

J.CERRONE

illegal *Life* //

CARL'S REVENGE



ILLEGAL LIFE II:

Carl's Revenge

J. CERRONE

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Note: Please be advised, this book is a work of fiction. Any likeness to any person, living or deceased, is purely coincidental.

Dedications: To everybody who has supported my work from the beginning and read my first release, “Illegal Life: A North Philly Story” ... I *truly* appreciate you *all*. Many of you have asked me over the past several years about when I was going to release a sequel, especially those I run into while I’m out and about in my city: Philadelphia! Well, here it is! I hope it’s everything you were hoping for and more!

INTRO|...

“So – here’s an O of soft, young-boy,” Rick hesitated momentarily as he followed Tiny’s instructions and gave Carl an ounce of powder cocaine on consignment. “You sure you can handle it?”

“Yeah, I got it,” fourteen-year-old Carl concisely replied.

“You sure?” Rick asked intensely. “Tiny told me to make sure you don’t fuck up! If you do, that’s going to be both our asses!”

“I’ll be good. Don’t even stress about it, OG.” The teenager’s demeanor had remained stoic in general since his older brother and role model, Will, had been murdered. Although Carl was excited that he had been placed in a position to make the money necessary to help himself and his mother, he couldn’t muster the enthusiasm to express that excitement. The young teen’s ability to genuinely display positive emotions had all but died along with his older sibling.

“Alright, bet,” Rick replied, satisfied with the young man’s display of quiet confidence. “I bet some of your brother’s hustling mentality rubbed off on you. You’ll be good. I’m going to go do my thing in the other room. You can bag up in here. Let me know when you’re done and I’ll check your work.”

“I got you. Do you mind if I listen to some music while I bag up?”

“Yeah, just not too loud,” Rick instructed. “You know what we do here, so we don’t want to draw. I had to snap on Pop and your brother for that shit one time when they had some bitches over here!” Rick chuckled as he reminisced. “I’m glad you asked first. I can already tell you’re on point – this situation might work out after all!”

Rick laughed to himself, turned the wireless speaker on and handed the remote control to Carl. The older hustler then turned and shuffled up the stairs without another word.

“Rick’s funny as hell,” Carl thought to himself. “Warning me about ‘not fucking up’ when everybody knows he’s a wet-head!”

Carl shook his head in disappointment several minutes later. The teenager’s nose soon caught the faint smell of Rick’s PCP smoke seeping through the opening under his closed bedroom door as the odor slowly crept through the house. The quiet chess player-turned-hustler cautiously bagged up the ounce of cocaine into dimes as he listened to Meek Mill’s “Dreams and Nightmares” album which had been released the previous year. The time passed quickly as Carl bobbed his head and rapped along to the lyrics of his favorite rapper until the album had played in its entirety.

“Damn! This shit is drawing!” Carl exclaimed as he looked at his pile of dime bags and realized he had only bagged up about one third of the product. The young man searched the music downloaded to his phone, located an older Meek Mill mixtape series entitled “Flamers,” and queued the songs in the series to his playlist before continuing to bag the off-white powder.

Two-and-a-half hours later, Carl rose from his seat at the dining room table, jogged up the stairs and knocked on Rick’s bedroom door.

“What’s up, C?”

As Rick opened the door to the bedroom, the pungent odor of embalming fluid, along with other burning chemicals and copious amounts of smoke tumbled through Rick’s doorway and assaulted Carl’s young lungs.

“Damn, OG!” Carl coughed and pulled his shirt over his face as his eyes welled up with tears. “You wetted like shit, huh? That shit smells crazy!”

“Stop bitching and mind your business!” Rick sternly instructed, his eyes crimson-red and glazed as if he had been weeping over the death of a close relative. “Remember Tiny said not to fuck up, right? You’re already fucking up, worrying about what the fuck I’m doing! What you knocking on my door for, anyway?”

“I’m done bagging up. Come look.”

“Oh, word? Here I come.” Rick followed Carl downstairs after closing the bedroom door behind him. Upon turning around to ask Rick’s opinion after entering the living room, Carl noticed a large grin of satisfaction

plastered across Rick's face. "Good shit! Now, turn your brother's phone on, hit The Park and sell that shit!"

The young teenager hesitated as Rick handed him his deceased brother's cell phone, which Tiny had been able to quickly retrieve using his connections in the police department. An eerie feeling overcame Carl as he took Will's phone in hand. Carl felt as if Rick was literally "passing the torch" to him. As their mother's only surviving child, Carl had mixed emotions about following in his older brother's footsteps; especially so soon after Will had been murdered.

Carl followed Rick's instructions despite how he felt internally. He felt obligated to provide for himself and his mother by any means necessary. The young man exited the stash-house at Sixth and Butler Streets and briskly walked back to Ninth and Lycoming Streets. Once Carl arrived, he sat on his stoop, backpack in hand, and sent a mass text message to every customer in his brother's "trap" phone.

"Yo. This is Will's brother, C. I'm on deck. Get at me."

The anxious adolescent then strolled over to Hunting Park, to the corner he had watched his brother hustle on for years. Within less than five minutes, Will's old phone – Carl's new phone, began to ring, startling him.

"Yo, what's good?"

"Oh shit! This really *is* you, huh C?" a voice boomed through the phone.

"You getting down now, huh?"

"Yeah. Who this?"

"Nigga! It's your OG, Tommy! Stop playing with me! I'm about to slide up on you to holler about that text. Where you at?"

"The same spot Will always posted up. You already know."

"My nigga! I'll be there in a minute."

"I'm sorry for your loss, young-boy... real shit," Tommy offered his sincere condolences as he exited his vehicle and shook Carl's hand when he arrived on the corner. "Will was a good nigga. A thorough-ass young-boy, for real!"

“Thanks, man. So, what you need?” Carl asked, getting straight to business.

“Two circles,” Tommy resolutely replied.

“Damn, OG,” Carl stuttered. “My fault, but I only got one left. I bagged it up already, though.”

“Let me see. That’s the same work your brother had?”

“You already *snow*,” Carl answered in the affirmative.

“It’s cool. I’ll take it, but next time I need the whole onion – not broken down. Your brother used to charge me eleven-hundred an O. The number’s still the same, right?”

Tommy posed his words as a question. Based on the man’s tone, however, Carl perceived he was being told what he was going to be paid for the ounce and that he could take it or leave it.

“You already know, OG.”

“Bet!” Tommy shook Carl’s hand as he simultaneously placed a stack of money in it. “Me and my man’s need two of these jawns every other day, so make sure you stay on deck for me.”

“I got you, bro,” Carl coolly replied. The young man remained calm, but he was internally overjoyed at the feeling of the one-thousand, one hundred dollars in cash clenched in his young fist. It was more money than he had ever held before.

Carl quickly stuffed the cash into his pocket and watched as Tommy walked back to his vehicle and drove away. He then briskly walked back to Rick’s stash-house and reported back to the man what had occurred. Rick congratulated Carl on his efficiency, gave him three-hundred dollars of the eleven-hundred and handed him a whole, un-bagged ounce of cocaine before sending the teenager on his way.

As Carl walked back to his block, he retrieved Will’s cell phone, composed another text message and sent it to Tommy.

“I got the other jawn whenever you’re ready.”

Ring...Ring...Ring...

“Yo...” Carl calmly answered the phone as he strolled down Hunting Park Avenue back towards Ninth Street.

“Young-boy,” Tommy began. “Chill with the text messages and all that. Just hit my phone whenever you’re ready, alright? I’m on my way now.”

“My fault, OG,” Carl replied, maturely accepting correction from the older, more experienced hustler. “Say less.”

After Tommy had come and gone from purchasing the second ounce from Carl, the newbie coke-dealer once again returned to Rick’s stash-spot and repeated the process of exchanging the cash for his cut and more cocaine. This time, he once again stayed for several hours and bagged up the powder for the customers who would purchase the drug for their own personal use; as opposed to Tommy, who resold the drug on the street in a different section of the city with his business partner, Jay.

Carl’s mind raced as he worked. He already had earned six-hundred dollars after only putting in a few hours of work. He finally understood why his brother had decided he no longer wanted to “waste time” playing basketball. Carl thought that if he had still been enrolled in his after-school chess club, he probably would have quit!

Once Carl had completed bagging the ounce, he decided to return home and figure out how he was going to give his mother money without her getting upset about the way he had earned it. He decided to relax inside his bedroom and brainstorm ideas while he waited for more calls from customers.

“Niggas have this number already. I sent a text,” Carl thought to himself. “No point in standing outside all night, asking to get booked!”

The calls and text messages from Will’s former customers, requesting multiple bags of powder, began to trickle in over the following hour. Carl, who was new to selling drugs, left the house every time he received a request, walked to the park to meet the customer, then returned home.

“Boy!” Mrs. Bonner exclaimed after Carl had returned home for the sixth time within the hour. “Why do you keep running in and out of my house?”

“Oh, uh... no reason, Ma,” Carl stuttered as he turned to face his mother who was lounging on the living room sofa with her feet propped up. “My friends keep calling and texting me to come outside.”

“Boy, please! I might be old and sick, but I’m far from slow!” Mrs. Bonner sarcastically replied. “I love you son, but you’re the most anti-social teenager in the city and you’re a horrible liar! You don’t even have that many friends! What are you *really* up to?”

“Okay, Ma,” Carl replied sheepishly as he reached into his pockets and retrieved his cash. “Don’t be mad, but I got Will’s phone and started doing my thing so I can help you out with money. I already made eight-hundred dollars today! This is all *ours*! Here you go Ma.”

“Oh, my goodness, baby!” Mrs. Bonner gasped as she hesitantly, albeit graciously, took the money from her fourteen-year-old son. Her teenaged son had just handed her enough money to pay their rent and electric bill for the month. It was like history was repeating itself. Mrs. Bonner became overwhelmed with emotion and propped herself up on the sofa. She hugged Carl around his neck and sobbed as her tears soaked his collar. “Thank you so much baby, but I never wanted this life for you or your brother! I don’t want you to end up like Will!”

“I won’t, Ma,” Carl calmly replied as he stepped back, placed his hands on his mother’s shoulders and looked into her eyes. “I’ll be cool. Besides, we don’t have a choice. You’re sick and I don’t want you stressing about us getting evicted. I’ll take care of us, Ma.”

Without waiting for Mrs. Bonner’s response, Carl kissed his mother on her forehead, then turned and galloped up the stairs to take a shower and wind down for the night.

Without the distractions of playing extra-curricular sports or being overly pre-occupied with chasing females, Carl devoted nearly all of his time outside of school to raising enough money to support himself and his mother. His connection with his older brother’s former customers, Tommy and Jay, who purchased and sold weight, propelled Carl’s career very quickly. Within a week Carl was selling two ounces of cocaine daily. Within a month – between his wholesale and retail clientele, Carl was selling a quarter of a kilogram of cocaine every two days.

Three years passed and by the time Carl's seventeenth birthday arrived, he had come into his own as an established, respected, young coke-boy. Like his older brother, Will, before him, Carl had become one of Tiny's most valued young, street dealers due to his loyalty, consistency and the relatively large volume of cocaine he trafficked in the North Philadelphia neighborhood Tiny held dear to his heart. Unlike his older brother, however, Carl had reached kilogram-status in less than two years. By the time Carl was old enough to drive, he was selling an average of two kilograms of powder cocaine every week.

Although Mrs. Bonner did not approve of her only remaining child's vocation, there wasn't much she could do or say to stop him. The middle-aged woman's health had been failing since well-before Will's passing and she could not work consistently. Carl had steadily paid all the household bills since the first night he confessed to selling drugs shortly after Will's funeral. Carl also made sure their small family did not want for anything and even provided many non-essential, luxury items for his mother. Carl paid all of her medical bills and splurged on the finest equipment to make the house convenient and easily-accessible to her even when she was in the poorest of health.

In addition, Carl had grown into a much different person than he had been when he was younger and when his older brother was alive. Seventeen-year-old Carl had grown into a solidly-built, gravelly-voiced young man. He was still a man of few words, but now that he was older and had been immersed in the street-life for several years, he had been called into physical action on numerous occasions. Young Carl had earned himself a reputation as a quiet, but deadly brawler and shooter. Unlike Will, Carl had extremely violent impulses he constantly worked to keep under control. To that end, he remained solo most of the time and didn't keep any close friends or consistent girlfriends. Carl was very militant and focused, didn't trust people and used principles he learned during his time playing chess to strategize his movements in the streets. These traits made Carl a force to be reckoned with at a young age. At the tender age of seventeen, Carl was already an incredible earner and a fierce soldier.

