



# THE CHOSEN

JOHN PALM & J.CERRONE



# The Chosen Ones

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John Palm

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J. Cerrone

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Written by John Palm and J. Cerrone Smith

Edited by J. Cerrone Smith and Audra Russell

Cover Design by Kyn Mixson

ISBN 978-1-7337305-7-0

**Paper-Chase Publications LLC**  
**Philadelphia, PA**

**Dedications:** To Kobe, GiGi and the entire Bryant family, my grandparents, and of course to my children: Amaya, Tyreek, Amoi and Isaiah.

**Note:** This story is inspired by true events and is recited to the best of the author's recollection. However, certain characters, names, businesses, incidents, locations, time frames and events have been changed to protect the identities of all parties involved.

# Chapter 1

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My name is John, but you can call me “Johnny.” I’m a Black man and what most people who know me consider an intellectually gifted individual. I was born in “The Woods.” Yes, I’m from a large city – Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to be exact. When I say, “I was born in ‘The Woods,’” I say that, because that’s how people used to refer to that section of Southwest Philadelphia back then.

I was born on September 19, 1979 to two seventeen-year-old parents who were residents of the colorful, two-story buildings which comprise the Larchwood Public Housing Apartments positioned along Lindbergh Boulevard. The buildings are set about a block behind the wide thoroughfare and more closely resemble a public housing complex from the Southeastern United States. The appearance of the buildings themselves, coupled with the extremely tall weeds and cattails which surround the expansive property in its remote location in the city, was likely responsible for the neighborhood being referred to as “The Woods.”

I have an average name, but my life was far from average. Growing up as a toddler in Larchwood was hectic. You might be thinking, “how hectic can life be for a toddler?” To answer that

question, I'll have to provide you with more details about my family history and about how my city and my neighborhood was back then.

My father's name is Craig. My mother's name is Rochelle. As I stated before, they were both seventeen years old when I was born. I also have a sister named Leticia who is a year and a half older than me. My mother dropped out of high school shortly before giving birth to her.

Leticia and I have different fathers and my mother had an off-and-on relationship with both my father and Leticia's father. Both Leticia's father and my father, Craig, were street guys. Leticia's father was a sadistic, abusive man who used to burn cigarettes on my flesh when I was still a young child. He was an evil man and I loathed him. I always dreaded the moments I saw him enter our apartment.

My father, Craig, was not around much when I was young. He was a teenager; a young man who lacked proper direction and needed funds. He obtained money by any means necessary. This led to many violent confrontations with other gangsters, including the now incarcerated Cool C, a West Philadelphia rapper who later was convicted of murdering a female police officer during a bank robbery and was sentenced to the death penalty.

My mother, on the other hand, was an emotionally imbalanced young woman who was just as lost as my father was. She seemed to be “looking for love in all the wrong places.” When you look for *anything* in the wrong places, you rarely find it. So, my mother’s attempts to find true love and affection were futile. Unfortunately, instead of directing her affection to my sister and I, by the time I was approaching two years old, things took a change for the worse in our “family” dynamic.

My mother’s mother also lived in Larchwood. She actually lived directly across the street from us on 82nd Street and Lindbergh Boulevard. By the time I was approaching two years of age, my mother made a new “friend.” Her name was also Rochelle, just like my mother, but people called her Boog. She had just moved to the projects, and she had a son who was my age, named Vernon.

Both Boog and Vernon were well-dressed at all times. Boog always wore dresses, flashy jewelry and made sure her hair was meticulously groomed; while she dressed Vernon in suit-jackets, ties along with dress shorts and kept his hair freshly cut.

Vernon seemed like a nerd to me back then, but I soon learned he was far from it. He was more of a menace who presented himself as a harmless young boy – you know, a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

Vernon quickly grew to become my nemesis. Over time, our relationship grew to become like the turbulent cat-and-mouse relationship between Spiderman and Kingpin from the comic books. As my story continues, you will see which of us represented each character.

I remember being intrigued by Vernon's mother, Boog. Back in the early 1980s, homosexuality was still frowned upon, especially in the Black community and especially in the ghetto. My mother's new "friend," Boog, however, was very open about the fact that she was bisexual. She was a loud and boisterous woman with a very strong, dominant personality.

At the tender age of two, I observed that my mother's timid nature was no match for the other woman's ferocity and that if my mother continued to associate with Boog, it would spell disaster for me and my sister's relationship with our mother. Unfortunately, my assessment was spot-on.

"Leticia," my mother called out one evening. "Look after Johnny. I'm going to hang out with Miss Boog for a few hours."

"Where are y'all going, Mommy?" a barely four-year-old Leticia innocently inquired.



“Girl! You know better than to ask about grown folks’ business!” my mother retorted. “Just do as I say and look after your brother until I get back. There’s some food in the fridge. I’ll be back in a few.”

“Mommy! Don’t leave!” I pleaded with tears in my eyes as I ran up to my mother while she attempted to hurriedly exit our apartment. I was barely two years old, so I didn’t know how to tell time yet, but when I looked out the window, I noticed that the sun had already set and it was dark outside.

“Boy! I’ll be back by the time you wake up,” my mother dismissed me as she hurried out the front door. “Mommy needs to have fun sometimes, too! Miss Boog is waiting on me.”

If only my mother had been telling the truth. We didn’t see our mother again for almost two weeks.

I don’t think my mother had any real concept of what was awaiting her during her first rendezvous with Boog and her entourage. There was an apartment in the projects on our block people in the neighborhood started to frequent shortly after Boog and Vernon moved to “The Woods.” In all honesty, a lot of new people moved into the neighborhood around that time. It was the early 1980s and

we had another new addition to the neighborhood and to our family: crack-cocaine. That's when things started to change drastically.

There was a man who started to visit the neighborhood on a regular basis. He was a young Italian man who I eventually learned was an undercover Philadelphia Housing Authority police officer. The first time we met him, he was accompanied by that evil lady; my mother's new "friend" Boog. Shortly after that man started popping up in the neighborhood, the crackheads started to appear.

As a toddler, I would sit in our second-floor apartment window and gaze outside. Oftentimes, I was looking for my mother, waiting for her to come home. I often observed adults walking into the apartment across the street. They were usually accompanied by my mother's "friend," Boog, or by Boog's male associate. The strange thing is, the adults entered the apartment one day looking presentable and well-dressed. However, when they exited the apartment, hours or sometimes days later – they appeared disheveled. Their clothes were dirty, their hair was mussed, and although I observed them from across the street, they all appeared to be unclean.

I later learned the reason for the stark contrast in how these folks looked when they entered and exited the apartment was because that

apartment was where they were turned on to crack-cocaine. It was a crack den or what we now refer to as a “crack house.”

Unfortunately for my mother, she was initiated in the same manner by Boog and Boog’s male friend. That was why Leticia and I hadn’t seen our mother for two weeks the first time she left her two young children at home alone to “hang out with Miss Boog for a few hours.”

These events occurred almost forty years ago. The effects of how crack impacted Black and brown communities is well-documented by now, but I’ll share with you how it affected my family and my neighborhood.

Things were very scary for us as children growing up in “The Woods.” You see, the crack era ushered in a new level of violence among the young, street-level dealers. High-powered firearms were introduced, which drastically increased the already sky-high murder rate in the city. Unfortunately, in our section of the city, people were being murdered and their dead bodies were being dumped in our neighborhood due to its remote location and the tall weeds which made it the “ideal” location to hide bodies.

Also, due to the lack of electronic surveillance and forensic DNA evidence back then, people were even killing children and babies for life insurance money and hiding their bodies around the property of my public housing complex. I'm sure you can imagine how unnerving it would be to hear reports like that as a young child – especially when you are being left at home alone on a consistent basis for weeks at a time to fend for yourself by your drug-addicted, teen mother.

As I stated earlier, many of my own family members were included in the ranks of young men and women who chose to indulge in illegal entrepreneurial pursuits. The introduction of crack just provided them with an additional source of income and another outlet for sadistic behavior for those in my family who had a penchant for such tendencies.

My family members who pursued drug trafficking used different methods than the average drug dealers. They wanted to guarantee their success, so they tapped into other “resources” in efforts to do so. I don't mean to be vague, so I'll just come right out and say it – they used Ouija boards, magic and witchcraft. No joke.

Yes, we're Black and many people in our culture view these practices as unfavorable, while others practice these things

unwittingly. Those in my family who practiced forms of witchcraft did so willingly because they wanted to ensure their success and prosperity in their financial pursuits, whether legal or otherwise. But I'll go into more details about that later because it gets really intricate.

Don't get me wrong – not everybody in my family was involved in drug dealing or witchcraft. I have several relatives who held honorable careers and who practiced more traditional forms of spirituality. For instance, I have an aunt who worked as a flight attendant. I spent a lot of time at her house, with my cousin, Tamir, during my adolescent years.

