

# THIS FEAR by FAITH

Jennifer Hudson was at the top of her game when the unimaginable happened last October. Now, fresh from her national tour, she's back in the spotlight with music in her heart and the love of her life by her side

BY JEANNINE AMBER  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY PEGGY SIROTA

STYLING: MARYAM MALAKPOUR/MARGARET WALDONADO AGENCY, HAIR: LAWRENCE DAVIS/KEN BARBOZA ASSOCIATES,  
MAKEUP: TIA DANTZLER/DIOR BEAUTY/EPHANY ARTIST GROUP, INC. MANICURE: LISA JACHIN/LOREAL/CLOUTIERAGENCY.COM.







**Jennifer Hudson** is poised on the edge of a hillside, two miles above the shores of the sunny beaches of Malibu, California, overlooking a spectacular vista. In the distance, the pale blue sky kisses an aqua sea. It's a vision as close to heaven as you can get in Los Angeles, and Jennifer is basking in the glory. Dressed in a bright orange Michael Kors gown with a bejeweled neckline, she's bobbing her head from side to side, singing along to her hit single "Spotlight." She raises a fist in the air, looks directly into the camera, and smiles.

Hudson's triumphant pose and unwavering gaze are all the more remarkable when you consider that mere months before, her days were filled with pain. Not even a year has passed since the 28-year-old Oscar- and Grammy-winning talent endured the murder of her mother Darnell Donerson, her brother Jason Hudson, and her nephew Julian King. It was a tragedy of such epic proportions it seemed inconceivable that the Jennifer we knew—the young woman who came to embody a Hollywood fairy tale—could ever

return. But here she is: performing the national anthem watched by almost 100 million viewers at the Super Bowl, garnering a standing ovation and a Best R&B Album award at the Grammys, and embarking on her quickly selling-out tour with singer Robin Thicke. "When I'm onstage, everything kind of goes away," Hudson says about performing again. "All your emotions, whatever you feel. It's like therapy." The press is calling her tour a comeback. But how exactly does a woman who lost almost everything that really matters ever make it back?

By all accounts Jennifer's relationship with her mother was incredibly close. Soft-spoken and at times shy, Darnell Donerson began every day with a text message to her youngest child. "I was always a mama's baby," Jennifer says, smiling and nodding at the memory. "I'd go and sleep in her bed until I was 15 years old." Jennifer's fiancé, David Otunga, 29, notes that even as an adult, Hudson found sanctuary by her mother's side. "She'd go to visit and I would text, 'Have you arrived?' and she'd text back, 'Yeah, I'm

already lying in my momma's bed and we're talking.'"

But as close as they were, Donerson was never one of those stage mothers who lived for her turn on the red carpet. "She was comfortable and content with just being in her house and going to get Julian every day from school," says Walter Williams III, Hudson's personal assistant and childhood friend. "Jennifer's mother was just that type of person. She didn't want to be in the spotlight or anything." But boy, was she excited when her daughter sang at the Democratic National Convention last August. "She just looked at me and said, 'This is history,'" Otunga recalls. "She was a big fan of Obama. She voted early." As it turned out, Donerson lost her life on October 24, 2008, just 11 days before the general election. "Yup, she got her vote in," Otunga repeats quietly, and then his voice trails off. "This is the most I've talked to the press about this," he says after a little while. "We don't talk about it."

In fact, according to Otunga, when Hudson decided to return to her singing career earlier this year, the thought of having to field questions about the tragedy was her number one concern. Otunga says after the incident, the paparazzi descended on the couple from all sides. "Some people were doing anything just to get information," he recalls. "Reporters I would see on TV were sending me text messages saying, 'We will give you an exclusive! I don't even know how they got my number. One of them even offered me money. I was like, 'This is disgusting.' It really changed us."