Ring...Ring...Ring...

"What's good, OG?"

“Come to my bar,” Tiny urgently commanded Carl. “I’ll meet you out front.”

“Say less.”

Carl immediately placed his gun in his backpack, strapped it across his back and exited his house. He straddled one of his dirt-bikes, started it and quickly shifted gears until he popped a wheelie up Ninth Street towards Hunting Park Avenue. Once he turned right onto the Avenue, Carl made the short trip to Tiny’s bar, where the short, Puerto Rican boss was standing outside, smoking a cigar. As he arrived and observed Tiny’s demeanor, Carl could tell by his body language that the man was frustrated. Carl wondered what had made his supplier upset.

“What’s wrong, OG?”

“This dickhead, Rick, got booked!” Tiny shook his head before taking a long drag of his large, expensive cigar.

“What?” Carl exclaimed in shock. “He’s locked up right now? The crib got raided or some shit?”

“Hell naw! Come on, C!” Tiny laughed. “You know I pay too much for my spots to get raided by the Philly PD!”

“Facts, though!” Carl acknowledged with a smile and a shrug.

“Naw, this dickhead was wetted, *as usual*, and tried to kill his daughter’s boyfriend,” Tiny explained. “This motherfucker stabbed the dude like eight times. He’s on life-support. It’s attempted murder now, but if he dies, then Rick’s going to be fighting a body.”

“Damn, man!” Carl shook his head in disappointment. “Why the fuck did he do the nigga dirty like that?”

“Rick’s daughter said he was so high – he must have been hallucinating. She said he kept snapping, calling her baby-pop an alien or a reptilian or some old weird shit!” Tiny continued. “I’ve been telling that motherfucker to quit smoking that shit for years! Look at him now! People never want to listen to me, then wonder why they wind up in fucked up situations! I’m the boss for a reason!” Tiny vented. “But anyway – fuck that shit! That’s not your

problem. The reason I called you over here is because I want you to take over the spot on Sixth Street now that Rick's down."

"For real, Tiny?" Carl's voiced cracked. His excitement was actually evident by his tone and body language, which had been an extremely rare occurrence during recent years. "That would be love!"

"Yeah, pop," Tiny confirmed as he patted Carl on his shoulder. "You've been doing your thing these past few years. I'm proud of you. I've watched you grow up to be a stand-up motherfucker! You do good business and you take care of your mother. Your brother would be proud. You actually would look just like him if it wasn't for those long braids and tattoos!"

"Yeah, Pop always called Will a pretty-boy," Carl smirked. "I'm definitely not one of those!"

"You're your own man and motherfuckers respect that shit," Tiny continued. "So, are you going to take over the spot or what?"

"Do I have to live there? Because, you know... my mother is sick and I'm all she has."

"It would be best if you could stay there all the time," Tiny hesitated. "But you're doing me a favor. It's not your fault Rick's dumb-ass got booked! Just play the spot as much as possible while I work something out. You might want to hire someone to help you with your mom. Did you ever think about paying for a live-in nurse?"

"Yeah," Carl reluctantly replied. "I just really don't like letting strangers in my crib, though, you know?"

"I definitely feel that," Tiny agreed. "Let me look into some shit to make this easier on both of us. In the meantime, meet me at the spot at nine o'clock tonight so I can give you the run-down on how Rick handled everything over there."

"Say less. I'll be there," Carl agreed as he shook Tiny's hand before hopping onto his dirt-bike and riding away.

"Well, hello stranger!" Mrs. Bonner greeted her son sarcastically from her position, reclined on the living room sofa. "I feel like I haven't had a real

conversation with you in a month of Sundays!”

“Yeah, sorry, Ma,” Carl sighed. “I’ve been busy.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know. Running the damn streets!” Mrs. Bonner rolled her eyes.

“Here we go!” Carl groaned under his breath as he retrieved a water bottle from the refrigerator and attempted to retreat up the stairs.

“Where you rushing off to, my son?” Mrs. Bonner asked in a high-pitched fervor. “You don’t want to spend time with your sick mother?”

“Come on, Ma,” Carl sighed, frustrated, as he slowly turned around and walked back into the living room. “It ain’t even like that. I’m just tired. You know I’m constantly running around, handling business.”

“Yes, and I appreciate everything you do for us,” Mrs. Bonner replied. “But I’m not going to be around forever, so you might want to schedule some ‘face-time’ with your mother before I leave this place – and I don’t mean on your iPhone!”

“Please, Ma,” Carl groaned. “I hate when you talk like that! Ain’t nobody dying no time soon!”

“Hey... you never know!” Mrs. Bonner shrilly objected. “Tomorrow isn’t promised to any of us. Why don’t you relax and watch a movie with me before you rush off to your room?”

“Sure,” Carl acquiesced as he strolled over to the loveseat and sat down. “What you want to watch?”

“Let’s watch *Soul Food*.”

“You ain’t tired of watching that movie, Ma?” Carl asked as he rolled his eyes. “Can we watch something else, please?”

“I thought that was your favorite movie, Carl! Please don’t tell me you’re switching up!” Mrs. Bonner shrieked hysterically as she dramatically placed her hand on her chest.

“No, Ma,” Carl retorted. “That’s *your* favorite movie! It’s cool, but it’s kind of played out after watching it a thousand times! Me and Will just

always watched that jawn to make you happy. Besides, it brings back bad memories since it was the last movie the three of us watched together before Will...”

“That’s why it’s so special to me!” Mrs. Bonner interrupted, sobbing. “Why don’t you want to share memories with your mother? You’ve changed and I don’t like it! It’s like you think you’re this big man now that you make money, pay the bills and buy all those toys!”

“I’m seventeen years old, Ma,” Carl objected. “I *am* a man! I’m holding it down in here! No disrespect, but if it weren’t for me, we would be in a shelter right now! I feel like if I don’t want to watch *Soul Food*, you shouldn’t come at my neck about it!”

“Please, boy! You still got peach-fuzz on your face! You ain’t no man yet!” Mrs. Bonner scoffed. “Making money doesn’t make you a man – especially when you’re making it off of selling poison in your own neighborhood!”

“Poison, huh? Wow... that’s how you really feel, Ma?” Carl grimaced. “Peach-fuzz, though? I ain’t a man, though? For real? It’s all good! I’m out!”

Without another word, Carl stormed up the steps, into his room and quickly stuffed several changes of clothes and a few pairs of sneakers into a large duffle-bag. He then opened his safe – Will’s old safe – retrieved sixty-thousand dollars, along with a half of a kilogram of cocaine and a forty-caliber Smith & Wesson™ handgun and placed them inside of his bookbag. The steaming young man slung the backpack and duffle-bag over his shoulder and stomped back down the stairs and into the living room.

“Here you go, Ma,” Carl calmly placed a large stack of cash in his speechless mother’s lap as he quickly bent over and kissed her on her forehead. “That’s twenty stacks. I love you to do death, but I think we need some time apart.”

“Time apart?” Mrs. Bonner shrieked. “Boy! What are you talking about? You can’t leave me!”

“I need to stay focused, Ma,” Carl attempted to reason with his mother. “That’s the same reason I don’t have a girlfriend. You’re stressing me out

like you're my girl. I'm going to get killed out here if I'm not on point. Besides, I got promoted. Tiny needs me to run the spot on Sixth Street."

"Oh, so you planned on leaving anyway?" Mrs. Bonner sobbed. "You started this whole argument on purpose!"

"Naw, Ma," Carl softly objected. "Not at all. I told Tiny I couldn't move there and he was cool with it. But when I came in and you started tripping, I decided it's for the best. I don't want to beef with you. I'll be right around the corner. I love you Ma."

"No, you don't!" Mrs. Bonner's voice was harsh and piercing as she wailed dramatically, threw the stack of cash across the room and flung her face into the sofa cushion. Carl had grown used to his mother's hysterics since Will's death. He felt guilty, but he realized he was doing what was best for the two of them.

"I'm sorry I made you feel that way, Ma," the quiet teenager replied softly as he gazed at his emotionally broken mother. "I'll be back every day. You can call me any time. I'll call tomorrow to get a nurse to come help take care of you. I love you, Ma."

"Whatever!" Mrs. Bonner continued her muffled sobs, her face buried in the fluffy sofa cushion. "Why don't you just hurry up and leave, since you hate being around your mother so much?"

"Ugh..." Carl groaned. "Alright, Ma. Sorry to hurt your feelings. I love you. See you tomorrow."

A downtrodden Carl slowly exited the house he grew up in. He walked down the front steps of the stoop while retrieving his car keys from his pocket and pressing the trunk-release on his remote. Carl secured his bags in a large, customized secure compartment in the trunk of the flashy, supercharged Dodge Charger Hellcat™, closed the trunk and entered the driver's side. He sat in silence for a moment, attempting to regain his composure. Within a few short minutes, he pulled away from the curb, ready for his meeting with Tiny. Carl was prepared to take his cocaine enterprise to the next level. In Carl's mind, he had become a man and was ready to strike out on his own.

CHAPTER | 1

“Yo, pop, you good?” Tiny asked when he noticed Carl’s vexed expression as he exited his Charger after parking in front of the Sixth Street stash-house.

“Yeah, I’m chilling,” Carl shrugged as he retrieved his bags from the trunk of his super-charged vehicle. “Me and my mother just got into it real crazy, so I’m kind of pissed. The good news is, I’ll be living here now.”

“That *is* good news,” Tiny replied with a smile. “I’m sorry you and your mom are beefing, but you know how mothers can be – she’ll love you again tomorrow! She’s your mom, but she’s still a woman!”

“Facts!” Carl agreed with a smirk. “I need to call and get a nurse to look after her, though.”

“About that,” Tiny interjected. “I was thinking – my niece, Cyndal, is a home-health aide now. I’ll hit her up in the a.m. and see if she’s available to take care of your mom. You can trust her.”

“Oh, that’s love!” Carl shook Tiny’s hand vigorously. “That would be the best solution.”

“Yeah, I’ll figure out what her schedule is like, what she gets paid and all that and let you know tomorrow morning. Cool?”

“That’s better than cool, OG!” Carl replied enthusiastically. “That’s perfect!”

“Bet. Remember my crazy-ass nephew, Mannie?” Tiny asked, bearing a sly grin.

“Of course, I remember Mannie! That was my nigga!”

“Yeah, I reached out to my people in PR,” Tiny continued. “I’m bringing him back to help you. He needs to get off the island behind some beef, so he might as well come back here and help out. I just need to figure out the details since he’s technically not allowed back over here.”

“Aw, shit! My nigga, Mannie, is coming back?” Carl exclaimed. “It’s about to go down!”

“Shit! I hope not!” Tiny chuckled. “I hope he’ll be on some low-key, get-money shit this time. Hopefully since you got shit on lock now, you’ll be able to help keep him in check this time! Now let’s get inside so I can show you the ropes on how to run this operation.”

“Say less.”

At around ten-o’clock the next morning, Tiny called Carl and informed him that his niece, Cyndal, would, in fact, be available to take Mrs. Bonner on as a client.

“That’s what’s up! Please tell her I said thanks,” Carl replied enthusiastically.

“You can tell her yourself,” Tiny coolly responded. “She’ll be at your mother’s house at one this afternoon to meet y’all and start working.”

“Oh, shit! I’ll be there.”

At exactly one in the afternoon there was a knock on the front door of the Bonner residence. Carl rose from the living room sofa, where he and Mrs. Bonner were watching her favorite movie, *Soul Food*. Carl cautiously walked to the front door, pulled his Smith & Wesson™ and cocked it back, releasing a bullet into the chamber, before looking through the peep-hole.

“Oh, snap! She’s bad as shit!” Carl exclaimed under his breath as he took several moments to observe the beautiful, shapely brown-skinned woman waiting patiently on the stoop. Her curly, dark hair flowed luxuriously down her back, to her waist. Her caramel-colored skin was flawless. When Carl noticed the young woman reaching to knock on the door again, he regained his composure, tucked his gun into the front of his jeans and rapidly unlocked and opened the door.

“Hi. Cyndal?” Carl greeted the attractive, young Puerto Rican woman as he extended his hand to shake hers.

“Yes, but you can call me ‘CeCe,’” the woman smiled as she shook Carl’s hand. “You’re Carl?”

“Yeah, come on in.”

CeCe followed the young man’s instructions and entered the residence; her large, designer medical bag draped over her shoulder.