I also have family members who were very involved in the church. To be quite honest, some of my family members who later became involved in witchcraft were initially deeply involved in the church and even had aspirations to be pastors when I was very young. Even my name, “John,” means, “the grace or mercy of the Lord.” So, it seems apparent that when I was born, my mother wasn't directly involved in, or at least unduly influenced by witchcraft at the time, and was more influenced by the Scriptures.

I also have a cousin who you probably have heard of. His father's name is Joe “Jelly Bean” Bryant. My cousin's name was Kobe. Yes, that's right – Kobe Bryant was my cousin. Kobe was

about a year older than me and we were extremely close growing up. Actually, Kobe, Tamir and I were all close and used to play basketball frequently before my uncle Joe moved their family to Italy to play in the European League.

So, in any event, my mother continued to leave Leticia and I home alone for days and weeks at a time. I was only a toddler and my sister, Leticia, was only a year-and-a-half older than me. Obviously, my mother's judgment was not ideal at the time. The emotional and physical neglect quickly became too much for our young bodies and psyches to handle. We didn't have enough food and we were far too young to fend for ourselves for any period of time, especially for days and weeks on end.

I recall repeatedly begging the adults around me to potty train me so I didn't have to wait for an older person to change my diapers. I grew frustrated at the fact that my requests were continually dismissed and ignored. As our mother continued to leave my sister and I home alone, unsupervised, I eventually developed severe diaper rash. My red, irritated skin burned and I cried almost nonstop for days. My sister was helpless and we ran out of any type of substantial food to sustain us. At the tender age of two, I eventually came to the conclusion that I was going to lose my life and sadly, I accepted my fate as a toddler.

Of course, since I am able to tell you this story, I survived. Our mother eventually returned home and fed us. My diaper rash was eventually treated and the physical scars vanished. The emotional scars still remain, as these events transpired almost forty years ago but are still as vivid in my mind as they were the day they occurred.

I say all this to show you that although my name, John, is average, the seventh most common American name the year I was born, my life has been far from average. I'm not seeking sympathy. I'm simply sharing my story to help heal myself and hoping it will help others with similar experiences do the same. I also hope that those who may be dealing with traumatic experiences similar to mine can understand that they are not alone and that they can not only survive through the pain and trauma, but that they can thrive and prosper.

It took me a very long time to realize it, but I came to learn that I was *chosen* to experience these things for a reason. I survived these traumatic experiences to mold me into the person I am now and to teach the generation after me how to survive and evolve through their personal trauma and learn from it instead of being swallowed up and destroyed by it. I hope my mission is accomplished by the time you finish reading my story.

But this is only the first chapter. We've only reached the point in my story when I was two years old. I'm over forty years old now, so needless to say, my story is far from over, so let's keep going! I hope you're ready...



## Chapter 2

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So, I already provided you with some background information on me and my family. Now it's time to get into the gritty details about what made life so difficult for me and some other children who were unfortunate enough to be *chosen* as targets of the adults in our family.

The eighties were a troubling, even terrifying time for many people in my section of Philadelphia – especially for young children. Me and Leticia's mother, Rochelle, had a sporadic relationship with both of our fathers. However, it seemed to me as if my mother's relationship with Leticia's father was slightly more consistent, for lack of a better term. This was especially the case after my own father became addicted to crack himself.

In hindsight, it seems ironic to me that the relationship between Leticia's father and our mother seemed to have slightly more lasting power than our mother's relationship with my father did. Leticia's father also smoked crack, but he indulged in damn near every other drug you could imagine as well: powder cocaine, heroin, prescription pills, PCP – basically anything he could get his hands on. His behavior was erratic and as I stated before, he was a sadistic, abusive man who used to burn me with his lit cigarettes as a toddler.

He would laugh manically when he burned me, as if he was amused by torturing a young toddler. I vividly remember my mother laughing along with him and how shocked and hurt I was when she did so. I also remember this evil man used to physically abuse my mother on a regular basis as well. Maybe she only laughed nervously when he burnt me with his cigarettes to avoid being burned herself. I was a child, but I can still remember how terrified I was of that man, so I can only imagine how afraid she was of him since he used to beat her viciously. But she continued to deal with him anyway.

My mother was intelligent and people saw her as very physically attractive, but she suffered from mental health issues and she was very young at the time. Rochelle had very little guidance and consumed substances to cope with her issues instead of seeking professional help. I'm not excusing the harm she exposed Leticia and me to as innocent, young children – I'm just looking at the situation from the more mature perspective of a forty-one-year-old father. So, like I said before; I find it ironic that my mother continued to tolerate Leticia's father's behavior for so long, and stayed in a sporadic, tumultuous relationship with him.

Sadly, as crack-addicted parents often do, Rochelle continued to leave Leticia and I at home alone for extended periods of time. Now that I reflect even further, in addition to her addiction, I think my mother may have left the house so often because she was trying

to escape *every* relationship in her life. The home base for the relationships in my mother's life was our apartment in Larchwood Projects.

Most addicts use their addictions, whatever they may be, as an escape from reality. As an adult with much more experience now; I realize that my mother may have left home so often to run away, if even just temporarily. She was a single mother in her late teens with two toddlers. She was newly addicted to crack and looking for someone she could truly love and trust. She was being misled by herself and others. This led to Rochelle through numerous stormy relationships – among friends, family and romantic partners.

So, even if Rochelle wasn't dealing with my father or Leticia's abusive father at the moment; it may have been difficult for our mother to fully escape reality while her two toddlers were sitting there, staring in her face, asking for food, needing to be cared for. Obviously, Leticia and I were very young and needed to be looked after by a competent adult.

Unfortunately, it didn't seem to be in Rochelle's mental and emotional make-up to be a competent mother on a consistent basis. Sadly, at three years old and one-and-a-half years old respectively; Leticia and I were essentially left to fend for ourselves. My mother

was already very young, a teen mother, and we lived in the projects, so you already know our financial outlook was bleak. We didn't often have very much food in our apartment when our mother was home, so imagine how quickly things declined for Leticia and I after our mother had been gone for a week or two.

Back then, when my mother was first turned onto crack-cocaine by that evil lady, Boog, I was only a year-and-a-half old. I was actually still drinking Carnation and had not yet been potty trained, although I could talk and was extremely articulate for my age, according to the adults I encountered. When my mother left Leticia and I home alone, it was my young sister's responsibility to mix my formula for me. Mixing baby formula is a task many new parents botch during early attempts as adults; so, you can only imagine the difficulties my toddler sister encountered while attempting to care for herself *and* her baby brother.

Leticia and I were often both famished, so we just ate snacks and condiments throughout the day as we played in our mostly empty project apartment alone as toddlers. This continued for days and weeks on end while our mother was out with that evil lady and my sister and me were home alone. We often consumed all the "food" in our small apartment several days before our mother returned. We spent the remainder of the time waiting, suffering and crying from our hunger pangs as we attempted to play and distract ourselves

inside; as we were often too afraid to venture outside into the danger of “The Woods.”

Leticia and I developed a tight-knit bond for a period of time, as siblings who are relatively close in age often do. In addition, the circumstances we endured drew us even closer. Leticia cared for me to the best of her ability, but she was only three years old when my mother started neglecting and abandoning us.

The toll the neglect took on our physical and mental health became apparent roughly six months later, when I was about two years old. Unfortunately for me, my older sister, my would-be protector and provider – turned on me. Leticia obviously felt some type of resentment, anger and aggression due to the abandonment and neglect we both suffered at our mother’s hands. The problem was, she misdirected those feelings toward me.

I was only two years old the first time I can remember Leticia becoming aggressive and violent with me. Leticia was approaching four. She was bigger and stronger than me, and the blow she delivered stung. So naturally, I cried from the pain of being struck for no apparent reason. That was the first physical confrontation between my sister and me, but unfortunately, it would not be the last.

After Leticia hit me the first time, it seemed to become easier for her to resort to doing so regularly. In addition to the negative way Leticia processed the neglect we experienced due to our mother's addiction and mental state; she was likely also influenced by the violent interactions we both witnessed between our mother and her father when he was in our apartment. It was still not a valid excuse, however. I was only two years old. She was my older sister. All we had was each other.

The violence escalated one day when my sister pushed me down the steps inside our building while our mother was away. I was badly hurt, with busted, swollen lips and multiple scrapes and bruises covering my small body. I cried relentlessly until my older sister, who also happened to be my caretaker, assisted me up and nursed my wounds.

The most extreme case of violence between Leticia and I back then occurred one evening while our mother, Rochelle, was absent again. I was sitting in the window, sobbing, waiting for my mother to come home. I guess my crying irritated my sister to her breaking point. Without warning, my three-year-old care-taker snuck up on me from behind and pushed me out of our second-story apartment window.

“Ahhhhhh!”