These days, if you are to be granted an interview with Jennifer Hudson, you must agree not to ask about her loss, not even in the most roundabout way. Which means to sit down with her is to engage in a dance of small talk, while a seven-ton elephant sits by the door. You can study her face for any hint of unsteady emotion, but all you'll get is calm. Sitting in the Beverly Hills office of her publicist (who has insisted on being present for the interview), Jennifer is wearing a gray floor-length dress, flat sandals and a purple scarf around her neck. When she talks about her early days singing in front of an audience, she leans forward and says, "I was so shy, you know. I sang with my eyes closed until I was 19." When she speaks about her fiancé and his elaborately staged proposal involving a beach, a blindfold and her digging in the sand, she giggles. "He thinks he's the king of romance!" When she speaks about her faith, a smile blooms across her face. "The thing that keeps me going is knowing that God is in control," she says with conviction. "It's like, if He placed me here then I must be prepared."

She carries herself with serenity, pointedly refusing to allow the loss of almost her entire immediate family to be the topic of conversation. "It does not surprise me that she is not talking about this in public," says the Reverend Beverly R. Wallace, coauthor of *African American Grief* (Routledge). "Sometimes acknowledging something makes it more real. While there is healing in the acknowledgment, it also takes one deep into the sorrow and pain. Her loss is so recent and traumatic, she simply may not be ready to go there." But who can blame her? To be a celebrity who has experienced what she has is to be forced to traverse the rocky terrain between private pain and public sympathy. And with the

prying that often comes under the guise of concern, maybe she just wants to grapple with her loss on her own terms.

"We need to let her be," says her good friend and fellow *American Idol* alum Fantasia Barrino, who's currently recording her new album. "What happened to her was such a tragic thing. I remember her telling me that she didn't even feel like singing." Barrino, who sang at the Hudson family funeral, recalls that at the time of the murders Jennifer had "a hot song and a fresh video but none of that really mattered. I know she can't forget about what happened, but a lot of people were praying for her and it worked. She's up now; she's up. She's moving. I'm just happy she's back on the mic."

And she's looking ahead. Jennifer met her fiancé, David Otunga, through mutual friends in December 2007. They've been inseparable ever since. Otunga, a graduate of Harvard Law School, has the dubious distinction of having been the "smart one" vying for the affection of chain-smoking Tiffany Pollard, aka New York, on the VH1 reality show that bore her nickname. He laughs about it now and explains that it was all in good fun—his niece put him up to it. But the love he has for Jennifer? That's what's real. "From the minute we met we've been joined at the hip," he says. "She's the one person who just gets me. She's my best friend."

Jennifer seems equally smitten. "David is very family-oriented," she says, smiling. "I love that. And he is such a gentlemen, like, I

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sit in the car waiting because I can't touch the door. I am not allowed! And he is so serious and so focused, but yet, just like me, so playful. We are very similar and I just love the balance." She stares down at her five-carat center stone, sunburst-shaped engagement ring, her long fingers splayed on her lap. David had the sparkle specially made to match her favorite diamond studs, she explains. The studs had

been a gift from jewelry designer Neil Lane the year she won her Oscar. "This ring looks like David to me," she says softly, almost as an afterthought. "It's so bright."

The couple had been dating less than a year when Otunga asked Jennifer's mother if it would be okay with her if he asked her daughter to marry him. Donerson gave him her blessing and two weeks later he proposed. It was September 12, Jennifer's birthday. A little more than a month later, her mother was killed.

Hudson's personal assistant Williams credits Otunga with helping the singer deal with her grief. "If it wasn't for him, I don't know how she would have gotten through this," he says. For his part, Otunga, who lost his own father six years ago, knows that what Jennifer needs most from him is his consistency. "We pray together and we talk a lot," he says. "I try to make sure she knows that in this time when things seem so uncertain for her there is certainty in our bond. She doesn't have to worry about losing me. I'm always going to be right here."

But make no mistake, he says, it wasn't just his support that got Jennifer through. It was her faith, which even in the darkest days never wavered. Ask Jennifer how strongly she believes, and she'll tell you this story: When she went to college, her mother encouraged her to pray every morning and gave her a new black >



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Bible with gold lettering on the front. “I’ve had that Bible since way before *Dreamgirls*,” she says. “But when we were doing auditions, I wrote in the back of the Bible, ‘I will get the role in *Dreamgirls* and I will win an Academy Award for it, in Jesus name I pray. Amen.’ Everything I wrote came to pass. Every single thing. It’s God. I have the proof. Sometimes it even scares me. I’m like, *Jesus, how close are you?*”

Jennifer’s mother lived on the South Side of Chicago in a white clapboard three-story house with a barbecue grill on the front lawn. Donerson shared the home with her son, Jason Hudson, her daughter Julia, and Julia’s son, Julian, a smart, playful 7-year-old with chubby cheeks.