“My uncle said your mother is in need of home nursing services.”

“Yeah,” Carl replied in the affirmative. “She’s in the living room, right this way. Follow me.”

CeCe followed Carl into the living room and stopped in her tracks when she saw Mrs. Bonner reclined on the sofa.

“Wait a second – I know y’all!” CeCe hesitated.

“Hold up – you’re Pop’s CeCe?” Carl asked.

“Well, I’m *my own* CeCe,” the beautiful young woman replied with a perfectly aligned smile. “But yeah, I’m the same CeCe! I haven’t seen y’all since...”

“Since my baby-boy’s funeral,” Mrs. Bonner solemnly interrupted.

“Yeah,” CeCe added somberly. “Wow. It’s been a few years. Y’all been okay?”

“Other than my health going down the toilet, I guess so,” Mrs. Bonner forced a smile. “How you been, girl?”

“I’ve been good, thanks,” CeCe grinned. “I was messed up in the head for a while after what happened. That should *not* have happened to Will and Pop.”

“You ain’t never lied,” Carl huffed.

“I was fresh out of high school and trying to become a model at the time,” CeCe explained. “I gave up on that shortly after the funeral and went to school. Now I do this.”

“You mean to tell me you couldn’t find any modeling jobs with the way *you* look?” Carl asked skeptically. “I don’t believe that!”

“Calm down, son,” Mrs. Bonner wheezed as she rolled her eyes. “CeCe is too old for you. Plus, she’s here to take care of me, *not* your horny ass!”

“Dag, Ma! How do you really feel?” Carl asked as the three of them burst into laughter.

“Thanks for the compliment, Carl,” CeCe replied. “Modeling isn’t as easy as people think it is. It isn’t just about looks – it’s about how you walk, your facial expressions, body language, industry politics, networking... all of that!

I just didn’t have the energy for all that after Will and Pop died. I was actually real depressed about it for a while. I can’t even imagine how y’all felt!”

“Yeah, it is what it is at this point,” Carl sighed.

“So, are we going to sit up here taking about depressing stuff all afternoon?” Mrs. Bonner interrupted. “Or, are you going to take care of me so Carl doesn’t have to start planning another funeral since he decided to abandon me and move out?”

“Wow, Mrs. Bonner!” CeCe gasped. “You don’t mince words, do you?”

“Do you know many Black women who do?” Mrs. Bonner asked quite seriously, looking CeCe directly in her eyes.

“Now that you mention it – I don’t,” CeCe admitted. “Carl, do you mind giving us some privacy while I examine your mother?”

“Naw. Go ahead and do your thing,” Carl agreed. “I’ll be on the stoop, enjoying this weather.”

About fifteen minutes later, CeCe exited the front door of the Bonner residence and stepped onto the porch where Carl was seated, smoking a blunt and playing music on his phone.

“Everything cool?” Carl asked as he gazed up, entranced by both the marijuana he was smoking and the sight of the beautiful, young woman.

“Yeah,” CeCe smiled apprehensively. “Your mom is nice. She’s funny, though! She’s extremely honest! Does she have a problem with Puerto Rican people? Because if she does, then Hunting Park is probably not the best neighborhood for her to live in!”

“Naw,” Carl hesitated. “Why? Did she say some disrespectful shit to you?”

“Not exactly,” CeCe confessed. “The whole time she kept talking about how *that girl*, Stacy, was perfect for Will and she wanted them to get married; how ‘Black Love’ is the most beautiful thing in the world, she wants you to settle down with a ‘sister’ when you’re older and all that. I’ll always keep it professional, but I must admit, I was starting to feel like she was coming for me!”

“Ha! Oh, shit!” Carl erupted in laughter. “That’s probably my fault, ma. My mother probably felt like I was on your top after what I said in there, so she was letting you know what type time she’s on! Sorry about that. I’ll tell her to chill.”

“No, it’s all good,” CeCe objected. “Don’t say anything. I don’t want any tension since I’ll be working for y’all. It’s not that deep. I just thought it was funny, that’s all.”

“Oh, okay. If you’re sure. But, if she draws on you, let me know and I’ll check her,” Carl insisted. “You’re doing us a favor. I’m not going to let her make you feel uncomfortable. She used to come at Will all crazy, because before he got serious with Stacy, he messed with *a lot* of Rican jawns. My mother is real jealous!”

“Well, she birthed handsome sons, so I’m not surprised,” CeCe smiled. “It’s crazy how much you look like Will, except for the braids and tattoos. Plus, you’re a little more muscular than he was. You grew up fast! Your mom said you moved out last night. How old are you now, Carl?”

“I’m seventeen,” Carl replied, slightly adding even more bass to his already gravelly voice and poking his chiseled chest out some. “How old are you?”

“Oh, shit!” CeCe gasped. “You’re only seventeen? You look like a whole grown-ass man! You moved out already? You really *are* like your brother!”

“I’m a lot different than Will too, though,” Carl nonchalantly replied. “I’m my own man. Plus, you know... I *am* a whole grown-ass man! Besides, I

make more money than most grown men! Moms was bugging, so I dipped.
Me and your uncle get money together, so it's all good."

"Oh, I see," CeCe replied, nodding her head. "That's why he was so adamant about me taking this job at the last minute. He even offered to pay me out of pocket if the agency gives me any issues."

"For real? See – that's why Tiny is *that* nigga," Carl smiled with satisfaction. "So, anyway, you never answered my question. How old are you?"

"Oh, me? I'm about to be twenty-one," CeCe answered matter-of-factly.
"So, yeah, your mother was right – I'm a little too old for you!"

"Age ain't nothing but a number, ma..."

"And jail ain't nothing but a building, but I'm not trying to go there for statutory rape!" CeCe giggled.

"Yeah, I feel you," Carl chuckled as he shrugged his shoulders. "My birthday just passed, so I guess I have a little less than a year to make you fall in love!"

"Boy, you're silly!" CeCe smiled from ear-to-ear as she flirtatiously smacked Carl on his shoulder. "Well, anyway – I'll be here seven days a week, four hours in the morning and four hours in the evening. I'll take good care of your mother, so you won't have to worry. Here's my card. Call me if y'all need anything."

"*Anything?*" Carl asked with a devious smile as he slowly took the card from CeCe.

"*Ay Dios mio!*" CeCe laughed. "I see you're going to be a problem!"

"Naw, ma," Carl coolly objected. "I don't want to no problems! I want to be the answer to your problems..."

"Ha! Oh, you think you got game, huh, young C?" CeCe blushed. "Seems to me like you've been watching too many pimp movies, boy!"

"You trying to play me?" Carl laughed. "You don't even know, ma! But it's all good. I really appreciate you helping us out. I'll let you go do your

thing, though, so I can holler at my mother before I get back to business.”

“Okay. It was really good seeing you again,” CeCe confessed. “I’m looking forward to working with you and your mother.”

“You and me both, CeCe,” Carl admitted. “I’ll text you my number so you can lock me in. Be safe.”

Roughly six months passed and Mrs. Bonner’s health made marginal improvements over time. CeCe was an excellent caregiver in general and she took even greater care of Mrs. Bonner due to her history with the family. This enabled Carl to move about much more freely and acclimate himself to his new routine and the responsibilities that came with living on his own and operating the stash-house. Carl’s reputation in the streets was even more solidified than it already had been. Carl had also already accumulated more wealth than most men twice his age.

It was Spring – when Carl and his fellow Philadelphians exchanged hooded sweatshirts and jeans for V-neck T-shirts and cargo shorts. Carl decided to treat himself to a new toy. He logged into the Lyft™ ride-share application on his cell phone and ordered a ride to a high-end motorcycle shop in the suburbs. It was far away, but it was worth it.

The shop was called Tricked Out Custom Cycles and it is located in the suburbs, on Old York Road in Warminster, Bucks County. Carl had stumbled upon the shop’s Instagram page one day and realized it was owned by people who looked like him. Not only did they sell motorcycles and countless accessories – they customized them with parts and beautiful graphic paint-jobs. Carl was compelled to take a short vacation away from the hood, spend some of his “hard-earned” money on a new-toy and simultaneously test-ride the bike on his way back to Hunting Park.

All went well during the Lyft ride to T.O.C.C. The Lyft driver was very pleasant and her car was clean and tidy. Carl was pleasantly surprised that his driver happened to be an attractive, intelligent, young woman in her early twenties who had recently moved to the city from Haiti to attend Temple University. Carl asked her about herself and she detailed her personal history for the first twenty minutes of the approximately forty-minute commute.

Once Carl arrived at the customs shop, he immediately saw the bike he wanted. It was a silver and royal blue Suzuki Hayabusa and it was a beautiful monster of a sports bike with a powerful 1,300 cc engine.

Carl had seen the Suzuki posted on his Instagram “Explore” page, fell in love, started following the shop’s Instagram page and decided to go purchase the bike at his earliest opportunity. Less than seventy-two hours later, seventeen-year-old Carl from North Philadelphia, was the owner of an eighteen-thousand-dollar motorcycle. The shop even provided Carl with a complimentary, customized, airbrushed helmet to go along with his purchase. Carl revved the engine on his new toy, pleased with his gift to himself and excited to ride the crotch-rocket back to his neighborhood.

“Should I ride through the city, or should I take 95?” Carl thought aloud. “I want to open this jaw’n up... I’ll take 95!”

The muscular young man strapped on his helmet and quickly rode out of the parking lot on the powerful sports-bike, traveling South on Old York Road. The engine growled as he effortlessly weaved through the light traffic and sped down the wide thoroughfare. The road narrowed as Carl continued, and he slowed down as he rode through the quaint, colonial-styled town of Hatboro. Once the young, adrenaline-junkie approached the green light at Byberry Road and attempted to turn left, he quickly shifted gears and sped up to pass a hesitant, suburban driver in a minivan.

What the impulsive, young man didn’t realize, due to his limited view, was that the driver in front of him hadn’t turned because there was an old woman with a walker slowly attempting to cross the street. Carl darted past the minivan, but quickly swerved to avoid hitting the elderly pedestrian. Carl’s tire slid ever so slightly on oily gravel, causing the rear tire of his bike to fish-tail and collide with the curb. Carl dropped his bike and tried to land on his feet, but the immensely heavy machine crushed his entire right leg; snapping his bones completely in two and splintering them inside his flesh. Carl groaned loudly in agony, as he fell to the sidewalk next to the corner gas station.

“Are you okay, young man?” the gas station attendant, an older white man, asked as he rushed to Carl’s aid.

“Naw!” Carl gasped as he ripped his helmet off and thrust it aside. “I need to go to the hospital. Can you help me get this bike off my leg? My whole shit is broken!”

Carl was admitted to Abington Memorial Hospital on York Road where he stayed for nine days and received four operations on his right leg. Upon his admission, he called his mother, CeCe and Tiny to inform them of his whereabouts. CeCe agreed to be listed as Carl’s emergency contact and she visited him every day in between her shifts caring for Mrs. Bonner. They all agreed it made more sense for CeCe to be Carl’s emergency contact since Mrs. Bonner was essentially confined to the house due to her mental and physical health issues at the time. Once Carl was released from the hospital, CeCe picked him up and he returned to the stash-house on Sixth Street. His injury and recovery process complicated his ability to work, however. He was in constant pain and could not walk for months. In addition, Carl was scheduled for intensive physical therapy and rehabilitation five days per week. In order to help out, CeCe dropped all her other clients so she could focus solely on caring for Carl and Mrs. Bonner.

This was the beginning of Carl and CeCe’s secret romantic relationship. The two of them had already grown close over the months CeCe had been caring for Mrs. Bonner. Carl appreciated CeCe and he made it known on a regular basis – both verbally and via regular cash bonuses and gifts. In addition to his sexual attraction to the young woman and his gratitude for the way she treated his mother; Carl grew even fonder of CeCe due to how she nurtured him after his accident. One day, upon returning to Sixth Street after a therapy appointment in which he took his first steps without being assisted, Carl and CeCe had sex for the first time. There were several reasons, CeCe explained, why she wished to keep their affair a secret however.

“That’s corny, ma!” Carl huffed as he lay on his back, exhaling marijuana smoke. “I’m thorough as fuck and you’re acting like you’re ashamed of a nigga!”

“Not at all, baby!” CeCe protested. She looked up at Carl, her head rested against his bare chest as she gently stroked his still erect manhood. “It’s just that – I’m going on twenty-one and you’re seventeen. It’s not really a good look. Plus, Tiny probably wouldn’t like it.”