I was terrified and screamed in horror on the way down. I genuinely thought I was falling to my death.

*Thud!*

I writhed in pain, moaned and cried as I lay limp on the grass next to our building. Less than a minute later, Leticia rushed out of the front door of our building, calling my name.

“Johnny! Johnny! What happened?” Leticia asked, feigning shock as she crouched over me. “Are you okay?”

“No, I’m not okay!” I whined. “You pushed me!”

“Shut up, Johnny!” Leticia commanded with a scowl. “No, I didn’t!”

“Yes, you did!” I snapped as tears streamed down my face. “I’m telling Mommy!”

“How? She’s not even here! I have to take care of you. Come on. I’ll fix you.”

Leticia struggled for a moment as she mustered the strength to pick me up. She stumbled several times as she entered the doorway of our building. Leticia almost dropped me as she trudged up the staircase she pushed me down a few short weeks beforehand. My sister then carried me into our apartment before plopping me onto the sofa.

“Ouch!” I yelped. “Not so rough, Tish!”

“Shut up before I sock you, Johnny!” Leticia threatened me with a smirk. “Let me check you out and make sure you didn’t break anything when you fell.”

“Okay,” I acquiesced.

“Does this hurt?” Leticia asked as she grabbed my hands and wiggled my wrists, obviously imitating something she had seen on a television show.

“My *whole body* hurts, Leticia!”

“Stop being a baby!” Leticia snapped. “You hungry? I’ll make us something to eat.”



My older sister, caretaker and abuser stormed off to the kitchen in a huff, looking like a frustrated miniature-sized housewife. She retrieved three bags of chips and a loaf of bread and brought them back to the living room.

“Get up so I can sit down, Johnny.”

Leticia sat down next to me as I complied. My older sister handed me one bag of chips and two slices of bread.

“I get two bags of chips because I’m the oldest,” Leticia stated smugly as she snatched the bag of chips from my hand, opened it for me and handed the chips back to me. She then opened one of her own bags, took several bites of a loaf of bread and began devouring her first bag of chips. “We ran out of peanut butter. You ate it all.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay. I had some too,” Leticia shrugged.

“You’ll be okay,” Leticia continued innocently as she started eating a second slice of bread. “I’ll wash your cuts after we eat, but you already stopped crying, so I don’t think you broke any bones.

You gotta be more careful, Johnny. You shouldn't sit in the window anymore. You might get hurt really bad next time."

"You're right. Thanks for taking care of me, Tish!" I grinned as I looked up at my sister; bread and potato chip crumbs cascading down my face and shirt.

"You're welcome." Leticia concisely replied.

True to her word, within about thirty minutes of pushing me out of our living room window, Leticia fed me and nursed my wounds. We laid on the sofa together and told each other "make-believe" stories as we waited for our mother to return at some undetermined date and time. My sister and I had officially become trauma-bonded.

## Chapter 3

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Our mother finally returned once again as she always eventually did. Shortly after this incident, however, new characters were introduced into our lives and into my story.

Remember that Italian man who coincidentally appeared along with Boog in my neighborhood right before the crack fiends started to appear? A few days after Rochelle returned from her most recent hiatus, my life would quickly change directions once more.

It was shortly after what I will refer to as the “window incident.” That evil lady, Boog, introduced my mother to that young, slick-talking Italian man and his equally young, Black, female companion. I was polite to the strangers, although I was irritated. I wanted to spend time alone with Leticia and my mother.

Our mother had been gone so often and for so long. Besides, I was certain she had been “hanging out with Boog,” at least for a substantial portion of her absence. Plus, I was physically hurt and both Leticia and I were malnourished. Now Boog was bringing two strangers into our home for Lord knows what. Why couldn’t Boog just leave my mother alone so she could take care of herself and us kids and so we could be a family?

“Rochelle!” Boog shouted in her usual, unnecessarily loud fashion. “This is Sal. You need to talk to him.”

“What is this about, Boog?” Rochelle timidly asked as she stepped aside and allowed the group to enter our apartment. “Who are these people?”

“This is his *bitch*, I mean his partner, Barbara!” Boog sharply replied as she strutted across the living room as if she owned the place. “Vernon! Go play with Johnny and Leticia for a minute while the grown folks talk!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Vernon shuffled over to us. He was slightly older and taller than me but he was a sort of goofy kid. I think it was the way his mother dressed him. As I stated earlier, Boog always dressed Vernon in “church clothes” and kept his hair freshly cut. But the way his clothes were put together was very nerdy.

Vernon wore a Members Only <sup>TM</sup> jacket, with a button-up shirt, a plaid bowtie and plaid shorts held up by a fake, brown leather belt. His outfit was “completed” by brown penny loafers to match his fake leather belt. I was only two years old. I barely had any clothes of my

own, and the ones I owned were not very nice. With that being said, I thought Vernon looked somewhat silly and I imagined there was no way one of my peers could enjoy dressing that way. I felt sorry for him at first. That was, until he opened his mouth.

“Hey, I’m Vernon.”

“Hey Vernon. I’m Leticia. This is my brother, Johnny.”

“Hey,” I greeted Vernon with a reluctant smile. “That’s your mom?”

“Duh!” Vernon rudely replied. “You’re such a nerd!”

“What?” I whined in shock. “I wasn’t sure! I was just asking! Excuse me for living!”

“Just be quiet, kid!” Vernon growled under his breath, trying his best to be intimidating.

“*You* be quiet, kid! How are you gonna call my brother a nerd when you’re dressed like a Poindexter?” Leticia snapped.

“Good one, Tish!” I chuckled.

“Whatever!” Vernon shrugged. “You can’t laugh! You only have a diaper and a t-shirt on!”

“Your shorts are so tight; they look like a diaper!” I shot back.

“Oh, snap!” Leticia chuckled.

“Shut up! You don’t even know!” Vernon whined. “I’m going to be a gangster!”

“Well, I’m going to be a kingpin!” I retorted. “I’m going to be the biggest businessman ever!”

“No!” Vernon screamed and stomped his foot. “I’m going to be The Kingpin – like from Spiderman!”

“No! I am! I said it first!”

“Johnny,” my mother intervened as the group of adults approached us, “what are y’all arguing about?”

“I said I’m going to be the kingpin and he’s trying to steal my idea!”

“Oh, well... don’t worry about that right now,” my mother dismissed my concerns. “We’ll talk about your ideas later. This man needs to talk to you. These are Miss Boog’s friends.”

“Oh,” I sternly replied as I looked up at Boog and the two other adults. I did not like their energy.

“Hey, kiddo,” the olive-skinned young man greeted me with a large smile as he knelt to address me at eye-level. “My name is Sal. What’s your name?”

“I’m Johnny. My mom didn’t tell you?”

“Well, aren’t you sharp?” Sal chuckled. “Yes, she did. I just figured I’d introduced myself, man to man. You know?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“So, I see you have some boo-boos all over your body,” Sal continued as he took my arm in his hand. “Do they hurt?”

“Only when you touch them,” I sharply replied. I did not trust Sal. I wanted him to leave.

“Hmmm,” Sal smirked. “How did you get all these bumps and bruises, Johnny?”

I hesitated before responding. I glanced over at my older sister. I noticed the expression of fear filling her young face and I felt compassion and love for her. I could not risk getting Leticia into trouble.

“I fell.”

“How did you fall, Johnny?”

“I was sitting in the window and I fell.”

“You fell inside or outside the window, Johnny?” Sal asked incredulously.

“Outside.”

“You fell outside the window, Johnny?” Sal shrieked. “Dammit, kid! You’re lucky to be alive! Was your mother here when this happened?”

“She was outside.”



“I’m so sorry, Johnny!” my mother burst into tears and scooped me into her arms, cradling me like the baby I was.

“This is a serious matter, Miss Palm,” Sal huffed as he slowly rose from his crouched position. “I have to make an official report with CYS. We’ll be back. You kids be safe. Feel better soon, Johnny. Stay out that window!”

“I will!” I called out to the man as he exited the apartment. “It wasn’t my mom’s fault! Leticia told me to stay out the window. It wasn’t her fault either!”

“We probably have to bring Jerry back on this one,” Barbara whispered to Sal on their way out.

“Roger that,” Sal nodded as Boog closed the door behind them, leaving our devastated family behind without a word or an ounce of sympathy. An evil woman indeed.

The next time Sal and Barbara visited us, their supervisor, Jerry, accompanied them. Jerry was a short, slim, middle-aged white man. He was of European-Jewish heritage and had short, wavy, brown hair. He introduced himself to me, but allowed Sal to lead the conversation while he and Barbara observed. The older man seemed nice enough,

but I didn't trust him either. I wanted everybody but my mother and my sister to leave our apartment.

"Rochelle," Sal began, "we know you need help, and that's what public housing is for. But when you do things like leaving your kids home alone; you're not only putting them at risk, you're placing the city in a position to be liable if we continue to allow you to live here."

