if he will slip into an old routine once he encounters his old friends.



## Part 4, Chapter 35

### Part 4, Chapter 35 Summary

Little Mel is Jamel's son. His mother, Cassandra visits Jamel in prison at first, but soon has another boyfriend and is pregnant with a second child. She does not tell Jamel right away. When she finally tells him over the phone, he yells and screams at her. Still, she has to see him now he is out of prison. She flies from Florida to New York with Little Mel (four years old) and her daughter (nearly a year old). Not long after she arrives, a verbal argument breaks out between her and Jamel. She throws a phone at him and he proceeds to hit her in the face. She pretends to call the police, he hits her some more and she ends up in the hospital where her mother tries to get her to press charges. She will not.

### Part 4, Chapter 35 Analysis

Jamel is out on work release, but years of incarceration have only strengthened his violent tendencies. It will be a tremendous feat for him to stay clean and go straight. The violent subtext of Elaine's family is apparent in this chapter. The cycle needs to stop or Jamel will return to prison.



## Part 4, Chapter 36

### Part 4, Chapter 36 Summary

Shortly after Jamel is given a parole officer, they change officers on him. He liked the first woman, but does not like the second. He also has to attend drug counseling, which Elaine has to convince him to go to. Jamel says he is not going to this new parole officer. She is trying to get him to give her names of drug sellers. He knows it brings a death sentence to tell on anyone, so he would rather go back to prison and finish his two years. Elaine calls a meeting with Arturo Smith (his drug counselor), Tisha and Jamel to resolve the matter.

### Part 4, Chapter 36 Analysis

Elaine assumes her parental role with a vengeance, bound and determined to persuade Jamel to stay out of prison.

## **Part 4, Chapter 37**

### **Part 4, Chapter 37 Summary**

Elaine starts slipping at work. She calls in sick to go to rallies, then calls in and says, "I'm not coming in today," with no reason at all. She stops caring about the job. One afternoon she is called into the boss's office and demoted. She will have to go back downstairs, make less pay and work 4:00 p.m. to midnight again. Elaine does not let him see the disappointment in her eyes. She just walks away respectfully. She does, however, show her unhappiness through the outfits she wears to work.

### **Part 4, Chapter 37 Analysis**

Elaine needs to keep her job. She cannot afford to be without a paycheck. As unhappy as she is, she takes the demotion and keeps on working.

As crushing as this is to Elaine's emotional state, she has no choices here. Keeping Jamel out of jail, and her demotion come to a head. She struggles to keep her head above water.

## **Part 4, Chapter 38**

### **Part 4, Chapter 38 Summary**

Michelle phones Elaine at work to tell her that Sabrina has passed away. Elaine takes the train to the hospital to see her, but gets there too late. She is informed that three other women and two men have already viewed the body and the hospital will not take it out again. Elaine does not get angry or yell at anyone. She simply leaves, takes the train back home. There she runs into Jamel who notices his mother's sadness and hugs her.

### **Part 4, Chapter 38 Analysis**

Now only four of Yvonne's children are still alive, two in prison and two living in New York. Elaine endures yet another tragedy. She has three siblings left, her children and a past strewn with disappointments. She presses on to make the most of the situations she encounters.



## Part 4, Chapter 39

### Part 4, Chapter 39 Summary

Jamel has always loved to rap with his friends in and out of prison. He would write songs and sing them to the inmates. Elaine encouraged him. Anything other than drugs and hanging out on the streets is good and might keep him out of jail. One night Lora invites Jamel to perform at a local club she frequents. It is open microphone and she announces Jamel after a poetry act. He gets up on stage, takes the microphone and thanks Lora and his mother and introduces his newest girlfriend, Joanne, as his wife. Out pours a lyric about his niece who passed away at four months old. The crowd claps loudly when he is finished and Elaine is in awe. She has never heard this one before.

### Part 4, Chapter 39 Analysis

Sometimes the smallest talent, nurtured and encouraged, can bring extraordinary results. Rap was healthy for Jamel and Elaine knew it. She encourages her children in every way possible. She knows that they need this boost to their self esteem to keep them off the streets.