“Tiny is my nigga, but I feel you though,” Carl conceded. “We’ll just wait until I’m older to let the world know that this is *my* pussy! But from now on, you just make sure you don’t let nobody else hit!”

“You’re crazy, love!” CeCe pecked Carl on his lips as she released his manhood and retrieved the blunt from his hand. “This pussy is all yours!”

Shortly after his accident, Carl made the decision to drop out of high school while recovering. His schedule – between hustling, being unable to walk, going to rehab and taking time to rest; did not leave him any time for high school. While Carl had made significant external progress within four months of his accident – walking again, resuming his normal business flow and embarking on a storybook sexual affair with his long-time crush; he was fighting a new internal battle.

Due to his chronic pain from breaking his leg badly, Carl had quickly become addicted to opioid pain relievers. Due to the severity of his injuries and the number of surgeries he had to undergo, he was immediately prescribed fifteen milligram tablets, which were increased in intervals to thirty milligrams within two short months. Six months had passed and Carl had become a slave to the substance, although most people who knew him had no idea. CeCe had perceived what Carl was doing, however, although Carl vehemently denied it. The young couple argued about the subject often.

“I’m not addicted to those shits, CeCe!” Carl growled as spit flew from his mouth, his thick eyebrows ruffled in anger during one particular argument.

“You saw my leg! You went with me to rehab! You’re a CNA! You should know better! I’m in pain! I need them jawns! Give them to me!”

“No!” CeCe shrilly protested. “It’s too soon! You just took two thirties, forty-five minutes ago! You’re acting like a fiend! I’m taking care of you as a nurse *and* as a girlfriend. I’m not going to let you OD! Everybody’s dying off these pills! I’m not going to lose you!”

“*Lose* me? You don’t even have me!” Carl roared. “You don’t even want people to know we’re together! Now, give me my fucking pills!”

“I told you I’m not giving them to you!” CeCe shrieked. “I’m leaving before the neighbors call the cops and get this spot raided!”

“Fine! Leave! But you better give me my fucking pills!”

Without another word, CeCe grabbed her purse from the sofa, sprinted to the door, pill-bottle in hand, opened the door and left, slamming it behind her.

“CeCe! CeCe! Fucking bitch!” Carl growled to himself as he retrieved his phone from his pocket and dialed a number in his contact list.

“Yo, my nig. What’s good?” Carl asked when his associate answered.
“You got thirties on deck? Alright bet! You got time to record? Alright bet!
Slide through Sixth Street... I’m here now... Say less.”

Carl was restless as he waited for his producer and street-level, wholesale Percocet-dealer to arrive. He went into his basement to prepare to record a rap he had been working on. Carl had invested substantial funds into a state-of-the-art home recording studio in the basement of the Hunting Park stash-house he now called home. Other than its size, the studio rivaled those used by successful recording artists, producers and engineers and inspired awe in most folks who entered, based on its location in the basement of a North Philadelphia rowhome.

“My nigga, Trent! You took forever, my nigga!” Carl exclaimed as he opened the door and shook the producer-hustler’s hand and hurried him into the house.

“Damn, nigga! You feening, huh?” Trent chuckled. “You only called me twenty minutes ago!”

“Oh word? My fault,” Carl apologized, embarrassed. “Nut-ass broad stole my percs and my leg is fucking killing me! You got that script?”

“Yeah, here you go,” Trent handed the unlabeled bottle full of pills to Carl. In exchange, Carl handed the man twelve-hundred dollars in cash.

“Good looking.”

“Good looking on you!” Carl replied enthusiastically after swallowing two thirty-milligram pills and chasing them with a swig of pineapple-flavored vodka – another habit he had picked up since his motorcycle accident.

“Uh... so, you ready to go in the stu and lay this track?” Trent hesitated, trying not to betray in his tone and facial expression that he had observed the change in Carl during the months since his accident.

“No doubt! I got to get this shit off my chest,” Carl sighed, leading the way to the basement. Carl walked into the booth and draped the headphones over his head as Trent logged into the equipment and queued the tracks. A few minutes later, Trent began to play a grimy, bass-heavy, up-tempo beat and signaled to Carl, giving him the go-ahead to begin.

“Uh! Yeah! Ima show ‘em why they call me C-Murder!

Uh! Yeah! I’m the realest nigga that you never heard of!

Aw! Man! They killed my brother, Will and my man, Pop...

Aw! Man! So, if I catch them niggas, then they getting shot!

Aw! Shit! I’m the realest nigga down in North Phill...

Aw! Shit! A get-money nigga, but that boy kill!

Uh! Yeah! I got the hood locked down in HP!

Aw! Shit! All the baddest bitches want to lay me!

Aw! Man! So, jealous, pussy niggas want to spray me!

Uh! Yeah! But I will never ever let ‘em play me!

Aw! Man! Keep it a thousand nigga, all the way G!

Uh! Yeah! Y’all niggas switch teams, more like KD!

Aw! Shit! I keep hammers on me like a fucking vet!

Aw! Man! So, nigga, run up on me and you getting wet!

Aw! Man! Ima show ‘em why they call me C-Murda!

Uh! Yeah! I’m the realest nigga that you never heard of!”

“Yeah, that jawn went hard, bro!” Trent complimented Carl as he exited the booth after recording the entire track.

“Good looking, fam,” Carl thanked his associate as he retrieved the bottle of Percocet, swallowed two more pills and took another gulp of liquor. “That shit’s been weighing on my mind a lot lately. Especially while I was laid up, healing from the accident.”

“Yeah, I feel you, dog,” Trent acknowledged apprehensively. “Look, bro. You might want to slow down with popping those erks, man. Them jawns are no joke! Plus, those are thirties! You’ve popped four since I got here an hour ago!”

“Aw shit! Here we go! You sound just like the bitch who just left!” Carl jeered. “You better not try to take these jawns back or it’s going to be an issue, my nig!”

“Come on, C! Stop trying to play me,” Trent objected. “I’m just saying – you’re C-Murda! You’re a hustler. You’re not supposed to be eating them jawns like that!”

“Look, my nigga,” Carl rolled his eyes. “I appreciate your concern, but I’m good. I got some business to handle, though. How long do you think it will take you to mix and master that jawn?”

“For you? I’ll e-mail it to you by tomorrow.”

“My nigga! I appreciate you,” Carl slurred his speech, the liquor and opioids beginning to overwhelm his system. “Alright, bro... let me walk you out.”

Carl slowly led the way, stumbling slightly as he walked up the basement steps and unlocked the front door. Carl opened the door and swayed as he extended his sweaty palm in Trent’s direction to shake his associate’s hand.

“You sure you’re cool, C?”

“Yeah... yeah... nigga!” Carl gasped as he belched. “I’m good. I’m just on! I’ll get with you. Just send me that track ASAP, though.”

“Alright, man. Take care.”

Trent had barely exited the doorway and walked off the porch before Carl stumbled to the living room and collapsed onto the sofa. The young hustler

quickly slipped into a drug and alcohol-induced coma, unaware that he had left the front door not only unlocked, but slightly ajar.

CHAPTER | 2

“Get the fuck up, pussy!”

Less than an hour after Trent’s departure, a groggy and intoxicated Carl was startled out of his sleep by the booming voices of two slim, dark-skinned young men. They wore black bandanas tied across their faces and black baseball caps pulled low over their long, locked hair; along with black t-shirts, pants and sneakers. Of course, they were armed. The man who stood closer to Carl held a large revolver – a Smith and Wesson 500. The second man, who stood back, covering his associate’s back, had his sights trained on Carl – holding an AK-47 assault rifle which was the same size as the relatively small man’s torso.

“H-h-hold up!” Carl stuttered, instantly waking and sobering up slightly at the sight of the two masked strangers in his living room – realizing he had been caught slipping in what might turn out to be a fatal mistake. “Do you know who you’re fucking with?”

Smack!

“Nigga! Do you know who *you’re* fucking with?” The lead stick-up man screamed frantically as he violently struck Carl between his eyes with the butt of his over-sized revolver. Carl grabbed his face with both hands and groaned in pain as a large gash opened up above his nose and immediately began leaking dark fluid. “Nobody gives a fuck about your reputation, young-boy! We need all the fucking cash and work or you’re going to get parked right on your goddamn sofa!”

“Oh... you bitch-ass niggas!” Carl seethed with anger as his body trembled due to his frustration. “Broke-ass pussies don’t hustle, so you try to rob a real nigga? You’re going to have to pop me, ‘cause y’all ain’t getting shit!”

“You think we’re playing with your nut-ass, cuz?” the second, assault-rifle-bearing intruder asked, irritated, as he approached Carl and placed the barrel of the AK-47 to the teenager’s forehead. “Nigga, stop playing with

me! I'll empty this whole jaw'n in your fucking head! Where the fuck is that work?"

"Your mom's head-game is *that work!*" Carl shot back defiantly. "Other than that, I don't know what to tell y'all niggas!"

"Oh, you got jokes, dickhead?"

Crack!

Carl's head began to spin as the impact of the handle of the assault rifle colliding with his teeth and gums sent shockwaves of pain through his mouth, into his skull; cracking his front teeth and challenging the teenager to remain conscious.

"Ughhhhh!" Carl uttered a loud, but muffled moan. The injured, young man immediately grabbed his mouth to catch his bloody, chipped teeth as two of them detached from his severed gums. "You bitch!"

"We told you we're not playing with your nut-ass!" The revolver-wielding gunman screamed. "Now, where's the shit?"

"Fuck y'all," Carl faintly gasped as he attempted to fight the darkness which began to overtake his consciousness. "Y'all ain't getting shit..."

"Yo, cuz," the lead robber whispered to his associate. "This nigga is crazy! He's not giving up shit!"

"You want me to let loose on him?"

"Naw," the leader objected. "You know the OG said not yet. We're just supposed to rob this nigga. I can't believe the young-boy is ready to die, though."

"I'm not leaving empty-handed, my nigga," the second man huffed as he gripped his AK-47.

"I feel you," his friend agreed. "We didn't come here for nothing! Hold me down while I run his pockets."

At that, the man secured his revolver in the back of his pants and aggressively tackled a half-conscious Carl; easily restraining the badly injured teen as he rifled through his pockets.

“Oh, shit!” The man grinned cheerily as he rose from the sofa with Carl’s confiscated cash and pills. “This nigga got racks on him and a whole script of thirties!”

“Bet! That’s cool for now! Let’s dip!”

Several minutes later, when Carl momentarily regained consciousness, he immediately used his cell phone to call his supplier, Tiny.

“OG,” Carl uttered a muffled groan into the phone when the older Puerto-Rican man answered. “I got done dirty…”

“You good, *papi*? *Papi*! C!”

Unfortunately, Carl had already faded back into unconsciousness. Tiny immediately disconnected the call, left his bar on Hunting Park Avenue and rushed to the house on Sixth and Butler Streets to check on Carl. By the time Carl regained consciousness, he was in a private room in Einstein Hospital with Tiny seated beside him.

“Welcome back, pop,” Tiny greeted Carl when he noticed the teenager stirring in his hospital bed. “How do you feel?”

“Fucked up!”

“Well, then – I guess you feel how you look!” Tiny joked to make light of the serious situation. The short, stocky man rose, walked to close the hospital room door and returned to his seat next to Carl’s bed. “Who did this to you?”

“I don’t even know, OG,” Carl slowly confessed, his mouth swollen and sore from the impact of the assault rifle. “My producer was in the studio with me. I passed out on the living room sofa when he left. When I woke up, two skinny, dark-skinned niggas with dreads and ratchets were in my living room! One had that revolver that shoots shotgun shells and the other one had the K.”

“Damn!” Tiny shook his head in disappointment. “What did they take from you?”

“Just the cash I had on me – my personal shit,” Carl admitted, embarrassed. He decided to omit the fact that the men had stolen a bottle of pills he had just purchased for his own personal use. Carl figured Tiny did

not need to know details that didn't concern him. "I didn't give up none of your shit, OG."

"Good shit," Tiny commended Carl. "I'm proud of you. That's why I put you over there. I knew you would hold it down. I'm sorry this shit happened, though. Sorry about all the questions while you're still fucked up. But you know – it's the business."

"I feel you."

"I'll have Cyndal come through to give you a ride and nurse you back to health when you get discharged," Tiny continued. "Plus, you'll have a surprise waiting for you when you get back to the crib. One more question – how the fuck did those bastards get in? The door wasn't kicked in or nothing..."

"Uh," Carl hesitated. "To be honest, OG – I was kind of on when my producer left. I really don't remember what happened after he left until them niggas woke me up with the burner in my face. My fault, Tiny. They caught me slipping."