"I know," my mother timidly acknowledged as she grew tearful. "I'm sorry! It won't happen again."

"I know it won't!" Sal callously replied. "I'm placing you on a probationary period with PHA. I'll be performing random welfare checks for the foreseeable future. You're on thin ice, Rochelle! One more fuck-up like this and you're going to lose this place and we're going to take Johnny from you! Do you want to lose your kid?"

"No! Please, no, Mr. Sal," my mother sobbed. "I'll do better, I promise!"

"Johnny," Sal stooped down to meet me at my eye-level like he had during our first encounter. "Do you want to stay with your mother and be homeless or do you want to come with us and have a nice, safe

place to live with plenty of food to eat and nice kids your age to play with?”

“Well,” I hesitated. “I want to stay with my mom... but I don’t want to be homeless.”

“Well, if you don’t want to be homeless, then you might want to come with us,” Sal matter-of-factly replied. His eyes locked with mine. I shuddered as an eerie feeling overcame me. It was as if he was staring through my soul. My eyes immediately filled with tears and I started to cry.

“Easy, Sal,” Jerry quietly interjected as he placed his hand on his subordinate’s shoulder. “We’ll be back.”

“Yeah, come on, Sal,” Barbara added. “The poor kid’s only two! Hey, Johnny, what do you want to be when you grow up?”

“Who? Me?” I sniffled, surprised the woman had finally taken enough of an interest to address me directly. “I want to be a businessman when I grow up!”

“Oh, wow, Johnny,” Barbara nodded her head as she glanced at her supervisor, his brow furrowed and eyes narrowed. “Those are big plans for such a little guy!”

“I’m going to be a kingpin businessman like the guy on Spiderman!”

“What?” Sal erupted into laughter. “That is hilarious! Yeah, kid – I wanted to be The Lone Ranger when I was your age!”

“My son is special! Don’t laugh at him,” my mother, Rochelle, quickly jumped to my defense.

“Yeah, Rochelle,” Sal huffed. “Everybody’s kids are special to them. If your kids are so special to you, how about you try not leaving them home alone so you don’t lose custody?”

“I’m serious, Mr. Sal!” my mother grew defensive. I saw my mother become assertive for the first time in my young life. “Johnny has magic inside of him. It runs in our family and he has a gift. Johnny can see things – he’s psychic! If he says he will be a kingpin businessman, then he will be! Period. End of story! Now, if there isn’t anything else, y’all can leave now.”

“Okay, whatever, Rochelle,” Sal dismissively replied. “We’ll be back!”

“I’m sure you will. Bye!” My mother snapped as she slammed the door behind the group of shady public housing police officers. “Don’t listen to them, Johnny. Mr. Sal doesn’t know what he’s talking about. You’ll be a kingpin one day, just like you said!”

“Sheesh! What the hell was that about?” Jerry sighed as he, Sal and Barbara walked away from the building and to their vehicle. “Is she on drugs? We might need to have her tested.”

“Look, boss... that lady is just crazy,” Sal protested, denying his knowledge of my mother’s addiction, knowing he was associated with the woman who was responsible for introducing her to crack-cocaine. “She’s just the neighborhood nut-job – well *one* of them. There’s plenty of them around here!”

“Oh, okay,” Jerry sighed. “Well, just keep tabs on them and keep detailed records of what you find during the welfare checks. Keep me posted on what you find and let me know of any substantial developments. I’ll come with you for a follow-up visit in ninety days.”

“I feel sorry for those kids,” Barbara sighed as she gazed out the window.

“It’s part of the job,” Sal coldly replied. “You need to toughen up if you’re going to last!”

“You’re such an asshole!” Barbara huffed. “I don’t know how I stand to be around you as much as I do!”

“I hate to say it,” Jerry interjected, “but Sal’s right. It is part of the job – everyday, Barbara. It’s a sad reality, so if you can’t handle it, you might want to get into a different line of work.”

“Damn, Jerry! For real?”

“Sad, but true,” Jerry nodded. “But hey... you’re young and you’re still a rookie. If you decide it’s not for you, at least you didn’t waste a lot of time. Better to find out now before you see too much and get traumatized.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Barbara sighed. “It’s a shame, though.”

“What’s a shame?” Jerry asked.

“It’s just that,” Barbara hesitated. “Those kids don’t have that option...”

## Chapter 4

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Winter arrived in the city soon after the “window incident.”

The winter of 1982/1983 was an extremely harsh one for the city of Philadelphia. Mid-December brought a blizzard and bitter-cold temperatures along with it. My mother exercised poor judgment once again, to my detriment. This time it was in a new and unexpected fashion.

“Wake up, Johnny!” Rochelle exclaimed in a hurry as she picked me up from the mattress I shared with Leticia. I looked back as my mother carried me out of the room and I noticed that Leticia was not in bed. “We got to go, son!”

“Where are we going, Mommy?” I asked innocently as my mother rushed and dressed me.

“I’m not going to let them take you away from me, Johnny! Do you understand?” My mother sobbed as she pulled underwear over my diaper. She rapidly pulled a t-shirt down over my head and arms, then placed socks on my feet and bundled my half-naked body in a snowsuit before zippering it. “I’m taking you to your Uncle Darien’s house out West.”



My Uncle Darien was a character. He was slightly older than my mother. Darien, like many other men in my family, was a street-guy. He always talked about his crew – the “Lynch Mob.” He spoke of them as if they would run their section of West Philly one day.

Darien was somewhat of a confused young man. He was heavily immersed in the streets, but at the same time, he was actively involved in the church back then. Darien’s main goal was to be successful, respected and influential wherever he went and he was willing to do *anything* to achieve that goal.

“Uncle Darien’s house? I’m going to live with him?”

“Yes, Johnny,” my mother replied as she zipped my snowsuit, picked me up and headed for the door. “Your Uncle Darien and your Aunt Diane. Now, keep your mouth closed. It’s cold outside.”

“But what about Tish? Where is she?”

“Leticia’s not going there with you,” my mother concisely replied as she opened the front door of the building. “She’s already staying with someone else. Now, enough questions.”

It felt as if my mother had opened the freezer door and stepped inside of it while holding me. We were greeted by a harsh gust of freezing wind as we stepped into the brisk mid-December air. There were snowbanks several feet high from the snow plows along the shoulders of the road. Ice had formed atop the nearly two feet of snow that lay on the sidewalks, making it difficult to walk without slipping.

The problem was: my mother, Rochelle, did not own a vehicle or have cab or bus fare. We would be forced to brave the elements and make the treacherous journey on foot. An even bigger problem for me was that my mother had not placed any shoes on my feet. In addition, she only carried me sporadically throughout the trip.

“Aaaaahhhhh! Mommy!” I screamed. “My feet hurt! Pick me up... *please!*”

“Oh my God, Johnny! Not right now!” my mother huffed. “It’s freezing and Mommy’s back hurts! Now, come on.”

“Okay, Mommy,” I sniffled as I struggled to walk on the ice-covered snow.

I walked several feet before I slipped and fell hard, frontward onto my chest, stomach and face. I wailed, cried and lay there until my mother trudged through the snow and picked me up.

“Jesus, Johnny!” My mother huffed as she leaned over and scooped me into her arms. “You’re going to bust your head wide open if you’re not careful!”

My mother continued to hold me until I stopped crying and spewing mucous all over my snowsuit and her coat. Then she placed me back on the ground and allowed me to walk on the ice for the remainder of the four-mile hike wearing only a single pair of socks over my small feet. We continued the arduous journey for hours until we finally made it to the warmth of my Uncle Darien and Aunt Diane’s house on 56th and Litchfield Streets in West Philadelphia.

Yes – we walked from 82nd Street to 56th Street! The temperature was in the teens that day. The ground was covered in snow and ice. It was a dangerous atmosphere in general and my mother and I traveled through crime-ridden neighborhoods, like our own. My mother was a very young woman. I was a toddler and I wasn’t wearing any shoes.

I was in physical distress from the journey and emotional turmoil from the news that my mother was sending me to live with somebody else. I didn't want to live with my Uncle Darien. I wanted to live with my mother and sister. And I didn't even have a chance to say goodbye to Leticia. It wasn't fair. On the other hand, after being exposed to the bitter cold and walking for several hours, I was relieved to have arrived at my aunt and uncle's warm house.

"Y'all finally made it, huh?" Uncle Darien arrogantly snapped as he stood in the doorway of his rowhome. "Y'all should have been here almost two hours ago! I got shit to do!"

"Sorry, Darien," my mother sniffled. "We had to walk. That's why I asked you to pick me up. It's cold as shit out here! Me and my baby are freezing!"

"What? I have to pay you a thousand dollars and give you a ride too?" Darien sneered. "Now, pick the boy up and come in. You're letting my heat out!"