## Part 4, Chapter 40

### Part 4, Chapter 40 Summary

Jamel now stays in the living room of the apartment. Elaine finds two different apartments to rent, but at the last minute, after she and Jamel pool their money together, the apartments are no longer available. It is discouraging, and a few days later Jamel gets into a brawl with some other boys in the street. Elaine learns later that he tried to break a fight up and one boy pulled out a gun. He is not hurt, but it reiterates to Elaine how desperately they need to move.

### Part 4, Chapter 40 Analysis

Elaine is correct in her fear that if she does not get Jamel out of the neighborhood, something terrible will happen. He will end up back in prison or dead. Her fears escalate after the fight. She is desperate for a solution and will not give up.



# Part 4, Chapter 41

## Part 4, Chapter 41 Summary

In December Elaine walks into her parole office and sits down. She has to be at work by 4:00 p.m., but always comes early not knowing how long the visit will take. On her last visit Camacho was training a new parole officer. He called him a trainee. Elaine likes to mess with the new trainees, so she pretends she has been doing drugs to get Camacho to test her. The test will turn out negative, of course. It is all in fun.

On this day, it is nearly two hours before anyone calls her name. She sits and waits. Jamel shows up. It is his day for a visit as well, and they think they will go in together to meet whomever the new officer is that is replacing Camacho. Officer Russell appears in the doorway (the officer that she fought to have removed from Jamel's case). Elaine is angry. Officer Russell asks Elaine, "Where do you work?" Elaine asks her, "Did you read my chart? Did you take the time to familiarize yourself with my case?" This escalates into a battle of wits. The supervisor is called in, Elaine is handcuffed and threatened with imprisonment. She calms down, answers Russell's questions and leaves the office feeling depressed. Jamel goes in next.

## Part 4, Chapter 41 Analysis

Working with Camacho for over a year, Elaine is made to feel like a human being and a productive member of society. Upon his departure and Russell's entrance, all of those months disappear and she again is made to feel like a number and not a person.

To Elaine, this is like a slap in the face. She knows she is a prior convict, and does not need to be harshly reminded by Russell. She feels she does not deserve it. First, she is surprised to not find Camacho there for her appointment, and to have Russell instead is a complete shock for Elaine. She will need to overcome this situation and make the best of it.



## **Part 4, Chapter 42**

### **Part 4, Chapter 42 Summary**

Elaine receives \$16,108 for the accident she was in with Gary. She sees a flyer with an ad for Lay-A-Way Homes that looks to be just what she needs. She calls them two weeks after Christmas. After previewing the plans for a house that would cost her \$299,000, she figures that if she rents two of the rooms out, she and Jamel can afford it. The company wants \$5,000 down, so she hesitates. She calls Lora who tells her not to jump at the first opportunity, so she never gives them the deposit. Lora buys Elaine her very first cell phone and it rings all the time. Her car accident money dwindles as the family catches wind of it. Everyone seems to need money for something.

In March, Apache introduces his mother to Yvonne Stennett who offers to help Elaine get out of the apartment. Yvonne's organization owns several apartment buildings and says that if Elaine is approved, she will have an apartment. Satara and Star also apply for an apartment, which is approved first, leaving Elaine, Jamel, Apache and Danae four weeks to move out and find another place to live.

### **Part 4, Chapter 42 Analysis**

Yet another hope shattered. Elaine tries and tries only to give and not receive. Through her ordeals Elaine learns to look ahead and tries to be as optimistic as possible.



## Part 4, Chapter 43

### Part 4, Chapter 43 Summary

Shortly after Satara and Star's application is accepted for housing, Elaine's is also. She is assigned a four-bedroom apartment on the fifth floor. She is not sure who will be moving in with her, but there was plenty of room for them. She gives Danae a set of keys to the apartment in case she decides to stay there. Elaine busily moves her things into the apartment while everyone else finds other things to do. The only one with her is her three-year old granddaughter.