"Well, at least they didn't get any of the work," Tiny admitted. "But it's a bad look that somebody ran up in the crib. We can't let that rock. But get some rest. We'll talk about it later."

True to his word, Tiny arranged for CeCe to pick Carl up from the hospital upon his discharge several days later, after the doctors felt they had sufficiently treated his wounds. The hospital staff and law enforcement officers they had contacted on the teenager's behalf quickly grew frustrated with his lack of cooperation with their investigation into the assault.

"How you feeling, *papi*?" CeCe asked Carl as she discreetly pecked his cheek when he entered the passenger's side of her sedan. "Your mouth and forehead are so swollen! It looks like it hurts!"

"It does... but shit! You should have seen my face the other day!" Carl chuckled. "I'm good, though. You know I'm a G! This ain't shit compared to what I'm going to do when I find the niggas who did this shit!"

"*Ay Dios mio!* You're already talking about the dumb shit, love?" CeCe shook her head in disapproval as she drove away from the hospital and

proceeded to the Hunting Park section of the city. “At least let me nurse you back to health before you start running around the city, trying to get revenge on motherfuckers like you’re Batman or some shit!”

“Girl, please!” Carl scoffed. “You better stop trying to play me! You see my face? This is real life! Besides – Batman doesn’t merck niggas...”

“You know what? I don’t even want to hear another word!” CeCe sharply replied. She quickly increased the volume on her stereo and began to loudly and obnoxiously sing along in Spanish to “*Despacito*” as the extremely popular song played while she drove.

Less than ten minutes later, CeCe and Carl arrived at the house located at Sixth and Butler Streets. They exited the vehicle and as they climbed the front steps, Carl was surprised to see that the door had been replaced. He knocked quickly, in a rhythmic pattern. Tiny answered the door within moments.

“Yo, C!” Tiny warmly greeted the teenager as he embraced him and allowed Carl and CeCe to enter. Tiny hugged and kissed his niece as she walked past him as well. “Welcome back. You like the new door? It’s steel-reinforced. I know those motherfuckers caught you slipping, but I figured I’d get these new doors in the front and back to send a message.”

“Yeah, that jawn is husky, OG,” Carl acknowledged, before hesitating. “Pause! I see you’re not going to let me live this robbery shit down, huh?”

“Oh, I won’t hold it against you forever!” Tiny laughed. “But it just happened the other day and we didn’t even talk about it in detail yet! It’s all good, though. You live and you learn. Remember I told you I had a surprise for you?”

“Yeah,” Carl pensively replied. “I’ve been wondering what it is...”

“Flacco! Come down here,” Tiny’s hoarse voice echoed throughout the house. The neighborhood boss’s instructions were followed by the appearance of a short, slim Puerto-Rican man standing at the top of the stairs. Carl backed up apprehensively and nervously glanced over at CeCe, who was smiling.

“Tiny,” Carl hesitated. “Who the fuck is Flacco?”

“Well,” a familiar voice resonated from the stairwell as a young man dramatically placed one foot below the other and descended the staircase, revealing his now more mature face. “You probably remember a nigga as Mannie!”

“My nigga!” Carl erupted in genuine excitement.

It had been nearly four years since he had seen Mannie on the day of Will and Pop’s funeral. Four years since he and Mannie had left the repast early and smoked weed together. Four years since Mannie had tried to “help” Carl with money in a failed car-jacking attempt at the busy intersection of Broad Street and Hunting Park Avenue. The same period of time had elapsed since Mannie had been arrested and sent back to Puerto Rico.

In actuality, the incident with Mannie was the real reason why Tiny had approached Carl about working for him in the first place. If Mannie had not been trying to “help” Carl, the Bonner’s financial situation likely would not have even been a second thought to Tiny and he likely would not have approached Carl. As crazy and as reckless as Mannie’s actions had been, Carl felt Mannie’s behavior years ago was the only reason Carl had been placed in the position to make so much money and prevent he and his mother from ending up on the streets. Carl was eternally grateful to both Mannie and Tiny and it showed in the way he dealt with them. Seeing his friend again after almost four years revived a joy in Carl which was a rare sight to behold since Will’s passing.

“So, what’s up, my nigga?” Carl asked as he shook Mannie’s hand and pulled him in for a hug as the shorter man stepped into the living room. “I’m supposed to call you ‘Flacco’ now?”

“Naw, fuck that!” Mannie chuckled. “That’s just the name on my ID! My *Tio* hooked me up so I could come back since they don’t want me in the States. They don’t want me here... they don’t want me in PR! I’m like Public Enemy Number One!”

“Damn, my nigga!” Carl sighed and shook his head. “I know you’re a wild nigga, but what the fuck you been getting into?”

“Aw, man,” Mannie shrugged. “PR is wild, man. I’m only doing what I got to do, you know?”

“PR *is* wild,” Tiny interjected. “But it’s not much worse than Philly is these days. Mannie’s too much like his cousins, the twins. I’m hoping he’s learned from their bad examples and what happened to them. I hope Mannie is smarter than they were.”

Mannie, or Flacco, shuffled somewhat nervously as an awkward silence ensued after Tiny made his statement about the deceased twins.

“So, what you want me to do, OG?” Carl’s question interrupted the silence. “I’m ready to get back to work.”

“I actually want you to go back to your mother’s house and rest up until your face heals completely,” Tiny revealed. “The streets talk. It’s a bad look for people to see you with your face swollen like that, knowing the spot got robbed. You can come back to work as soon as you’re all healed up. Mannie is going to hold the spot down until you’re better.”

“Oh, okay,” Carl reluctantly agreed.

“We’re going to be partners, bro!” Mannie excitedly added.

“That’s what’s up!”

“Yeah,” Tiny continued. “I figured it would be the best situation and add an extra level of security here. People know you as a goon, C. But, as we can see, some motherfuckers still want to try you. Now that Mannie is here, they shouldn’t be able to catch you both slipping.”

“That makes sense,” Carl agreed.

“So, Cyndal,” Tiny turned to his niece. “Take C back to his mother’s house and make sure he recovers quickly so he can get back to work within the week. Use medicine and whatever other old-school remedies from the island you need to use. Let me and your cousin know if you need anything.”

“Okay *Tio*,” CeCe replied. “You ready Carl?”

“Yeah, we can go,” Carl nodded as he turned to shake his boss’s hand. “Thanks again Tiny. Can Mannie slide through my crib later if he’s not busy here?”

“Shit! He’s a grown man!” Tiny laughed. “I’m not baby-sitting y’all! I don’t give a fuck where Mannie goes as long as business remains his number one priority and as long as he doesn’t get into any dumb shit!”

“Say less, OG.”

“Oh, my Lord, baby!” a tearful Mrs. Bonner exclaimed when Carl and CeCe entered the living room of her home. “What did they do to you?”

“It’s nothing serious, Ma,” Carl replied dismissively as he shuffled over to the sofa to hug and kiss his mother.

“Nothing serious?” Mrs. Bonner sobbed as she closely examined her son’s face. “They disfigured your handsome face!”

“He’ll be okay, Mrs. Bonner,” CeCe gently interjected with a smile. “I’ll treat his wounds over the next week to make sure his handsome face gets back to normal.”

“Uh-huh,” Mrs. Bonner scoffed and rolled her eyes, immediately changing her demeanor. “I’m sure you will take *very* good care of my son’s handsome face. Won’t you, CeCe?”

“I’m just doing my job, Mrs. Bonner,” CeCe timidly replied. “Don’t you want me to help Carl get better?”

“Of course, I want my son to get better,” Mrs. Bonner rebuffed. “What kind of toxic mother do you think I am?”

“Oh, I’m not trying to say you’re a toxic mother at all, Mrs. Bonner,” CeCe plead her case. “I just want you to know I’ll take just as good care of your son as I have been of you.”

“Yeah,” Mrs. Bonner hissed. “I just get the feeling that you’ve already been taking better care of him than you are of me!”

“Ma!” Carl abruptly intervened. “You need to stop coming at CeCe like that. Is this really how you want to welcome me home?”

“I guess you’re right,” Mrs. Bonner sighed. “Look at that – my baby-boy correcting me... how do you like that?”

“And since you seem to be so jealous of her nursing skills, you can help take care of me too!” Carl chuckled. “I’m going to be staying here until my face and gums are healed up.”

“That sounds good to me,” CeCe chimed in with a smile. “I’ll take the help!”

“Oh, my goodness!” Mrs. Bonner gasped with joy. “You’re coming home to stay?”

“Just for about a week, so don’t get too hyped, Ma. I got to get back to the house and handle business ASAP. I just don’t want to do it looking like this!”

“Ain’t handling business at that house how you got beat up in the first place?” Mrs. Bonner rolled her eyes.

“Yeah... it’s also how I’ve supported us the past four years,” Carl coolly replied. “It’s good to see you, Ma. I’m going to go upstairs and lay down until my homey slides through. I’ll talk to y’all later.”

Later that evening there was a knock on the front door. When Carl answered, he was happy to see his long, lost friend, Mannie standing on the other side.

“Come on in, my dude,” Carl greeted the fugitive. “So, what you been up to?”

“Shit, man,” Mannie began. “I’ve been in Chicago for the past six months since I came back to the States. My *Tio* was making sure it was cool for me to come back to Philly, so he had me staying with some Latin Kings he’s connected with in Chicago.”

“For real? Why’d you have to leave PR in the first place?”

“Crazy drama down there, bro!” Mannie sternly informed his friend. “I was out drinking with this super-bad jawn, and this group of jealous motherfuckers started acting like they owned the fucking bar. Assholes came over talking shit and starting trouble. The biggest one grabbed the *puti* I had with me, so I snapped. I pulled my machete and hacked his arm off, below

his elbow – the same one he used to grab her ass! Now he can't do that shit anymore!”

“Damn, nigga! That was some real, G shit! Can't nobody say you don't defend your woman!”

“Shit... she wasn't even my woman,” Mannie confessed with a smirk. “I hadn't even fucked yet! And there was so much drama after that, I didn't even have a chance to hit that! Ain't that some bullshit, bro?”

“That *is* some bullshit,” Carl concurred. “So, that's why you left PR? Because you chopped that nigga's arm off?”

“Yeah, that's what set the whole situation off,” Mannie continued. “So, come to find out, those dudes are in some petty-ass neighborhood gang and they wanted revenge. They spread the word they were going to kill me, but I wasn't worried about it. They tried to catch me slipping, but you know me. I shot two of them and now they're, how do you say – *big mad!*”

“So, if they're a petty-ass street-gang, then fuck 'em, right?”

“Language!” Mrs. Bonner chimed in loudly from the living room. “I know you think you're grown, but this is still my house!”

“My fault, dog,” Carl whispered as he rolled his eyes. “I can't wait until I'm well enough to move back to the spot! So, anyway – why didn't you just merck all of them?”

“Because my *Tio* has known the leader's uncle since they were kids and does business with him, so they agreed the only way to squash the beef is if I left the island.”

“Tiny is definitely all about business!” Carl observed aloud as he compulsively twirled his chin hairs between his fingers. The teenager had developed the habit of stroking his chin while in deep thought during his chess-playing days, long before he had grown any facial hair. “At least you got a lot of experience with going to war now! That shit is going to come in handy for when I find them niggas who robbed me!”

“You already know I got your back, bro,” Mannie stated resolutely as he gripped Carl's hand and shook it firmly.

“Excuse me,” Mrs. Bonner startled the two young men when she entered the front room and began to speak. “What is your name, young man? Mannie, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Well, Mannie... my son seems to like you. But I hear you talking about ‘going to war’ and hurting and killing people and that’s not what I want discussed with my teenaged son in my home,” Mrs. Bonner ranted. “I need to ask you to leave.”

“Ma! You can’t kick Mannie out!” Carl vehemently objected.

“I don’t care how much money you bring in! This is *my* house, boy! I can do whatever I want!” Mrs. Bonner retorted.

“Except for get up off the couch by yourself unless you’re snapping on one of my people...”

Smack!

“Watch your mouth, boy! I’m still your mother!” Mrs. Bonner screamed at her son after striking him in his already sore, stitch-filled mouth.

“Dammit, Ma!” Carl groaned. “Why you always drawing?”

The young man held his face and winced in pain as blood seeped from his lip. Mannie stood in the vestibule motionless, unsure of how to react.

“What’s going on out here?” CeCe rushed into the room to investigate the commotion a few moments later. “Why are you bleeding, Carl? What’s wrong, *papi*?”