My mother complied and finally picked me up. She scurried into Darien's home as he stepped aside so we could enter. The greeting my mother received from our "family" was almost as frigid as the

weather outside, but I was just happy to be able to warm myself in the heat of the house.

“Hey, Johnny,” my Aunt Diane greeted me with a half-smile as she picked me up and rubbed my hands between hers. “You’re freezing! Darien, I told you; you should have given them a ride!”

“I’m not wasting my gas, possibly crashing my car in this ice, paying her a stack *and* raising her kid!” Darien scoffed. “Fuck that!”

“So, do you have the money for me, Darien?” my mother asked impatiently as she rubbed her hands together in an attempt to warm them.

“Not right now,” Darien rolled his eyes. “I need to make a couple moves first. I got you in a couple days.”

“But Darien, you said--”

“Look, Rochelle,” Darien interrupted, “I’m not the one who left my baby home alone so I could get high and let him fall out a window! Don’t come at me about this! If you weren’t worried about Child Services taking him from you, you wouldn’t even be asking us to keep him; so, don’t rush me!”

“But Darien--”

“Look, Rochelle,” my Uncle Darien interrupted my mother again, “do you want the money or not?”

“Yes,” my mother timidly replied.

“Then you’re going to have to wait for it. I don’t have any kids of my own for a reason! The only reason I agreed to look after this little nigga is because Diane agreed to it and you said Johnny is psychic! I’m thinking this little nigga is going to be somebody one day! He’s going to be the Lynch Mob protégé. Like any other investment, you need to wait for a return. A couple days ain’t shit to wait. You can either be patient, or you can take this snot-nosed nigga with you back to ‘The Woods!’”

“No, it’s okay,” my mother replied, dejected. “I’ll wait.”

“Are y’all hungry?” Diane asked.

“Yes!” My mother and I answered in unison.

“Okay, then! I’ll make y’all something to eat,” Diane replied. “Is fried chicken, cornbread and rice okay, Darien?”

“Yeah, that’s cool.”

My mother held me and we both warmed up in Darien and Diane’s living room while my aunt prepared dinner for the group of relatives gathered at her home. Once the food was ready, we all sat around the living room and ate. Nobody really talked much because we were too busy eating – especially my mother and I because we were famished.

Once we had finished eating, Diane pressured my Uncle Darien to give my mother a ride home so she didn’t have to walk in the cold. He reluctantly agreed. My mother rose from her chair and looked down at me. I looked up at my mother and finally remembered what she had told me before we left our apartment earlier that morning. The reality that I wasn’t returning home with her hit me like a ton of bricks and knocked the wind out of my young body. My eyes immediately filled with tears and I bellowed in agony.

“Mommy! No! Don’t leave me!” I wailed. “Please, Mommy! I want to go home with you!”

“I’m sorry, baby, but this is for the best,” Rochelle softly replied, her eyes filled with tears as she quickly embraced me before

Darien tore me from her and handed me to my Aunt Diane. “It’s only going to be temporary anyway. Mommy will be back to get you.”

“No, Mommy! *Please!*”

“Come on, Rochelle,” Darien commanded as he strutted towards the front door, his car keys in hand. “We gotta leave now, or you got to walk.”

“I’m sorry, baby! I love you,” my mother cried as she slowly followed my Uncle Darien out the front door. “Darien, I’mma need that money as soon as possible.”

Aunt Diane was nice enough, but I observed that my Uncle Darien seemed to be a heartless man. At the young age of three, I realized that my uncle, my new guardian, was very calloused. I was not looking forward to living with him, although it seemed as if I would no longer have to worry about not having enough food to eat while I stayed with him. Having a consistently healthy diet and supervision from a seemingly loving mother-figure like my Aunt Diane was the only consolation I found in this horrific situation. I sobbed in my aunt’s arms after my mother and Uncle Darien left. I didn’t stop until that man returned home and demanded I stop. I only did so out of pure fear.



“I can’t believe this punk-ass boy is still crying and I can’t believe you’re still coddling his bitch-ass!” Darien snapped when he reentered the house.

“Darien,” Diane snapped as she rocked me back and forth. “He’s literally a baby and his mother just left him with relatives he barely knows. Chill the fuck out!”

“*He* needs to chill the fuck out!” Darien retorted. “Shut the fuck up, Johnny! Man up! Your mother’s not coming back! You live here now! You’re a part of the Lynch Mob, nigga! And Lynch Mob niggas don’t cry!”

I sniffled and stifled my wails immediately for fear that my uncle might strike me.

“You ain’t never lied,” one of Darien’s male associates who was seated in the living room chimed in upon hearing my uncle’s comments about their gang. “Lynch Mob runs shit!”

“Y’all some cold cats!” Diane said in a low voice as she shook her head in disgust. “He’s a baby whose mother just sold him for a thousand dollars and y’all talking all this shit to him!”

“No, she didn’t sell him for a thousand dollars!” Darien chuckled.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Diane asked in shock. “We talked about it when she first asked. You *just* told her you were going to pay her in a few days!”

“Look, Diane,” Darien began, “I’m not giving Rochelle shit! We’re already feeding the little nigga and taking care of his ass. You want to pay her, bro?” Darien chuckled as he turned to one of his male cousins who was seated across the room.

“Nah, bro,” the young man laughed as he raised his hands in mock surrender.

“You want to buy the kid from Rochelle? You got a stack for that girl?” Darien callously asked as he turned to another one of his associates.

“Damn, bro,” his friend grimaced. “You’re a cold cat! But no. I got my own seeds. I’m good.”

“See, Diane!” Darien turned back to his wife as she continued to rock me back and forth as she gently rubbed my back. “He’s a bill.

I don't remember busting the nut that created the nigga! I'm pretty sure it was Jelly Bean who did that, but that's a whole other story! This nigga, Johnny, is an investment in our future!"

"What the fuck is you talking about, Darien?" Diane asked, perplexed.

"Rochelle says Johnny is psychic, right?" Darien asked rhetorically. "Johnny, what do you want to be when you grow up?"

"A businessman – the Kingpin!" I sniffled as I looked up at my uncle, trembling.

"See!" my uncle shouted triumphantly. "This little nigga is our meal ticket! He's going to be our ticket out the hood!"

"You're full of it, Darien!" Diane objected. "You know Rochelle is smoking that new crack shit and it has her acting and talking crazy! That's why Johnny's here in the first place! Come on, Darien... he's just a baby!"

"Exactly!" my uncle countered. "What kind of three-year-old with no father-figure talks like him? Johnny must be some type of genius! Jelly Bean has Kobe playing basketball, Wanda has Tamir in

basketball too and Johnny is stuck on this businessman tip. He's young, though. We can put him in basketball too. We can make him do whatever the fuck we want him to. He's ours now."

"I don't know..."

"Look," Darien continued. "There's nothing not to know. It's guaranteed. I'm fucking with this church situation right now with the pastor; but me, Wanda and them been experimenting with the Ouija board too. You don't even know, Diane! We're going to be on top soon enough, one way or another!"

"A Ouija board, though?" Aunt Diane gasped. "I don't know about that, babe. That scares me."

"I'll have Wanda show you next time she comes over," Darien tried to ease his young wife's concerns. "Don't believe the hype. The white man has brainwashed us into believing our traditional forms of spirituality are evil to keep us away from them. He does that because he knows these practices makes us stronger against him. I won't fall for it anymore. You're my wife, and the Lynch Mob is my crew, so we're going to beat the system by any means necessary! That boy is going to be something someday! I'm going to make sure of it!"

So, as you can see, I had a new “home” but it was not an emotionally safe or healthy environment. I now had a male head-of-household, a “father-figure,” but he was a young, imbalanced, manipulative, materialistic man. I didn’t comprehend the gravity of everything he was saying, but even back then, I was devastated by the callous statements he made in front of me, an innocent three-year-old.

I just wanted to be back home with my mother and Leticia. But it didn’t seem like that was going to happen. Oh, well. At least I was in a warm house, full of food and my aunt was hugging me, consoling me and showing me love. For now.

## Chapter 5

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I spent the first several weeks in my new home living comfortably, adjusting to life with Uncle Darien and Aunt Diane, in relatively clean and warm surroundings. They kept me well-fed and purchased me a full wardrobe since I arrived at their home wearing nothing but a snowsuit, a t-shirt and socks. It was December, so my new, temporary guardians bought me winter clothes. My aunt and uncle also needed to purchase diapers for me on a regular basis since I still wasn't potty trained and the only diaper my mother brought with us was the dirty diaper I was wearing at the time. Uncle Darien and Aunt Diane also neglected to take the time to potty train me at first, which frustrated me to no end.