After putting most of her things away, she proceeds to the bank to take some money out, but finds her account empty. She cannot believe it. She knows she had had almost \$7,000. She remembers putting her checkbook in a bag and throwing it in the back of the closet at the old apartment. She wonders who would have stolen from her. She knows it must have been a family member. She does not say or do anything. She pawns a necklace Jamel gave her for \$300 and buys food for the new apartment.

Elaine hears a buzz at the door and is told that Jamel jumped off a bridge and is in the hospital. She flies down the stairs, gets to the hospital and is told she cannot see him, because he is under arrest. A kind nurse lets her see Jamel and he tells her a story of his friend Chiquito being attacked and Jamel coming to his rescue. To avoid being caught by the attackers he jumps off the bridge and hurts his leg and foot. The police find two guns at the scene.

### Part 4, Chapter 43 Analysis

Elaine wonders if she can go through all of this again. The family has been through so much together and now Jamel is hurt and going back to prison. She does not even know for how long or where he will serve his time. It is a frustrating time for Elaine.

Every effort Elaine has made to try to keep Jamel out of prison has failed. She is now faced with the reality that Jamel will be out of her life for a while, a reality which was hard enough while she was in prison, but now the roles are reversed and she wonders how she will handle it.

## Part 4, Chapter 44

### Part 4, Chapter 44 Summary

Elaine has been working at Project Renewal for almost three years. She has two grandchildren living with her in her new apartment and a new twenty-one year old boyfriend named Deon. Nathan still calls all the time, but when he finds out about Deon, he fights with Elaine on the phone. Apache and Danae stay occasionally, but for the most part Apache stays with his girlfriend and Danae wants to lie around and not work, so Elaine makes her and her girlfriend move out. They ended up at Michelle's house.

Elaine meets Deon at Project Renewal and they have to keep their relationship a secret at first, because it is against the rules for an employee to date a resident. They get along very well, so he moves in with her. He helps her all the time by watching the kids or giving her money when he has it. Things are alright and Elaine hopes she is going to make it after all.

### Part 4, Chapter 44 Analysis

Elaine's new life is introduced in this chapter. The shadows of her past still haunt her, but she moves forward regardless. Her life is not exactly as she imagined it after being released from prison, but she has learned that life is what you make of it. Elaine has her own apartment, still holds her job and has a good boyfriend. She is optimistic and is no longer looking back. Elaine is gaining inner strength, and feeling and thinking about things in a new way since leaving her old life behind.



# Characters

## Elaine Bartlett

Elaine is the novel's main character. The story is about how Elaine is sentenced to twenty-years to life in prison in New York for carrying a bag of cocaine from Manhattan to Albany. Elaine's upbringing is poor and abusive. Her mother tries her best to raise a family of six children on welfare and hand-outs from other family members. They live check to check in a very meager apartment in the projects of New York.

Elaine, at a young age, has Apache and Jamel by a boyfriend named Bobby. She then meets Nathan and has Satara and Danae. She struggles to raise the children and one day hears of a chance to make \$2,500 by carrying cocaine from Manhattan to Albany. She figures this will be enough money to buy a nice Thanksgiving dinner for her family. She has been set up by two police informants. Guilty of an A-1 felony with the Rockefeller laws in full force, she is in a lot of trouble, but does not find this out until she goes to court. She is sure she will not serve more than three years. After all, this is her very first offense and everyone she knows guilty of a drug crime gets off with little time or community service. To her surprise, she gets hard time.

The story unfolds around the Bartlett family and how one son, Apache, ends up hanging onto basketball as an outlet, whereas the other son, Jamel, runs the streets and tries to make money illegally. The girls resent their mother for going away for so long and are raised by family members. The children's aunts and uncles are no role models, with the uncles on drugs or in prison.

Elaine eventually gets a job and an apartment, establishes a relationship with her children and things work out. It's certainly not the relationship she dreamed of while in prison, but it is real and she learns to be optimistic about her future on the outside.

## Nathan Brooks

Elaine's boyfriend and the father of her two daughters, Satara and Danae, Nathan's role is short. He accompanies Elaine to Albany to hand over the bag of cocaine only to be greeted by police officers banging on the hotel door. They are arrested, Elaine talks him into going to trial instead of taking a plea bargain and he serves twenty-five to life and his daughters never come to see him. He is visited by his mother, and Elaine comes a few times after she is released. But, for the most part, he does his time alone.