“My mother is losing her mind! She just smacked me in my face! I think she wants to fuck me up worse, so I got to stay here longer!”

“Boy, please! You sound ridiculous! *Now* who’s losing their mind?” Mrs. Bonner shrieked before turning to address CeCe. “My foolish son and his equally foolish friend are in here talking about killing folks, so I asked the young man to leave.”

“Oh, I see,” CeCe sheepishly replied.

“You can’t make Mannie leave, Ma!” Carl vehemently objected. “He just got here! Besides... he’s Tiny’s nephew and CeCe’s cousin!”

“I wouldn’t give a damn if he was Barack Obama’s son-in-law!” Mrs. Bonner screeched. “I’m not letting anybody encourage my son to talk that foolishness in my home! He’s got to go! Now!”

“That’s corny, Ma!” Carl protested. “If Mannie goes, then I’m out! You can’t tell me who I can be friends with! I’m a grown man! Come on Mannie! We out, dog!”

“Where do you think you’re going? You can’t leave me again!” Mrs. Bonner shrieked as tears formed in her hysterical, trembling eyes. She watched in horror as her only living child ignored her and led the way out the front door of their family residence, his friend silently following behind him.

“Mrs. Bonner, please calm down,” CeCe pleaded as she gently rubbed the woman’s shoulder. “You shouldn’t get so excited. It’s not good for your health.”

“Carl! Baby! Don’t ignore me!” Mrs. Bonner cried as she dramatically limped to the doorway, CeCe trailing the older woman. “I’m sorry! Come back! Please! Let’s talk about it, baby! Please don’t leave me, baby!”

Carl continued walking and ignored his mother. He was so angry with her that the tears of the woman who birthed and raised him did not faze him one iota. Not to mention the fact that he had grown accustomed to his mother’s theatrical way of displaying her emotions. Mrs. Bonner’s exhibitions no longer moved Carl the way they once had. The young man retrieved his car keys from his pants pocket, unlocked the car doors and motioned for Mannie to get in. Before Carl entered the driver’s side of his vehicle, he looked up to the porch to quickly wave “goodbye” to his mother and CeCe.

“Carl! Please don’t leave me, baby-boy,” Mrs. Bonner called out weakly as she supported herself against the doorway. “I’m so...”

To everyone’s surprise, before she could finish her statement, Mrs. Bonner collapsed onto the floor of the front porch of her own home.

“Your mother is in critical, but stable condition, Mr. Bonner,” the cardiologist at Einstein Hospital informed Carl matter-of-factly. “Your

mother was suffering from angina and had a heart attack. We had to perform an emergency triple-bypass surgery. The procedure was successful. She's in the ICU now, recovering. You can see her if you'd like, but I just want to advise you – she looks bad. The machines are assisting with her breathing, but she'll only need those for the next several hours. Within the next seventy-two hours, if everything goes according to plan, your mother will be transferred out of the Intensive Care Unit. She should be good to go home a few days later.”

“Damn! That shit is crazy,” Carl sighed as he buried his face in CeCe's shoulder, who rubbed his back and tried to comfort her secret lover. “I feel like this is my fault!”

“It's definitely not your fault, C,” CeCe softly objected. “I'm the one who has been taking care of her. I should have seen this coming and made her follow-up with the cardiologist sooner.”

“My mother is stubborn,” Carl shook his head. “If she didn't listen to me, she definitely wouldn't have listened to you! I probably would have had to bribe her into going by telling her I would move back home full-time or some shit! I just can't believe I almost lost her...”

“Well, let's not start placing blame,” the doctor interjected. “The real culprit here is poor diet and a lack of regular exercise over the course of several decades. Now, she should recover fully within the next three-to-six months. But whoever is going to be Mrs. Bonner's primary caregiver needs to be extra careful because she's at an increased risk for another heart attack until she has fully recovered. During her recovery process, she may have certain symptoms as described in this paperwork.”

“I'm her caregiver. I'll take care of it,” CeCe reached for the papers, folded them and placed them inside her purse. “Thank you, doctor. Can we go in and see Mrs. Bonner now?”

“Yes, you may. I just wanted you to mentally prepare yourselves,” the surgeon explained. “Mrs. Bonner's predicament is not as bad as it looks, though. Right this way.”

Carl stopped abruptly at the sight of his relatively young mother laid on her back, connected to several mechanical apparatuses. CeCe observed her

man's demeanor, gently placed one arm around his shoulder and squeezed his other hand.

“You okay, love?”

“This is so fucked up!” Carl gasped. “This is how Will looked before he died...”

“But baby,” CeCe interrupted. “You heard the doctor. Your mother is going to be okay. And I promise I’ll take care of her.”

“B-b-b-but... you didn’t see Will, though, ma,” Carl began to hyperventilate. “Will was fucked up and paralyzed, but at least he was awake and talking in the hospital and all that. My mom ain’t even talking. It looks like she’s in a fucking coma!”

CeCe side-stepped and stood directly in front of Carl, in between him and his mother’s hospital bed. The attractive, young woman placed her palms against Carl’s cheeks and stared directly into his eyes.

“I promise you I’ll make sure your mother gets better – better than before the heart attack, Carl. Come on. Let’s go talk to her,” CeCe continued as she took Carl’s hand and led him to his mother’s bedside. The supportive young woman reached up, placed her hands atop Carl’s broad shoulders and gently pushed down, directing him to sit in the chair next to the bed. “Talk to her, Carl. She can hear you.”

“I’m so, *so* sorry, Ma,” Carl softly began after a long pause. He gently took his mother’s hand in his and held it as he spoke. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. I’ll move back home. I just need you to get better. I’ll be moved back in by the time they discharge you from this place. I’ll come pick you up and take you home to Ninth Street. It will be like before, but better. We can watch *Soul Food* every day if you want! Me and CeCe are going to take care of you, Ma. Please just hurry up and get better so I can take you home!”

Carl sighed heavily as he continued to hold his mother’s hand. He rested his head against CeCe’s torso as she stood beside him and played with his hair. Within moments, Mrs. Bonner stirred and squeezed Carl’s hand ever so slightly.

“She squeezed my hand, CeCe!” Carl blurted. “She heard me!”

“I know, love,” CeCe smiled as she continued to play with her young boyfriend’s braids. “Everything is going to be okay.”

CHAPTER | 3

“Yo, bro,” Mannie answered his phone.

“Damn, nigga! That was fast!” Carl chuckled. “The phone didn’t even ring!”

“Yeah, I was scrolling through the Gram, looking at *putis*,” Mannie laughed. “You coming to pick me up?”

“Yeah, you ready to take this hike to go visit the old-heads?”

“You already know, bro,” Mannie replied.

Mannie had reservations about visiting the prison, however. The last time he had been in, or even near, a correctional facility was after his failed car-jacking attempt in Hunting Park nearly four years prior. Mannie had been booked at the 25th Police District and transported to CFCF. His Uncle Tiny had arranged for him to be bailed out before sending him back to Puerto Rico and arranging for a new identity for his nephew in order to help him avoid serving time in prison. Now Mannie was nervous to voluntarily enter a state prison, but he needed to accompany Carl during his trip to visit Rick. Mannie had setup a visit with his uncle, Jasiel and Jose’s father, while he and Carl were at the facility. Jasiel Senior had recently been transferred to SCI Phoenix and had already been incarcerated for decades due to a life sentence he received for murder when the twins were young boys.

“What’s up, OG?” Carl greeted Rick when he sat down on the opposite side of the visiting-room table. “You’re looking healthy!”

“Yeah, man! All this time without that poison in my system has me feeling like a new man,” Rick smiled. Suddenly, the middle-aged man’s demeanor shifted. “I just wish I would have got clean before I did that dumb shit and killed my son-in-law...”

“I feel you, Rick,” Carl nodded. “You can’t really do shit about it now, though, right? Hind-sight is twenty-twenty.”

“You ain’t never lied, young-boy,” Rick chuckled. “Now I’m just trying to be positive and spiritual to atone for my past sins. I got to tell you, C – it’s hard in here, man! Some days it’s cool. But some days it’s like gladiator camp! I did five years before, but I was a young-boy back then. I’m getting too old for this! Ain’t no use in complaining, though. This is my life now. I put myself here.”

“Damn, OG,” Carl sighed. “That’s fucked up.”

“Yeah. It is what it is,” Rick shrugged. “So, I know you didn’t come up here just to hear me preach. What’s the deal?”

“Well, a couple niggas ran up in the crib a couple months back and robbed me,” Carl began. “They pistol-whipped me, knocked my teeth out and all that. These jawns are fronts right here.” Carl grimaced, revealing pearl-white veneers.

“Yeah, the boss told me about the nut shit,” Rick shook his head. “I’m glad you’re cool.”

“Good look. But one of the niggas was about to blow my top because I wouldn’t give shit up,” Carl explained. “The other dude told him ‘naw.’ He said their boss said not to kill me ‘yet.’ Tiny said he thinks it’s the Jamaicans. Tiny also said your new cellie is the Jamaican nigga who killed my old-head, Cannon, up State Road years ago. What’s up with that nigga?”

“Yeah,” Rick hesitated. “That’s the same dude. We’ve only been cellmates about three months, though. The crazy part is, I know what he did to your old-head, but he acts cool with me...”

“Fuck all that cool shit, Rick!” Carl sharply interrupted. “That nigga stabbed my OG to death in his sleep! And if I find out he had anything to do with getting the spot ran up in, it’s a wrap for him and all his niggas! That’s not just coming from me either. I got Tiny’s co-sign on that! You feel me, Rick?”

“Yeah, young-boy... chill,” Rick gestured for Carl to lower his voice as a correctional officer looked in their direction. “I got you. Don’t forget where

you're at."

"Yeah... cool," Carl continued. "So, what's up with this nigga?"

"He's a Jamaican from Germantown," Rick explained. "I hear he wasn't even heavy in the streets like that before – just minor weed shit. Then he caught that gun charge behind a DUI and got put in the same cell with your man. After he was sentenced to life for killing your old-head, he basically said 'fuck it' and decided to go Triple-OG on niggas. His family is connected and he already had people in the system, so he's basically a boss now. It's been some years now. What he did to your mans really gave him a name in the system. I hear he has a lot of clout with the Jamaicans on the inside and the outside – in the U.S and on the island."

"This pussy-nigga made a name off my old-head, huh?" Carl huffed. "That's that bullshit! Well, since y'all are so cool, I need you to try to find out if he had anything to do with running up in my crib. Does he know you're from The Park?"

"I never mentioned it, but he probably already knows," Rick admitted. "I'm telling you, C – the boy is connected. *For real!*"

"Say less. Just do me a favor and find out what that nigga knows about the robbery and holler at one of us about it, ASAP."

"I got you, C," Rick agreed. "You really holding it down out there, huh?"

"You already!" Carl proudly confirmed. "I'm about to get up out of here, though, OG. You know I get claustrophobic in places like this! I don't know how you do it."

"I do it because I don't have a choice!" Rick frowned.

"Yeah... I mean, you *had* a choice," Carl hesitated. "But anyway, I put money on your commissary. Let me know if you need anything else."

"Good looking out, C. I'll let you know what I find out."

Meanwhile, during Carl's visit with Rick; Mannie, or Flacco, was visiting with his family on the opposite side of the room. Jasiel Senior, sat opposite his young nephew.

Mannie had never actually met his uncle while he was still a free man. Jasiel Senior had been incarcerated for a murder while his sister, Mannie's mother, was still pregnant with him, living in San Juan. Mannie, however, had heard so many stories about his, "gangster *Tio* in Philadelphia," that Jasiel Senior's reputation had always loomed large in Mannie's mind.

"It's good to finally meet you *Tio*," Mannie smiled as he spoke into the receiver. "I've heard a lot about you my whole life!"

"I've heard a lot about you too, nephew," Jasiel Senior replied as he stared through the plated glass. "It's good to finally meet my sister's only boy. Too bad we got to do it like this, huh?"

"*Si, Tio*," Mannie nodded with a sigh. "It's some bullshit!"

"So, they call you 'Flacco' now?"

"Si, *Tio*."

"My brother-in-law is taking care of you?" Jasiel Senior continued.

"*Si, Tio*," Mannie nodded.

"So, you do business with him, then?"

"*Si, Tio*." Mannie respectfully replied.