As my uncle had anticipated, I quickly became another "bill" and he was not happy about it. Darien was a young, childless, married man in his early twenties. As he previously stated to my aunt, Darien was focused on building his own wealth and that of his crew, the Lynch Mob. He was determined to build his empire and increase the Lynch Mob's influence in their West Philadelphia neighborhood. The only way my Uncle Darien would continue to tolerate my presence was if I was able to assist him in reaching his goals. The more money

he spent on me, the more of a burden I became and the more impatient he grew to receive a return on his “investment.”

“This little nigga is way too expensive!” Uncle Darien vented to my Aunt Diane one Saturday evening. As usual, several of my relatives were gathered at my aunt and uncle’s house, drinking, smoking and playing cards. “No wonder Rochelle’s crack-smoking ass couldn’t afford to take care of him!”

“Yeah, I hear you, babe,” Diane sighed. “We might as well have our own baby for all this!”

“Nah... fuck that!” Darien sneered. “I’m not trying to take care of *nobody’s* kids!”

“Well, it’s kind of too late now, with Johnny,” Aunt Diane quietly replied, gesturing to me as I played on the floor with building blocks she had purchased for me. “He’s with us now. I don’t think Rochelle is coming back to get him any time soon. The only times she calls or pops up is to ask about the money you promised her.”

“That bitch is burnt! I don’t know why she ain’t smell the smoke yet!” my uncle laughed scornfully. “I ain’t giving her shit! But I

thought of a way we might be able to get some bread off of Johnny without waiting for him to grow up.”

“What do you mean, Darien?” Diane asked, her interest piqued. “How are we going to get money out of a three-year-old? You trying to put him on *Star Search* or something? I think he’s too shy...”

“*Star Search*? Hell, no, Diane!” Darien scoffed. “Nah, baby. I ain’t even on that! You got the Ouija board with you, right, Wanda?”

“Yeah, bro. I got it.”

“Bust that joint out,” Darien instructed. “I want to show Diane that shit.”

The adults gathered around Darien and Wanda as the children continued to play. Well, the other children, my cousins, focused on playing. I was slightly distracted because I heard the adults talking about me. My curiosity got the better of me when I saw my Aunt Wanda retrieve a dark board with large letters, numbers and other symbols on it and place it on one of the card tables in front of the group of adults.



“What’s that?” I asked as I made my way over to the group and peeked over the table.

“Now, I know you know better than to be all up in grown folks’ business, little nigga!” Darien snapped.

“But I thought I heard you call my name...”

“That doesn’t mean I was talking to you, Johnny!” Darien growled.

“Don’t worry about what we’re doing over here, Johnny,” Aunt Wanda smiled. “Just go back over and play with Tamir and them.”

“Okay.”

“See what I’m talking about?” Darien huffed from behind me as I complied with my aunt’s instructions and returned to the group of children. “This kid is on turkey time!”

“Stop it, Darien,” Wanda reprimanded my uncle. “We need the energy to be pure so we get a proper connection to the spirit world for this...”

“For what?” Aunt Diane asked, alarmed. “What y’all about to do?”

“We’re about to ask the ancestors how to get money out of Johnny!” Darien exclaimed.

I tried to remain inconspicuous and appear preoccupied playing with my cousins, but I heard my name several times, so my curiosity eventually got the best of me. I multitasked and watched my aunts and uncles out of the corner of my eye as I simultaneously shared toys with Tamir, Kobe and Laurie.

My Aunt Pam, Kobe’s mother, walked around the room and lit candles as she chanted unintelligible words in a low tone. My Aunt Wanda strolled over to the wall, turned off the lights in the living room, returned to the card table and took a seat directly in front of it. I watched as Wanda raised her arms upwards and held them level so both Diane and Darien could hold her hands.

“Now, Darien,” Aunt Wanda began. “What message do you need from the ancestors?”

“I need to know what to do with Johnny to get as much dough as fast as possible!” Darien replied as he rubbed his palms together.

“Okay, now, lightly place your fingertips on the planchette,” Wanda softly instructed the two adults seated on either side of her.

Wanda slowly released Diane and Darien’s hands and deliberately placed her fingers on the plastic, heart-shaped centerpiece of the Ouija board. Darien and Diane quickly followed suit. The young couple’s eyes grew large as the piece slowly slid across the board. Diane quickly grew tense and fought the urge to remove her hands from the planchette as it slowly crept across the board until it landed on the first letter: “I.” The three young adults kept their hands in place as the planchette continued to move to the next letter: “N,” then the next letter: “S.” Then the next: “U” The next: “R”

“You’re moving it!” Diane shrieked in astonishment.

“Shhhhh!” Darien, Wanda and Pam simultaneously commanded.

Darien, Wanda and Diane continued with their hands on the planchette as it glided along the board and landed on several more letters until it spelled out a complete word and stopped.

“I – N – S – U – R – A – N – C – E. Insurance? What’s that supposed to mean?” Diane asked, perplexed.

“It means,” Darien whispered fiercely, “that we’re supposed to use Johnny for the life insurance money. Ain’t that right, Wanda?”

“Um,” Wanda hesitated, a look of fear filling her face. “That’s what it seems like.”

“Can you ask the board?” Darien whispered as he glanced over at me slyly.

“Oh, uh... yeah. We can do that,” Aunt Wanda stuttered. “Leave your hands in place,” Wanda instructed as she bowed her head and closed her eyes. “Oh, great and merciful ancestors. Are you telling Darien and Diane to use Johnny for life insurance money?”

I watched the adults’ faces intently as their hands moved along with the planchette. Both Aunt Wanda and Aunt Diane’s faces dropped when the piece finally came to a complete stop in the far-left corner. Darien smiled with satisfaction when the planchette landed on the section of the board labeled “Yes.”

“See!” Darien shouted as he rose from his seat triumphantly.

“No!” Aunt Diane shrieked. “I don’t believe it! You moved that shit!”

“No, I didn’t!” Darien protested. “The ancestors moved it! That shit works! Doesn’t it, Wanda?”

“It does,” Wanda solemnly nodded. “It’s the real deal. But Darien... I don’t want any parts of killing that baby boy. He’s our family. I don’t think you should do it.”

“I didn’t create the little nigga!” Darien fumed. “Why I got to take care of his funky ass? I linked up with this cat who has bricks for the low and I need the dough! This is the best way to get it! You know the position that would put us in, Diane? Not to mention me and the Lynch Mob?”

“Fuck the Lynch Mob, Darien!” Diane snapped. “That’s all you care about!”

“But Darien,” Pam interjected. “It’s wrong. You can’t do that to Johnny.”

“That’s easy for you to say!” Darien shot back. “Jelly Bean is in the NBA! Y’all are rich now! You ain’t stressing because you and

Bean are good, while the rest of us are stuck in the hood! Where's Jelly Bean now? Probably out in Houston fucking some groupie bitches! He probably has more bastard children out there too! Besides... you're into this witchcraft heavier than any of us, Pam! Y'all three bitches are a damn coven in here! Aren't we supposed to listen to whatever the Ouija board says? Stop being a hypocrite just because you don't like the answer!"

"You know what, Darien?" Aunt Pam began. "You're on your own! I'm not going to let you drag my husband or my child into your foolishness just because you're jealous of Joe and desperate to get a dollar and be a kingpin! It's nobody else's fault you didn't have the talent or drive to get into the League yourself! Come on, Bean! We're leaving!"

"Whatever, Pam!" Darien ranted as my Aunt Pam walked out the front door, my cousin, Kobe, in tow. "You got your perfect, little, rich family and your perfect, little life with your little basketball prodigy, so you wouldn't understand! You'll see, though! I'll be on top soon enough! I'll be bigger than Jelly Bean! I'll be bigger than *all* y'all! I'm going to do *whatever* I need to do!"

"That's fine, but you're not doing *anything* to Johnny!" Diane protested.

“Since when do I let you tell me what the fuck to do, woman?” Darien growled in the darkness; his devilish face illuminated by the flickering flames of the lit candles.

“Darien,” Wanda turned and softly addressed my uncle. “Can I talk to you outside for a minute? Tamir, come lay down on the sofa. We’re about to leave in a minute.”

Tamir complied with his mother’s instructions, walked over to the sofa and laid down. Diane remained seated at the card table in silence, looking despondent as my Aunt Wanda followed Darien outside. I continued to play with my building blocks in the middle of the living room floor. I was only three years old, and although I was confused and disturbed by the conversation of the adults around me, there wasn’t anything I could do about it.

I played for several minutes and I almost forgot that Darien and Wanda had gone outside. That is, until I overheard my Uncle Darien raise his voice. At first, I heard a lot of yelling. I only heard my Uncle Darien’s voice, not my Aunt Wanda’s. I looked up in the relative darkness of the living room – the candles were still burning, flickering in the darkness. I tried to see outside from where I was seated from the living room floor, but it was extremely dark outside, and all I

could make out was shadows cast by the streetlights. The larger of the two human figures appeared to loom closer to the window.