## Yvonne Powell Bartlett

The mother and matriarch of the family, Yvonne has Frank Jr. and Elaine by Frank Bartlett and the other children (Ronald Jr., Kenneth, Sabrina and Donjuan) by Ronald Windsor.



She struggles to raise the four children that Elaine leave behind after her imprisonment. It is not an easy task. She gets money from her children and from the welfare system. The apartment they end up in is on the lower east side of Manhattan in a drug infested, crime-ridden neighborhood.

Yvonne takes the children to visit Elaine as much as possible, but money soon gets tight and she cannot go as much. During Elaine's years of imprisonment Yvonne loses two children, Ronald Jr. to HIV and Frank in a robbery.

## Apache

Elaine's oldest child, and the athlete in the family, Apache throws himself into basketball for many years, and always wants to set a good example for the other children. He loves his mother dearly and is not the slightest bit ashamed that she's incarcerated. When people ask, he always says that he's proud of her and he loves her.

## Jamel

Jamel is Elaine's second child. Unlike Apache, Jamel turns to the streets and drugs and is in and out of prison. This happens before and after his mother gets out of prison. Elaine has to get permission from her parole officer to visit her son in Rikers Island. Jamel is kind-hearted, but carries a lot of anger due to his mother's incarceration and his isolation from her as a child.

## Satara

Elaine's third child, Satara, is depressed for a long time. She deals with her mother's imprisonment by staying in the house all day, not brushing her hair or socializing with any of her friends. It almost gets the better of her, but when Elaine is released, she is able to encourage her to get back into society.

## Danae

Danae is the youngest of Elaine's children and has the hardest time with the incarceration. Danae doesn't really remember what it was like before her mother went to prison. She was so young, and is influenced by her aunt and her grandmother. She is a lesbian and has a girlfriend toward the end of the story. She doesn't want to work and is very angry about a lot of things.

## Sabrina

Sabrina is Elaine's younger sister and holds a lot of resentment toward Elaine for leaving. Sabrina ends up on crack cocaine. She tries to commit suicide by jumping off of



a bridge with canned goods lining her jacket pockets. She survives, only to live with HIV and die later in the hospital.

## **Michelle**

Elaine's youngest sister Michelle, a 300 pound woman who lives in Harlem, marries Pervis and has five children. When Elaine is released from prison, Michelle is raising her five children and Sabrina's four children. Michelle and Pervis have always worked very hard and stayed out of trouble. Michelle takes in Elaine and her children from time to time whenever they need a place to stay.

## **Lora Tucker**

Lora is a WomenCare, Inc. employee who used to work for a large bank as an interior designer and took a pay cut to work as a prison mentor. In 1997, Lora begins teaching classes at Bedford Hills and becomes a very close friend of Elaine Bartlett's. Their friendship continues after Elaine's release from prison.



# Objects/Places

## Harlem

Harlem is located on the north end of Manhattan. Traditionally an African-American neighborhood, it is known for its housing projects. This is where Elaine lives prior to her arrest. Her meagerly decorated apartment is located in one of these Harlem housing projects.

## Albany

Albany lies two and a half hours away from Harlem by train. This is where Elaine's drug deal is supposed to take place. The couple who supposedly want to buy the cocaine from Elaine live in Albany and do not want to travel to Harlem. Elaine travels to Albany instead.

## Bedford Hills

The prison Elaine is sentenced to do in time is known as the Bedford Hills Correctional Institution. It is thirty-five miles from Harlem. Elaine spends the duration of her prison term at this prison. She is sentenced to twenty-years to life, but serves sixteen years before being released.

## 13 B - The Wald House

One of the three public housing projects on the lower east side of Manhattan is known as the Wald House on Avenue D. While Elaine is incarcerated, her children live in apartment 13-B. Avenue D is known for its mean streets, poverty and violence.