Sometime on the morning of October 24, an assailant entered the home, shooting Donerson, 57, and Jason, 29. At 3:00 P.M. a relative arrived and discovered Donerson’s body. Police later found Jason dead in his bedroom. Julian was missing. Hours later, William Balfour, 27, Julia’s estranged husband and stepfather to Julian, was picked up. Balfour, who had pleaded guilty in 1999 to attempted murder, was initially held for a parole violation stemming from that incident.

As soon as they heard the news, Hudson and Otunga rushed to Chicago from Florida, where she had been promoting her movie *The Secret Life of Bees*. For three agonizing days the police searched for her nephew as Jennifer, her sister and Otunga were placed under 24-hour protection. “We didn’t know if Jennifer’s or Julia’s lives were in danger,” remembers Otunga. Then on the morning of October 27, Julian’s lifeless body was found in the backseat of Jason’s Chevrolet Suburban, which the prosecution said was parked less than two miles from Balfour’s home. Jennifer, who only days before had gone to the Cook County Medical Examiner’s office to identify her mother and brother, was back again for her young nephew. A *Chicago Tribune* report described how the singer looked up at a video monitor showing the boy’s face and then bowed her head. “Yes, that’s him,” she said.

In arguments detailed at Balfour’s bail hearing five and a half weeks later, the prosecution alleged that on the morning of the murders, Balfour had threatened to harm Julia’s family after he saw a birthday present he assumed was a gift to her from another man. Balfour, the only suspect named in the triple homicide, was charged on December 1, 2008, with three counts of first-degree murder and one count of home invasion. The Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office is seeking the death penalty, while the Public Defender’s Office intends to reinvestigate the case to discover what the police may have overlooked. Balfour has pleaded not guilty.

On Jennifer’s MySpace page there is a picture of Julian with the caption, “My missing nephew.” Months after the boy’s death, the photo remains like a ghost. But there are signs that the Hudson family is moving on. In March, Julia appeared in a plus-size fashion show in Chicago, defiantly speaking out despite the rest of her family’s silence. “If I were to not be able to get up,” she said in a clip that was posted on NBCCChicago.com, “that would mean William [Balfour] and the devil won. They took enough from me. They won’t take anything else.”

Meanwhile, Jennifer has found her own way to show she will not be broken—by moving back to center stage. Sony Music’s chief creative officer, Clive Davis, who oversaw production of Jennifer’s album and attended the family funeral, can’t imagine it any other way. “We kept in touch by text and e-mail throughout the situation with her family,” he says. “I did believe that the tragedy involving her mother should not end with that tragedy cutting short the life of the daughter. There is no question that her mother’s will would have been for Jennifer to continue on with her God-given talents. Not only to share it with everyone but to make her mother and the family proud.”

Though she won’t speak about it, perhaps Jennifer, too, believes her mother would want her to press on. After all, Donerson gave her the Bible in which she wrote her greatest dreams, and cheered her on as they came true.

Her fans, too, have been waiting for her return. Jennifer recalls a recent incident, her face lighting up as she recounts the memory. A man on a plane ride sent her a note. “It

said, ‘You have a special gift. God has given you a generation of his people,’” she remembers. “I was like, *Wow. That was powerful.*”

But when you suggest the obvious, that for her fans she represents hope, resilience and the possibility that when all seems lost we can find the strength to get up again, she seems a little taken aback. For a moment, Jennifer stumbles over her words, then grows silent, her eyes casting around the room. “I don’t even know what to say,” she responds finally. She only resumes her chattiness when the questions return to safer turf—her music and the thrill of being onstage. “I remember when we were doing our *Idol* tour, standing onstage and thinking, *This is the most amazing feeling!*” she says, excitedly fanning her fingers in front of her face. “When you’re in a room full of people who love you, all that energy in the room comes to you. The feeling just takes over. Music is who I am.” People may call it a comeback, but it looks as if Jennifer is simply going to the place she calls home. □

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Hudson and Otunga at the 2009 Grammys.