“Move to the side,” I heard a man’s voice whisper out of nowhere, directing me. The voice was faint, but it didn’t sound like it came from my Uncle Darien, outside. The voice seemed to come from somewhere behind me.

“No! I’m staying right here!” I huffed.

Being a somewhat obstinate toddler; I defied the voice’s command. Then, all of a sudden, an even louder noise erupted out of the yelling which had been carrying on outside.

*Boom!*

The loud sound that emanated from outside the rowhome was followed by a crashing noise inside the house. The picture on the wall behind me abruptly fell to the floor, seemingly out of nowhere.

“Did y’all hear that? Did y’all see that picture fall for no reason?”



I turned and questioned my Aunt Diane. She remained unresponsive. Tamir jumped when he heard the loud sound, followed by the picture jumping from the wall for no apparent reason. Tamir laid his head back down and tried to go back to sleep, however. He was only a toddler like I was.

My Uncle Darien hastily reentered the living room, pulling his shirt down around his waist, my Aunt Wanda trailing behind him. Darien had a wild look in his eyes and he glanced over at me. He looked me up and down and seemed to have a look of disappointment plastered across his face when he saw me.

“Did I miss him?” Uncle Darien muttered under his breath.

“Did you hear that?” I asked my uncle when I observed him enter the house. He ignored me as well.

“Tamir... come on, baby. We need to go now,” Aunt Wanda softly said to my cousin as she picked him up from the sofa. She had a look of distress plastered across her mug, but I could tell she was trying her best to avoid making direct eye contact with me. “Bye Diane. Good luck, honey.”

“Bye, Tamir,” I waved as my body swayed back and forth lazily. “Aunt Wanda... did you hear that loud sound? It... it sounded like a gunshot!”

Aunt Wanda ignored me as she scurried out the front door, Tamir wrapped in her arms.

“Why isn’t anybody answering me?” I whined as I began to feel dizzy. “Didn’t y’all hear that loud sound? It sounded like a...”

I then felt something dripping down the side of my face. I slowly placed my right hand to the side of my head and felt moisture. I removed my hand from my head and looked at it. My hand was covered in dark, red fluid – blood. That’s when I realized I had been shot. Fortunately, I wasn’t hit directly, but had been grazed by the bullet. At the tender age of three, I had been grazed in the head by a bullet. It was a bullet discharged from my Uncle Darien’s gun -- intentionally -- for life insurance money.

That was the reason why Darien looked disappointed when he reentered the house and saw me still standing. He was upset that I was only grazed and I wasn’t dead. His aspirations of killing me, dumping my little body in “The Woods,” collecting the life insurance money

to buy a brick of cocaine and becoming a kingpin would have to be postponed.

“Aaaaaaah!” I wailed when I saw the blood on my hand. “I need to go to the doctor Aunt Diane! I’m bleeding out my head! I’m going to die! I’m dying!”

“Oh, man up, Johnny!” Darien callously replied without even turning to look at me.

“So, you really tried it, huh, Darien?” Diane cried softly as she sat almost motionless in her chair. “You really shot him?”

“Well, he ain’t dead yet! The little bastard!” Darien huffed.

“What are we going to do?” Diane asked, her calm tone betraying the panic she felt inside.

“Take me to the doctor, *please*, Auntie!” I screamed as I fell to the floor, frustrated at my aunt and uncle’s failure to respond. I felt faint and was beginning to fade into unconsciousness.

“Well, it’s done now,” Darien replied matter-of-factly. “Let’s just wait a while and see how long he survives. If he dies, I’ll take

him to ‘The Woods’ and leave him in the weeds so the cops think it happened over there. He won’t last long... he just a little kid!”

“Yeah... he’s just a little kid. And you shot him!” Diane sobbed.

Although my young cranium had endured severe trauma and I was leaking profusely from my dome, I did not die. After slightly over an hour, Darien evidently gave up on collecting the insurance money after attempting to murder me – his own young nephew. Aunt Diane carried my limp, half-conscious body upstairs to the bathroom. She cleaned my lacerations with soap, water and peroxide, then she wrapped my head in bandages.

“I’m so sorry, Johnny!” Aunt Diane sobbed as she hugged me while I faded in and out of consciousness. “A little boy shouldn’t have to deal with this bullshit! Your Uncle Darien isn’t always bad. I promise. But at least you made it through this. I’m going to finish bandaging your head, then you can go to bed and get some rest. Okay?”

“Okay,” I replied weakly.

“Do you know what your name means?” Aunt Diane continued.

“What?”

“It means, ‘God has shown favor,’” Aunt Diane informed me. “I know your uncle and your other aunts were practicing that voodoo stuff, but your mother gave you a name from the Bible. Maybe that’s why you didn’t die. God showed you favor. Remember that, Johnny. I know your mother isn’t around right now because she has issues. Just remember – she gave you life and she gave you your name. Stay focused Johnny. Your uncle was right about one thing. You’re going to be somebody one day.”

I was very young – only three years old, but I realized that my Aunt Diane was right. I was an intelligent child. Many adults even referred to me as a genius. I paid close attention when the adults around me spoke, whether they were speaking directly to me or not. I believed what my Aunt Diane said when she told me that God had shown me favor. If not, I likely would have been dead. If I had listened to that man’s voice and stepped to the side before the gunshot went off, I no doubt would have been shot directly in my face or head and lost my young life. Instead, I was “only” grazed by the bullet. My defiance, and possibly my gift of intuition, had saved my life.

I cried often and drifted in and out of consciousness over the course of the following two weeks. I woke up periodically, my Uncle

Darien standing over me, slapping me in the face, telling me to wake up. My Uncle Darien was the most calloused, abusive “alarm clock” I have ever had the displeasure of being woken up by in my life!

I asked for professional medical assistance every time I regained consciousness, but my pleas for help fell on deaf ears. My aunts took turns caring for me throughout my recovery period. Aunt Diane bathed me and cleaned my wounds, while Aunt Wanda meticulously cleaned my teeth and mouth every day until I was well enough to care for myself again.

This was yet another extremely traumatic event I was *chosen* to endure during my young life. It stole my innocence and contributed to the man I am today. I actually lost my memory of the event for decades – I guess I subconsciously repressed the traumatic events in order to protect my psyche from the trauma. The brain is an amazing creation, and mine is no exception. I was only three years old when I was grazed by Uncle Darien’s bullet. This traumatic experience changed me for life. I haven’t been the same since that day.

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## Chapter 6

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The appearance of my entire face and head changed after my uncle shot me. Although I was only grazed, the impact the metal projectile had on my soft, young skull was drastic. The bullet burnt my flesh and hair as it tore through my skin, past my head and into the wall behind me. My skull was somewhat misshapen after the incident and my hairline receded on the side where the bullet grazed me. It took several years for my hair to return to its normal growth pattern and for my young dome to return to its natural shape as I grew older and reached adolescence. My cousin, Kobe, and I finally had something other than our bloodline and basketball in common; as he used to share his insecurities with Tamir and I about his slightly misshapen left eye. Both Kobe and I now had physical deformities which made us feel self-conscious.

My Uncle Darien had his proverbial foot in two forms of spirituality – witchcraft and Christianity. Darien was serious when he stated that he was willing to do anything to achieve his goals. He didn't even care how God himself felt about his methods. My uncle was willing to use any means to be "successful" – manipulation, drug dealing, robbery, extortion, insurance fraud, religion or all of the above.

Back in those days, Darien eventually elevated his status in the streets and with his crew, the Lynch Mob; selling higher quantities of narcotics and engaging in violence and intimidation tactics to keep his rivals in check. If Darien would shoot his own young, innocent nephew for money, imagine what he would do to grown men he was not related to! Within a relatively short period of time, Darien became “respected” in the neighborhood as a “boss:” a known gangster and drug kingpin.

Since I was Darien’s nephew and had lived with him for several months by that time, other adults in the neighborhood assumed I would follow in his footsteps one day.

“Hey, Little Johnny!” the grown-ups called out to me as I played outside. “You’re looking sharp in that suit, young man! You’re going to be a boss just like your uncle one day!”

I had other plans, however. My Aunt Diane and Uncle Darien bought me several suits to wear to church. I wore them all the time, even when I went outside to play, much to my aunt’s chagrin. I still had aspirations to be a businessman when I grew older. I wanted no parts of my uncle’s shady business dealings with his street associates and our family members.



In time, my uncle decided to pursue a side-career as a pastor in order to be viewed as more respected and to become established as a legitimate member of the community in his West Philadelphia neighborhood. Darien attended a church not too far from his home, and he took me to the services and Bible study with him on a weekly basis.

I truly enjoyed church service and Bible Study as a young child. It was very different for me, as my mother, sister and I never attended church regularly, or at all, from what I remembered. Hearing the pastor read from the Bible and talk about God, Abraham and Enoch was extremely interesting to me. The stories from the Old Testament were intriguing.