"*Mira!*" Jasiel Senior abruptly changed his tone, commanding Mannie's attention. "We do what we do because we come from where we come from. I heard about you '*Flacco*'... you need to chill the fuck out. You see what the streets got me – life in prison. No chance of parole. I've been in here *veinte anos* already! No more trips to PR. I missed your entire childhood. I missed my sons' childhoods... and their fucking funeral."

"I know, *Tio*," Mannie humbly acknowledged. "*Tio* told me. I've chilled out. But I got to do what I got to do. You know how it is."

"I do," Jasiel Senior agreed. "Be smart about it, though. Anything illegal worth doing is worth getting away with."

Carl and Mannie left the prison in a somber mood. Other than the music which resonated from the premium speakers of Carl's sportscar, the young men drove in silence for the first part of the ride. For the first twenty minutes, the two young thugs thought to themselves and enjoyed the sounds of the Maino and Uncle Murda "Yellow Tape" mixtape as Carl pumped its sounds through his audio system.

"Yo! I need to find out who killed my cousins and merck those motherfuckers!" Mannie blurted out, breaking the silence.

"What you say?" Carl asked as he decreased the volume on his stereo while he continued driving. "Merck who?"

"The motherfuckers who killed my cousins," Mannie repeated. "I need to find them and kill them! I don't give a fuck who it is!"

"I feel you on that, bro," Carl nodded. "I feel the same way about whoever killed Will and Pop."

"You help me – I help you," Mannie smirked devilishly as he turned to his friend, his hand extended across the cabin of the vehicle.

"You already know!" Carl smiled as he gripped Mannie's hand. "One hand washes the other, both wash the face! A favor for a favor – just like Maino and Murda said on the track! But I got to find out if this Jamaican nigga who's cellies with my old-head had something to do with the robbery first. I want to get him done dirty regardless for what he did to my old-head back in the day. But my first priority is to see how deep this robbery shit goes."

"I feel you," Mannie agreed. "I'm sure my *Tio* will help us figure all this shit out."

"No doubt," Carl added. "Tiny is *that* nigga!"

Meanwhile, back at his office inside his bar on Hunting Park Avenue, Tiny had called a private meeting while Mannie and Carl were visiting the prison.

"Thanks for getting here so quickly," Tiny thanked the two detectives, Earl and Vincent who entered his office. The men had been police officers when they were commissioned by the neighborhood boss to exterminate his

nephews four years prior. Since then, Tiny had used his political connections to reward them by secretly facilitating their promotions to the positions of detective in the Philadelphia Police Department.

“No problem, Tiny,” Earl replied. “Anything for you, boss!”

“So, what’s up?” Vincent asked.

“Well, we might have a problem,” Tiny began. “There’s going to be a war with the Jamaicans.”

“Aw, shit!” Earl exclaimed. “What the fuck happened?”

“You know the young-boy, Carl, Will’s brother, has been working for me, right?” Tiny explained as he gripped a remote control and powered on a flat-screen television affixed to the wall of his opulent office. “Well, two Jamaicans ran in the spot on Sixth and Butler and robbed him. They only got some of his money and pills he’s been abusing. We have to retaliate, though, because that’s *my* spot and I take that as a personal attack. My reputation is on the line.”

“Of course, Tiny,” Vincent nodded. “What do you need us to do?”

“We got the war covered,” Tiny continued as he pressed a button on the remote and a video began to play on the television. “We’re all good with that. I have two problems, though. First, Carl is a great earner, but I learned that I cannot fully trust him. He’s abusing pills, which is why he got robbed in the first place. He hid his drug abuse from me. I have the house under video surveillance. This is the footage.”

“Oh, shit! He left the door wide open!” Earl gasped as the detectives watched the footage along with Tiny.

“Yes. That’s a careless mistake that I cannot afford,” Tiny continued. “As you can see, young Carl could have lost his life. He *would* have lost his life if the orders from the Jamaican boss had not been to spare him for now.”

“Damn, that’s crazy,” Vincent shook his head.

“My second problem,” Tiny continued after turning off the television, “is that young Carl has been inappropriate with my niece who I graciously offered to help nurse both him and his mother back to health. I have love for

C, but I can no longer trust him. I need you two to keep an eye on him for now. Don't do anything other than report any suspicious or reckless activity he may engage in back to me."

"Copy that, boss," Earl immediately agreed.

"Inappropriate behavior with your niece?" Vincent repeated, confused. "You mean, what's her name – Cyndal? The young-boy is fucking your niece or something? I mean, come on, boss! They're young. Are you *really* mad about that?"

Earl shot a perturbed glance at his partner after hearing his insensitive and borderline dangerous comment. Even after all these years working together, there were some things Vincent did not seem to understand about their boss's view of the world. Earl had attempted to explain the dynamics between the members of the Hunting Park neighborhood on numerous occasions over their years working together. Earl had tried to help Vincent to see that although the neighborhood was mostly comprised of Black and Latino people from the same socioeconomic background who coexisted on a surface level; there were cultural differences that kept many of them divided on a deeper, subconscious level. This was something that Vincent, a white man who had experienced a middle-class, sheltered upbringing could not seem to fully grasp.

"Vincent," Tiny calmly addressed the detective. "This is a family matter. I do not expect you to understand. I just expect you to do as I say as long as I continue to pay what I pay. Are we in agreement?"

"Sorry, sir," Vincent nervously replied as he shuffled in his seat. "Yes Tiny. We're on it, boss."

"C and my nephew are on their way back from Graterford with information," Tiny informed the detectives. "I'll find out what they have learned and be in touch with you. In the meantime, just keep track of Carl for me and let me know if he does anything suspicious – in business or in his personal affairs."

"We got you, boss," Earl promptly confirmed.

The men shook hands and the two detectives quickly exited Tiny's office and left the bar.

"Man! Are you fucking slow or something?" Earl huffed as he and Vincent entered their unmarked vehicle which was parked two blocks from Tiny's bar. "Tiny tells us the young-boy is fucking his niece and you act like he's tripping? What the fuck was on your mind? Did you forget who we work for?"

"Look, dude," Vincent arrogantly replied. "My checks come from the PPD, bro! All this shit with Tiny is extra! I know he's the man in these parts, but how long do you think this shit is going to last? Besides, don't you think he's acting kind of crazy? They're young kids. His niece is in her early twenties, right? I mean, if the kid had raped her or something, that would be different. Tiny's acting all jealous just because his worker is getting his dick wet! That's bullshit if you ask me!"

"But he didn't ask you," Earl snidely replied as he drove. "He told us what he wanted us to do. Tiny pays us more in one month than we get paid in a quarter from the Department. You want to fuck that up? Not to mention, Tiny is a stone-cold killer. Besides, he has so much dirt on us – he could get us the fuck out of here any second."

"Yeah... yeah," Vincent jeered. "Stop acting like a pussy! We're killers too, bro! And we got dirt on him too! Don't forget – *we're* the ones with badges and the whole fucking Department behind us!"

"Look, man," Earl shot back. "You need to use your powers of detection to figure out when to shut the fuck up sometimes! Don't forget, Tiny paid us to get his own nephews the fuck out of here! Even if you don't care about your life and your family's future, please do me a favor – next time Tiny tells us to do something, just nod your head, say 'yes Tiny' and do the shit!"

"Whatever, man!" Vincent scoffed as he slumped back in the passenger's seat and glared out the window.

"Whatever? For real?" Earl exploded. "You're acting really tough now, but you bitched up in Tiny's office! Make sure you keep that same energy next time we see him!"

“I’m just saying,” Vincent softened his tone. “I totally get where he’s coming from with the robbery shit. The young-boy shouldn’t be popping pills, leaving the door open. That was dumb as hell! But he’s a teenager and Tiny’s niece is a fine piece of young, Puerto Rican ass! Don’t act like you wouldn’t hit that if you had the chance, bro!”

“Look Vince,” Earl shook his head as he kept his eyes affixed on the road ahead. “You’re my partner, but you’re talking reckless right now, man. I’m not going to have this conversation with you. I said what I said and Tiny said what he said. We have a job to do. I suggest you just focus on that.”

“Whatever, *partner*! Say no more...”

CHAPTER | 4

“**H**ow did your visit go?” Darren asked his cellmate, Rick, later that evening when they returned to their cell after chow. “Who came to visit you?”

“It was cool,” Rick nonchalantly replied as he plopped down onto the bottom bunk in their small cell. “One of my young-boys from my neighborhood slid through to check on me and put a couple dollars on my books. You know, the usual shit. How was your visit?”

“Mine was love,” Darren replied coolly as he squeezed state-issued toothpaste onto his state-issued toothbrush and stared into the cloudy metal mirror of their prison cell. “It was business, as usual.”

“Yeah, I know how you get down,” Rick chuckled. “All business. You be on your shit!”

“Ain’t shit else to do in here after they give a nigga life,” Darren replied after spitting into the metal sink. “I respect that you’ve been on your spiritual shit, trying to stay out the way and all that. I guess that’s some old-head shit. I’m too young for all that, though. Me and my niggas running this shit!”

“Yeah,” Rick hesitated. “I see. On that note – what would I have to do if I was trying to get down with your team?”

“Oh shit!” Darren laughed after rinsing his mouth out and spitting into the sink once more. “Don’t tell me I’ve been a bad influence on you, OG! I thought you were on some positive shit!”

“No doubt,” Rick agreed. “I’m definitely trying to live my life better. But look at where we are. I’m doing a life sentence with no possibility of parole. There’s a limit to how positive I can be! Besides, every time my people put money on my commissary it seems to be less and less,” Rick lied. “My team on the streets is keeping my movements limited and it’s hard to be positive when you’re stuck in survival mode. I got to find a better way, so I’m thinking I need to get down with a winning team. It seems like you and your people might be the answer.”

“Yeah... my squad is definitely winning,” Darren concurred as he climbed onto the top bunk. “We never had a Puerto Rican in the squad as far as I know, though. Fuck it – all Caribbean motherfuckers are originally from Africa anyway! We’re all bredrin at the end of the day, even though the white man has brainwashed us with the evil of his *isms*.’ What you trying to get into Rick?”

“You know I ain’t new to the streets,” Rick proudly replied. “I know how y’all Yardies get down. I know y’all move crazy weight and run down on niggas. I also know you personally got half the Pennsylvania prison system in a choke-hold which is why they keep moving your ass around! I’m just trying to figure out what I can do to be down and make the rest of my time easier. I’m not trying to see my money dry up and have to depend on one of these nut-ass prison jobs to survive! I know you’re a shot-caller, so you can make the decision to let me in the squad if you want to.”

“I feel you,” Darren nodded pensively as he lay on the top bunk, staring at the ceiling. “Well, if you’re going to be down – the first thing you’re going to have to do is study the teachings of the Rastafari. It ain’t just about being Jamaican. You have to know the principals of our spirituality as well.”

“Yeah, I’m with that. That’s not an issue. I ain’t got nothing but time in this motherfucker!”

“Alright, bet,” Darren smiled. “I’ll get you some materials to study. You’re also going to have to put in work to show your loyalty to The Cause – especially since you’re not Jamaican. You’re my cellie and all that, but niggas don’t really know you. You’re going to have to put in some serious work to show you’re really down.”

“I’m with it,” Rick resolutely replied. “Just let me know.”

“Okay, cool.”

“Let me ask you a question,” Rick continued.

“What’s up?”

“You said you’re from Germantown, right?” Rick asked.

“Born and raised – until I got locked up!” Darren chuckled.

“Well, you know, I’m from Hunting Park,” Rick continued. “I know a couple live young-boys from my hood. Hungry motherfuckers who are vicious in the streets. Black dudes. I was thinking – after you see this shit work out with me, maybe you can use them on the streets too.”

“It’s a possibility,” Darren hesitated. “I don’t know, though. I don’t really fuck with Hunting Park niggas.”

“Oh, word?” Rick feigned surprise. “Why not?”

“Remember, I told you why I got life?”

“Yeah,” Rick replied. “You killed your cellie up State Road after you got booked for a DUI and gun charge, right?”

“Facts,” Darren confirmed. “The nigga I poked up was from my hood, but I did it because he got my brother killed behind some bitch-ass Hunting Park niggas. So, I mean... I fuck with you, OG, but fuck *all* the rest of them Hunting Park niggas, for real!”

“Damn, man,” Rick sighed. “That’s how you really feel?”

“Facts!” Darren confirmed from the top bunk. “Look, man. You know I’m connected out there. I heard the niggas who killed my brother got mercked after I got locked up. So, yeah, I killed the wrong nigga. Whatever. Fuck it. If

you know anything about how we get down, then you know when a nigga violates us, we don't stop until we kill *everything* the nigga cares about.”