## Riker's Island

Riker's Island is a men's prison located in New York. Elaine's son Jamel spends a lot of his time there. He is in and out of Riker's Island for many years. Upon Elaine's release from prison, one of her first requests to her parole officer is for permission to visit her son there. She is denied.

## Project Renewal

Elaine lands her first job at Project Renewal. It's a program for recovering and hopes to stop them from returning to prison. It works for some and not for others. Elaine fits right in.



## **South Forty**

This is an employment center for ex-prisoners. It is near Penn Station in New York. Elaine goes there shortly after leaving prison and finally finds a job. Her contact there is George Lino.

## **Baruch Houses**

This is a public housing project near the Walk Houses. Elaine visits once and likes it, but never ends up with an apartment there due to the landlord changing his mind.

## **Lay-A-Way Homes**

Yet another of Elaine's attempts to find more appropriate housing for her children, this venture requires \$5,000 down as a deposit, making Elaine reluctant even though this is an actual home and not another apartment. Elaine never follows through with it.

## **Community League of West 159th Street**

Elaine is very excited to finally get approval for this housing project. She finally has a four-bedroom place where her family can live and not be so cramped.





# Themes

## Justice or Severe Punishment

One theme in this story is the wisdom of the Rockefeller Drug laws. Rockefeller fights vigorously to pass strong drug laws, which make offenders of serious drug crimes do serious sentences, with a minimum of fifteen years behind bars. The laws are passed during a time in which drugs have taken over the major cities of the United States and city officials are desperate to fight back, regardless of the consequences. Many poor people growing up in the inner cities turn to selling drugs on the side to make ends meet. These people are targeted by undercover police and city officials seeking successes and publicity for the war against drugs.

Elaine uneducated and naive when she is arrested for the crime of selling cocaine to individuals in Albany, New York. Through her years behind bars she learns of the Rockefeller laws and the impact they have on her and her family. She becomes stronger through her experiences and tries to instill this in her children upon her release. She battles major obstacles relating to employment, housing for her children, and the incarceration of one of her sons. She eventually is able to obtain safe housing and a relatively stable life for herself and her children.

## Elaine and Her Children

Less educated and struggling because of this fact, Elaine's children still try to make her proud. In the midst of everything that happens and their frequent visits to the prison, the children make a habit of doing their best, so they can make their mother proud.

Elaine struggles to maintain her closeness to her children while behind bars. In the beginning this seems more possible, but as the years pass it becomes harder and harder for her to maintain this closeness. The children's outside influences are many and their role models are family members and outsiders with a history of violence and drugs. In their housing project environment, it is hard for them to walk the straight and narrow path past drugs and crime. Some of the children maintain somewhat normal childhoods, while others are corrupted by outside influences and ultimately end up in prison.

## Survival Once On The Outside

Considering the amount of time Elaine is incarcerated, upon her release she does relatively well in establishing a new, outside identity. The longer one spends in an isolated prison environment, the harder the adjustment once released. In many instances, the ex-prisoners Elaine encounter throughout her years on the outside end up right back in prison, because they cannot make it on the outside. They have no home or job to come back to. Their only means of survival previously was a life of crime



or drugs. Society makes several options available to them as far as recovery is concerned (the rehabilitation centers) in which they can receive counseling and guidance, but the outcome rests entirely on the ex-con's shoulders.

In Elaine's case, the fight against the Rockefeller laws and the rallies she attends gives her a purpose and a cause. When she actually is a speaker the audience applauds vigorously, giving her much-needed affirmation. The audience members are like an extended family to Elaine because many have incarcerated loved ones, also in prison with long sentences due to the Rockefeller laws. Elaine feels she must do everything possible to help these prisoners.



# Style

## Point of View

This story is told from the point of view of Elaine Bartlett. She comes from a poor, poverty stricken family and has little education when she is arrested for the first and only time. She loves her children, and is very bitter toward the justice system. She clearly feels that her life has been stolen from her due to the Rockefeller drug laws which initiated her arrest.