Although my Uncle Darien scared me, I had a measure of respect for him. He was a father figure to me as a child. He loomed large in my life. After the shooting incident, I developed a fear of my Uncle Darien because I knew he could, and possibly would, kill me if I did not do what he said. When I heard the stories of the Israelites in the Bible while visiting church services with my uncle, I was reminded of my experiences with my intimidating Uncle Darien. He was almost like a god to me back then.

As Uncle Darien studied to become a pastor and carried on his double-life, one foot in the streets and one foot in the church, we rubbed shoulders with celebrities. My family's connection with celebrities came from both my Uncle Joe "Jelly Bean" Bryant, since he was an NBA player at the time, and also through Uncle Darien's hood-rich status from selling narcotics.

Over the years, I met and spent time with Philly-bred celebrities such as Patti LaBelle, Maurice Cheeks, Dr. Jay, a young Will Smith and more. I always wore my suit and the famous adults I met also expressed the fact that they were impressed by both my appearance and my mature demeanor.

My father, Craig, reappeared around this time. Craig had established himself in the streets since he and my mother had broken up. My father was just as violent and ruthless in dealing with his rivals as Darien or any other 80s-era Philadelphia gangster was. He and NBA player, Maurice "Mo" Cheeks, clashed on one occasion. They had a violent fist fight on Uncle Darien's block in West Philly, which apparently started over not one, but two females. Mo's hand-to-hand combat skills were immaculate and he initially got the better of my father. My father, Craig, eventually grew tired of getting punched in the face, grabbed hold of Mo and body slammed the professional ball player, abruptly ending the altercation.

During this time, my mother returned every few months and demanded that my uncle pay her the thousand dollars he “owed” her. Uncle Darien always refused, even though we all knew he had the money, and my mother would eventually take me back to “The Woods” with her. I had mixed feelings when this occurred. Of course, I was overjoyed to be reunited with my mother and sister after several months, but I missed my new friends in West Philly, and the relative stability I enjoyed while living with Aunt Diane and Uncle Darien.

I never had to worry about when and where my next meal would come from when I lived with my aunt and uncle. My clothes were clean, my hair was cut and the lights and heat in the house were never cut off. Unfortunately, the opposite was true when we lived with my mother.

In addition, when I stayed with my mother, I had to deal with that diabolical menace of a kid, Vernon Morrison. The first time my mother took me back from my aunt and uncle, I returned to “The Woods” wearing suits and Vernon seemed to envy my new wardrobe. Between Vernon, the other kids in the projects and even my own sister, Leticia’s, constant teasing over my suits; I finally decided to stop wearing them altogether unless one of the adults in my family instructed me to do so.

Unfortunately for Leticia and I, my reservations about moving back in with our mother were well-founded. Rochelle had remained steady in her addiction and had continued her off-and-on relationship with Leticia's father, further subjecting me to his abuse and exposing me to the violence he inflicted on my mother. My mother also continued her pattern of neglecting and abandoning us when she was not dealing with Leticia's father; leaving Leticia and I home alone for days and weeks at a time to fend for ourselves while she got high with that evil lady, Boog.

My mother's behavior eventually led to more visits from Sal and Barbara. So, as she did months beforehand, Rochelle packed me up and walked me from 82nd and Lindbergh Boulevard to 56th and Litchfield Streets, to my Uncle Darien's house. She followed the same routine as last time – demanded one-thousand dollars, apologized to me, told me it would be a temporary arrangement and cried before leaving. I wailed and begged my mother not to leave. Of course, my mother left me with my aunt and uncle every time.

This pattern continued every few months for years to come and it ripped my heart out every time. In all honesty, to this day I still don't even know why my mother didn't just leave me with my Aunt Diane and Uncle Darien permanently that very first time. The back and forth just made things more difficult for all parties involved.

So, while all this was occurring, I continued to attend church services with Uncle Darien and embrace my relationship with my Higher Power while I lived with my aunt and uncle. The things the adults in my life told me, coupled with the traumatic experiences in my few years on this planet, made a huge impact on my young mind. There was an abrupt and drastic change, however, which led me to a spiritual crisis a couple years after I began attending church with Uncle Darien.

“Look to your neighbor on your left!” our new pastor instructed, one morning while delivering his first sermon at our church. “Now, look to your neighbor on your right! Are you more concerned with your feelings? Or are you more concerned with what the Word says?”

“The Word, brother! The Word,” several voices called out from among the congregation.

“Yes, indeed, brothers and sisters!” the pastor bellowed from the podium. “So, when the light gets brighter; we here at First Family Christian Tabernacle of Enoch are obligated to put our personal feelings aside and follow that light, according to the Word! Can I get an Amen?”

“Amen!” I hesitated, imitating my Uncle Darien and the rest of the adults in the congregation. I did not quite understand what the pastor meant, but I figured I would eventually understand if I continued to listen to the pastor’s sermon.

However, I became even more confused as the pastor continued his sermon. Although I was young, I had taken a real interest in the information presented at church services and during Bible study. From what I could recall, the information at my Uncle Darien’s church previously focused on the Biblical figure Enoch and his role in the Bible as an example for servants of God.

Things changed after the sermon on that fateful day at church service. I was thoroughly confused by the preacher’s sermon, so I looked up at Uncle Darien for direction. I noticed his irritated demeanor and took it as a bad sign.

“Uncle Darien,” I whispered. “What’s he talking about?”

“Quiet, Johnny,” Darien hushed me. “I’ll tell you when we leave.”

I was thoroughly confused. Our former pastor typically spoke highly of Enoch throughout most of his sermons, while intermittently

speaking of some of the other major figures from the Old Testament. But after his speech about, “accepting the light from the Word,” this new pastor started preaching about Jesus Christ and the New Testament and encouraged us to discontinue our focus on the example of Enoch and the Old Testament.

“Wait here, Johnny,” Uncle Darien instructed me after Sunday service was over.

I stood aside as my uncle spoke with the pastor for several minutes. I could not hear what they spoke about, but based on my uncle’s demeanor, he did not look happy and the conversation did not appear to be pleasant. A few short minutes later, Uncle Darien abruptly turned his back on the pastor, walked back in my direction and took my hand.

“We’re not going back there anymore, Johnny.”

“But I liked that church!” I innocently protested as we walked to his vehicle. “I thought we were going to be pastors together! Why aren’t we going back?”

“Because that pastor is on some bullshit!” Darien huffed as he pulled away from the curb. “You can forget about being a pastor, Johnny. That shit is dead!”

I was young and conflicted. My newly-forming spiritual identity had been cut down before it even had the opportunity to fully blossom. I had been so excited about my new goal of becoming a junior pastor that I hadn’t even thought about the possibility that my dream might not become a reality. I guess I should have known better than to get my hopes up, especially when my Uncle Darien was involved. I didn’t even fully comprehend why my uncle had sabotaged my aspirations other than the new pastor’s sermon and the fact that Darien said the pastor was, “on some bullshit.”

Oh well. I guess it was just back to my normal routine and my ever-present goal of growing up to be a businessman – a kingpin. My desire to grow up and be a legitimate businessman was all-consuming. I even dressed in one of my white suits before going out to play with the other children in both of my neighborhoods: Larchwood projects in Southwest Philly and my uncle’s neighborhood in West Philly.

The Kingpin from the Spiderman comics wore a white suit, so although I had discontinued wearing suits other than on special



occasions, I considered play time a special occasion when I wanted to be the Kingpin, albeit a legitimate one instead of a gangster. This irritated my nemesis, Vernon, to no end since he claimed to want to be the Kingpin. I couldn't care less how Vernon felt, however.

It came to a point where my dreams of being a businessman were all I had left to hold onto and give me hope for the future; especially after my spiritual crisis as a five-year-old. I recalled how my mother used to tell people I was psychic. I wondered if she was right. Was my overwhelming desire to be a businessman more than just a desire? Could it be a *premonition*?

My uncle spoke badly about my mother. Uncle Darien referred to Rochelle as a "money-hungry junkie," a "crackhead," and "crazy" along with other derogatory terms. Yes, she had abandoned me on multiple occasions and she had many shortcomings. But she was my mother and I loved her. Besides, nobody is perfect, and Darien didn't know my mother like I did. Besides, Rochelle had given me life – she hadn't tried to kill me like Darien had. He really had some audacity, speaking badly about my mother!

My mother also knew me better than anybody else did. At the tender age of five, I pondered my life and the things I had learned. Whether my mother was right about me being psychic or not, one

thing was certain – I was still alive for a reason. I needed to survive long enough to find out why.

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**Phone:** 1(888)399-0365

**E-Mail:** [jaycerrone@paperchasepublications.com](mailto:jaycerrone@paperchasepublications.com)

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