“Yeah... I've heard that before,” Rick replied.

“So, fuck that pussy-clot nigga I stabbed up State Road and fuck his family who got killed in The Park a year later!” Darren abruptly roared as he jumped from the top bunk in a fervor. “And fuck *any* Hunting Park nigga associated with him who is still breathing Jah's air! And fuck *any* nigga who goes against my crew. The beef ain't over until I say it's over. And trust me, OG – it ain't over! Are you sure you want to get involved in this? Me a swear to God, I'll paint your whole fucking hood red and rain gun shots 'pon 'dem before 'dis a finished, Rick!”

“Look, man.” Rick shrugged. “I'm doing life – Hunting Park ain't my hood anymore. This cell-block is. My family is who I eat with and if you're going to have my back, then my loyalty is to you.”

“Blessings be to Jah!” Darren threw his arms in the air in a celebratory fashion before grabbing Rick's arm and assisting the middle-aged man up from his bunk. “So, it is said, so it shall be done!”

The men shook hands and embraced. Rick was pleased that he had convinced Darren that he was prepared to do whatever was necessary to become a part of the younger man's organization in exchange for money and protection. Rick had promised his allegiance to Darren even though his loyalty truly lied with his neighborhood, his long-time friend and business associate, Tiny and their young mentee, Carl.

The next afternoon, at his earliest opportunity, Rick used a cell phone which had been smuggled into the prison on his behalf to discreetly make a three-way call to Tiny and Carl. Rick waited until his cellmate had exited their cell, then proceeded to call his boss and mentee.

“What's up y'all? You can hear me?” Rick asked quietly.

“Yeah. We're here.” Tiny and Carl replied.

“Yeah, so, I talked to our friend last night after chow,” Rick explained. “He's still mad about Pop's cousin killing his brother. He started snapping about how the beef ain't over until he says it's over and how he's going to

kill everybody in Hunting Park. I definitely think he had something to do with getting Carl robbed.”

“That bitch-ass Yardie!” Carl fumed.

“Calm down, C,” Tiny calmly instructed. “That’s good you got the information, Rick. So, he obviously trusts you.”

“No doubt,” Rick confidently replied. “I lied and told him my commissary is drying up and I need to get down with a stronger team. He said I need to study Rastafarianism and all that, but he said he’s going to have me put in work to prove my loyalty. I got him right where I want him.”

“Good shit, OG!” Carl excitedly replied.

“So, how should I handle this shit?” Rick asked.

“What do you mean, ‘how should you handle it?’ Kill that nigga!” Carl snapped.

“No disrespect, young C,” Rick calmly responded. “But I wasn’t asking you. What do you say, boss?”

“What do you mean, ‘you weren’t asking me?’” Carl rebuffed. “I already told you the deal when I drove up there yesterday!”

“C, calm down,” Tiny calmly instructed. “Rick. You said he is still upset about what Will and Pop did years ago and is threatening to wreak havoc on the neighborhood?”

“Si, jefe.”

“You also say you believe this man is responsible for the robbery?”

“Si, jefe.”

“And you truly believe you have gained his trust and can handle this situation without compromising everything else we have going on?”

“*Si, jefe*. You already know how I get down,” Rick confidently replied.

“Then, go ahead,” Tiny calmly instructed. “We need to nip this in the bud before he brings war to our neighborhood. You have a green light.”

“Like I said – kill that nigga!” Carl aggressively repeated.

“I’m on it, ASAP, y’all. I’ll let you know how it goes.”

“Bet!” Carl excitedly replied. “Good looking, OG!”

“You already know, young-boy,” Rick replied with a smile in his voice.

“Thank you for handling this before it gets out of hand,” Tiny continued.

“Be safe, my friend.”

“*Si, jefe.*” Rick replied. He then disconnected the call before dumping the phone into the water inside his cell’s commode, destroying it.

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CHAPTER | 5

During the course of the following two weeks, Rick studied the Rastafari books and other study materials Darren provided him. Rick was determined to convince Darren that he was completely committed to “The Cause” in every way. Rick basically shadowed Darren, following both his workout regimen and his routine of spiritual study and worship. Rick could not help but notice the hypocrisy of the Jamaican man who practiced a form of spirituality which stressed peace and oneness with nature and all creation while simultaneously trafficking narcotics in the prisons and the outside world and ordering robberies and murders of his rivals and former associates who had betrayed “The Cause.”

“So, did you decide what mission I need to go on to earn my position?” Rick discreetly asked Darren early one morning as they made their way to the chow line.

“Yeah,” Darren concisely replied. “I’ll talk to you about it when we get back to our hut.”

About an hour passed and the men returned to their cell after chow and shower time had been completed.

“So, here’s the deal,” Darren began as he stood across from Rick who sat upright on his bottom bunk. “There’s a member of the crew who just got football numbers because his dumb-ass got caught with some dope. Niggas piss me off, bredrin! We have a system because it works. Niggas think they’re clever, start cutting corners and wind up getting locked up. This dummy got caught with eight keys of dog-food.”

“*Ay Dios mio!*” Rick exclaimed.

“I know, right?” Darren sighed. “So, this motherfucker gets sentenced to 35-70 years for being sloppy. Then I find out that as soon as he got up here, he asked to talk to somebody about cooperating to get his sentenced reduced.

He’s a young-boy, only like twenty-one. I guess the time he spent in the County combined with the reality of touching down Upstate got him scared.”

“Aw, shit!” Rick exclaimed, shaking his head in disapproval. “That’s no good.”

“No, it’s not,” Darren agreed. “That’s why you’re going to kill him and prove your loyalty to our cause at the same damn time. Two birds – one stone.”

“Bet!” Rick excitedly replied. “When and how do you want me to do it?”

“Tonight, after lights-out,” Darren explained. “I paid one of the C.O.s. He’s going to let me into the young-boy’s cell. Another one of my guys is going to meet us in there to help and to be a witness that you ended the snitch. We’re going to tie him up, gag him and poke him full of holes. Then we’re going to gouge his eyes out, cut out his tongue and cut his ears off.”

“Damn, cellie!” Rick gasped. “You want me to do all that?”

“So, it is said, so it shall be done,” Darren solemnly confirmed. “We need to send a message. In this Family, if you share what you see, or hear, you will see, hear or speak no more. Betrayal is punishable by death.”

“Sounds about right,” Rick nodded. “Snitches get stitches, except he ain’t going to live long enough to get those!”

“He’ll probably receive stitches, but he’ll be dead already,” Darren continued matter-of-factly. “The coroner will have to stitch his carcass up for his funeral if his family doesn’t want to have him cremated.”

“Yeah,” Rick hesitated as he shifted uneasily on his bunk. “Yeah, I guess that makes sense.”

“Of course, it does,” Darren coldly replied as he stared directly into his cellmate’s pupils. “He knew the oath he took when he joined our Family. Now you do too. Are you sure this is what you want to do with your life?”

“Yeah, man,” Rick gulped. “I’m down, brother.”

“So, it is said, so it shall be done!” Darren exclaimed as he vigorously shook Rick’s hand, pulled him from the bottom bunk and embraced the man. “I promise you, after tonight, you will never have to stress about your life in this place again.”

Later that night the correctional officers called “lights-out” and powered down the lights in the cells and day room. Approximately thirty minutes later, Darren and Rick stirred in their cell as a face appeared in the plated glass window. The correctional officer flashed a light through the window three times before quickly walking away.

“It’s about that time,” Darren sighed mechanically as he swiftly jumped down from his bunk. “Grab the sheets off your bed. We’re going to use them to tie the nigga up and gag him.”

“I got you,” Rick quickly complied as he rose from the bottom bunk and gathered the sheets from his thin mattress. “Let me grab my shank too.”

“Naw, you can leave yours. I got a special jawn for you to use,” Darren instructed as he revealed an eight-inch, home-made dagger which flashed in the dark as the metal reflected the dim light which shone through the jail cell window.

“Damn!” Rick exclaimed apprehensively in the darkness. “You really want me to poke some serious holes in this motherfucker, huh?”

“Me na’ play games if it’s not chess, bredrin,” Darren replied with a smirk, his white teeth glistening in the darkness. “I’ll give you the shank when we get in there. Let’s go.”

Darren slowly led the way through the open cell door as the two men crept along the row of cells to the steps leading to the top tier. They slowly and quietly tip-toed up the grated, steel steps. Darren gripped the long metal instrument and a weaponless Rick followed closely behind with his bed sheets in hand.

The men approached another open cell and Darren stood aside and motioned for Rick to enter before him. Rick’s heart raced and he began to sweat profusely as he contemplated the gruesome nature of the murder he was set to commit. Rick hesitated and panted heavily as he began to experience spotty flashback of murdering his son-in-law with a switch-blade. Darren noticed the older man’s hesitation and motioned to him in the darkness. When Rick failed to immediately comply, Darren spoke up.

“Get the fuck in there!” Darren whispered fiercely as he firmly placed his hand on Rick’s shoulder and applied pressure. “It’s too late to turn back now, bredrin.”

“M-m-my fault,” Rick stuttered as he attempted to regain his composure and stepped foot inside the cell.

“Darren, can I get the shank?” Rick whispered in the darkness; his hand extended behind him. The prisoner took two more steps and leaned over the bottom bunk. He squinted in the darkness and reached around, patting the mattress before realizing the bunk was empty. Before the middle-aged, career criminal had fully backed away from his position crouched under the top bunk, he felt two large, strong hands clutch his biceps from behind.

Darren’s associate, a large, muscular Jamaican man who stood six-feet, eight-inches tall, used his youth, size and strength to quickly overpower an unsuspecting Rick. The man used brute force to grab Rick around the arms and thrust his entire body behind him, lengthwise, against the cinderblock wall on the opposite side of the cell. Rick soared through the air like a discarded child’s toy; his body colliding against the hard surface violently, knocking the wind out of him and cracking his bones. The back of Rick’s head smacked against the wall, dazing the already physically shaken man.

Darren’s enforcer, who had been waiting in his cell for their arrival, used his vice-like grip to hoist Rick off the ground; restraining him in a choke-hold which restricted the movement in Rick’s arms, head, shoulders and neck. Darren slowly approached Rick as the large man held the older man in the air – his arms stretched above his head; his feet suspended several inches above the ground.

“You thought I was slow, huh, Rick?” Darren smirked devilishly as beams of moonlight which peeked through the small cell window reflected off his pearly teeth. “You thought I didn’t know what you were up to?”

“I – I – I,” Rick stuttered as he gasped for air and struggled to remain conscious.

“Shut the fuck up!” Darren hissed as he tore off Rick’s shoes and socks and shoved the man’s own footwear into his mouth, gagging him. “Bitch-ass, Hunting Park motherfucker! I told you I’ll kill *all* y’all!”

Darren then used the sheets Rick had removed from his own bunk to hog-tie his former cell-mate as the large enforcer restrained a barely conscious, unresistant Rick.

“You were marked from the start, OG,” Darren chuckled quietly in the darkness as whispers and shuffling sounds emanated from the dark cell. “You don’t even know how deep this shit goes. I run shit in these parts. I had them put me in the cell with you when I got transferred over here, nigga! I’ve *been* on your top!”

Rick’s eyes grew large with fear as Darren and his soldier strung the battered man up between the bunks.

“There wasn’t ever no rat, bredrin. My team is too tight for that,” Darren whispered as he quietly cackled manically and ran the blade of the shank along Rick’s trembling, perspiring face. Without warning, Darren slowly inserted an inch of the crude blade into Rick’s cheek, causing the man to utter a muffled, but hideous, blood-curdling scream.

“The fate of the fictitious rat is reserved for you,” Darren continued, whispering slightly louder in a weak attempt to disguise Rick’s screams.

Darren was not truly concerned whether or not anybody heard what he did to Rick. Darren had paid off the proper authorities and had free reign of the cell block that night and in general. Darren was also not worried about any other inmates retaliating on Rick’s behalf. Due to his relatively reserved, peaceful way of living since entering prison, Darren was confident that Rick’s legacy would die with him with no immediate retaliation.

“I’ve killed every one of my cellmates since I was sentenced to life. That’s the real reason they keep moving me around. Your pussy-clot boss should have done his homework on me before you tried to come for me.”

Darren spent the following twenty minutes administering the very same torture tactics he had detailed to Rick earlier that morning. The only difference was that instead of the “snitch” from Darren’s fabricated tale, Rick was the recipient of the gruesome mutilation and slow, painful death.

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