Despite her upbringing and her incarceration, Elaine tells her story in a straight-forward manner. She goes to school while in prison, obtains her education and tries very hard to be a roll model to her children and siblings. She struggles to maintain a relationship with her children from behind bars. In the first few years of her incarceration, her relationship with her children remains close, but as the years go by it becomes harder and harder for her to maintain it.

Everything from the children's relationships to their roles at school, to their boyfriends and girlfriends in the later years is from Elaine's perspective. Whether it be a loving memory or a struggle for the family to find housing large enough for everyone to occupy, Elaine holds nothing back. She tells the true story from her heart.

## Setting

The story opens in Harlem, where Elaine resides in a small, barely furnished apartment. Elaine's day-to-day life consists of working for a hair salon where she is paid in cash and caring for her children. She does not hold a license as a hair stylist, nor does she have much experience. She learns as she goes. Normally she takes her children with her to work at the salon. The children play in the back while she works. Other days the children stay with her mother or her boyfriend's mother. Elaine rarely leaves Manhattan.

Her world is Harlem. Her mother, sisters and brothers all live close by. Elaine's priorities are working to make ends meet and trying to take on odd jobs here and there to get extra food for the holidays, or nicer clothing for her children. The one time Elaine ventures into Albany is when she is arrested for selling narcotics to undercover police informants.

A large portion of the book takes place the inside the prison, where Elaine describes the day-to-day routine she has to follow. She describes the way she feels about some of the younger inmates. Elaine treats these individuals as her children. She takes them under her wing and nurtures them. Upon her release, the setting reverts back to the streets of Harlem and how things have changed while she was away. Her adjustment begins.



## Language and Meaning

This story was written between 2000 to 2005, but the narrative spans the time between the 1980's and 2000. It is meant for an adult audience. The language is of a "street" nature. There is some bad language, directly quoted from characters. Due to the lack of education, some of the quotes are grammatically incorrect.

The people surrounding the main character, Elaine, speak with this same grammatically incorrect "street" slang. The story is filled with descriptions of the troubles the family gets into and the prisons they frequent. The local drug trafficking and guns are a part of the children's normal life.

The story starts with the loving mother and her children. They go to work with her on an almost daily basis until they start school. Their lives are filled with struggle, as they watch their mother take on odd jobs to make ends meet. Once Elaine is incarcerated, the children are thrown into yet another world where they are raised by their grandmother. Years go by as they visit their mother behind bars, and their lives shift yet again upon her eventual release.

## Structure

The story is told in four sections, which encompass forty-four chapters. Each section is named for a part of Elaine's life. The story moves between time periods within each section. It starts with Elaine's release, and then reverts back to tell the story prior to her release.

Initially it describes the sensations felt by Elaine outside of the gates of prison, how she adores her son Apache and can't wait to see the rest of the family. Elaine feels a sense of relief, but is also very afraid of the changes that have taken place in her children's lives. She wonders if she can pick up where she left off and somehow make up the time she has lost.

The story then shifts to encompass Elaine's trial and first years of imprisonment. Elaine decides to go to trial rather than take a plea bargain, which could shorten her sentence. She believes she will have a more favorable outcome by chancing a trial. This turns out to be the untrue, and she is distraught at being sentenced for such a long term. The years she spends in the prison unfold in descriptions of how she befriends the younger inmates and treats them as her children. Her family visits as often as they can, but Elaine's connection to them is strained as she cannot see what is happening to their lives on the outside.

The next section re-introduces Elaine to the outside world and the many factors she must take into consideration if she wants to stay out of prison. Elaine must reacquaint herself with her children and try to become an active part of their lives. This turns out to be very difficult, due to her children's sense of abandonment due to her years of incarceration.

The last section of the story sums up the way things turn out to be. Although Elaine is not the mother she hoped to be, she accepts the new relationship she and her children are able to build.



## Quotes

"I'm not worried about them judging me. Even though I went through a lot of pain and suffering, I took everything good as well as bad and I'm bringing that out with me. So I can stand here and say I am very proud of the woman I am today, and that I was able to keep a bond with my family despite being incarcerated and be the best mother that I could be from behind these walls." Section 1, p. 6.

"Couple held in cocaine sale. Latham - State Police arrested a Manhattan couple Tuesday night in connection with the sale of a quarter pound of cocaine to undercover troopers, State Police said. Nathan Augustis Brooks, 34, and Elaine Bartlett, 36, were charged with first-degree criminal sale of controlled substances. Troopers said the pair was arrested in a Latham area motel. They were arraigned in Colonie Town Court before Judge Philip Caponera and sent to Albany County Jail without bail. The arrest was made in conjunction with Colonie Police and federal Drug Enforcement Agency officers, troopers said." Times Union of Albany, p. B-4.

"I still say that I'm not guilty and I did not make a first-degree sale, a felony," said Elaine. "I feel that I am being railroaded and doing someone else's time for the man. George Deets should have been the one that should have sat in this Court and been tried for this matter, not me or Nathan Brooks." Section 1, Chapter 6, p.67.

"I'm Elaine Bartlett, 84-G-0068. I'm doing 20-to-lefe under the Rockefeller drug laws. My dream is to be out of here and home with my kids and my mother." Part 2, Chapter15, p. 132.

"The Rockefeller drug laws had altered the profile of the typical New York State prisoner. Between 1980 and 1999, the number of new prisoners serving time for drug crimes had risen from 11 percent to 45 percent. The laws had also sparked a prison-building boom." Part 2, Chapter 16, p. 138.

"You don't let everyone know your whole family is in jail. It's embarrassing." Part 2, Chapter 16, p. 141.

"I am a stressed out girl who needs my mother right know to be their for me. But I am just trying my hardest to get out of school. I am doing it because I love myself and I promised my grandmother because she was suposed to go to my 12th grade graduation and it is really going to heart me that she is not going to be their. Please allow our mother to come home and be with us for she sas been gone to long.....Thank you! Yours truly, Satara Bartlett." Part 2, Chapter 15, p. 143.

"It is hard to fight to get out - the ups and downs, the hopes, the disappointments, a roller coaster of emotions, and you're dealing with your whole family and their ups and downs. We have known each other, forever, it seems. It will feel strange here without you but it will feel better because I know that you are home..." Part 2, Chapter 18, p. 152.



"Getting and Keeping a Job"

"Present a positive attitude, show enthusiasm; do not go in looking or acting like the walking wounded, be well groomed, neat and clean. Go to the interview alone. When you sit down, use good posture. Do not chew gum or smoke. Avoid using expressions such as "Uh, well, you know what I mean." Be courteous and pleasant during the interview. Smile frequently; people like others who smile and do so sincerely." Part 3, Chapter 23, p. 191.

"I know violence is not the answer, but the way kids are today and how disrespectful they are, they need to be knocked on their ass. That's the bottom line. They ain't got no respect." Part 3, Chapter 27, p. 223.

"It was nearly the end of her first Thanksgiving since leaving prison, and the event had not come close to resembling the family dinners she remembered from childhood." Part 3, Chapter 31, p. 252.

"You've got a brain on you. You're gifted with this rapping stuff. You can make it. Do your music and let them see you up there voicing your opinion." Part 3, Chapter 39, p. 298.

"How come she went so fast/ This little baby had no past/ Just plans for the future/  
Bright days that didn't last/ I always ask these questions/ Late night before resting/ Mind  
testing/ Looking for answers in these deep thought sessions/ Baby cousin I'm troubled/  
Wanted to tell you that I love you/ But I used to hustle/ Hunting for new ways to bubble/ I  
was scared to touch you/ Picking you up caused a struggle/ Heart beating I hugged  
you...." Part 4, Chapter 39, p. 300.

## Topics for Discussion

Many people have suffered due to the Rockefeller Drug Laws. Do you think the laws are an effective tool in the fight against drugs, or do you feel they are unjust?

How could Elaine have done things differently, as not to go to prison?

Are her problems due to Elaine's upbringing, or do you think this could have happened to anyone?

Are we a product of our environment?

How do you think this book would be different if Rockefeller had written it?

Do you think that Elaine's son ended up in prison because she went to prison?

Do you think the Rockefeller Drug Laws were in effect too long, or not long enough?