



# *The Prodigal Son*

BOOK ONE

*J. Cerrone*

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J. Cerrone

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

**Content Warning:**

The language and contents of this book can be described as “mature,” and will no doubt be considered offensive by some readers. This includes foul language, violence and sex between minors, use of certain ethnic slurs and other graphic content. I have included this content because it is integral to the story. I would like to remind critics that, for some time, J.D. Salinger’s “The Catcher in the Rye” was considered controversial and banned in the United States of America due to its content. It is now revered as ground-breaking, classic, American literature and is part of my own personal collection. Some may not consider “The Catcher in the Rye” to be in the same genre as “The Prodigal Son.” However, “The Prodigal Son” is a coming of age story, much like “The Catcher in the Rye.” I feel it necessary to also make note of some authors I hold in the highest regard and who share my genre and ethnic background, such as Donald Goines, Walter Dean Myers and Iceberg Slim. It is my hope that “The Prodigal Son” and all my subsequent books will one day, along with the writings of my melanated predecessors and contemporaries, be widely accepted as Great American Literature. With that said, I sincerely hope you thoroughly enjoy reading this book, and every book I publish successively. – J. Cerrone

**Dedications:**

To my son, Alonzo. Everything I do is with you in mind. I love you more than you will ever know.

To the select few people, living and deceased, who have always loved and supported me without ulterior motives. You are deeply loved and greatly appreciated.

**R.I.P.** – Grannydad, Grandma, Auntie Brenda, Matt Dicks, Tim Dicks, Larry Dicks, Teagle, my big homey D from Harlem, all the fallen soldiers from the old Harlem squad, and everybody else who left this plane(t) too soon but died with honor and loyalty in your hearts... I miss y’all and will never forget you.





# Part 1: Roots

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(Early 80s - Early 90s)

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# Introduction...

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“Hey, yo! Nigger!” Two short, very light-skinned, almost Italian-looking, Puerto-Rican teenagers called out to me as I walked home from school alone. I was attempting to mind my own business on that relatively warm, autumn day, but it didn’t seem to be working very well.

“Hey little nigger!” the shorter of the two called out to me again from behind. “You heard us calling you!”

About two minutes prior, when I initially walked past the teenagers, I noticed they had whispered something to each other. I heard them whisper, but didn’t know what they said because they had done so in Spanish. Now they were following me and calling me a “nigger,” so I assumed whatever they had said was about me and was not complimentary. I ignored them and continued on my way. I had been walking home from elementary school, on the South Side of Chicago, and was less than five minutes from home at that point. I had already passed the areas where the crossing guards were stationed in the neighborhood, and it was odd to me that my neighborhood seemed so deserted and quiet on such a nice day.

“Go ahead with all that!” I snapped back at them after they called out to me. I thought it was strange that there were two young, Puerto-Rican guys in my neighborhood because it was a predominantly Black area. Another factor which caused me some confusion was how they were starting a problem with a lone six-year-old kid when they must have been at least thirteen or fourteen-years-old themselves. What really alarmed me was the fact that the shorter of the two was brandishing a full-size wooden baseball bat, a “Louisville Slugger™,” as they followed me and called me a “little nigger.”

They didn’t “belong” in my neighborhood at all. We lived on the South Side of Chicago, on Carpenter Street, near the Dan Ryan Expressway. When I say, “we lived in a predominantly Black neighborhood,” I only use the term “predominantly” because I’m sure there were *some* non-Black residents – I just didn’t personally know of any. The fact that these two older Puerto-Rican guys were harassing me and that one of them was brandishing a

baseball bat really made me uneasy. Naturally, I tried to act tough, like it didn't bother me, hoping my act would deter them from further antagonizing me.

“Yo!” I snapped at them with my young, high-pitched, slightly raspy, voice. “Why don’t y’all just go back to your hood with that? I ain’t even paying y’all no mind!”

There had to be a reason why they would come over here starting trouble. The closest Latino neighborhood was a good distance away by car or bus, and Chicago was full of gangs. I suppose there were other Spanish gang members not too far away who would provide backup if they deemed it necessary; but the Black gangs in my neighborhood would literally tear these two kids apart if they caught them out here starting trouble.

My neighbor, Bobby, lived two doors down with his grandparents, just like I did. The only difference was that I also lived with my mother and my little sister. Bobby’s mother was a crack-head and was nowhere to be found, so his grandparents spoiled him rotten. He received all the toys, video games and candy he wanted, and he was allowed to stay home from school whenever he wanted to; even when his grandmother knew he was faking sick. Well, today, I was about to get my head busted open and Bobby was at home, “playing hookie,” probably stuffing his fat face with candy and playing Atari!

“Yo, little nigger... come here! We just want to talk to you,” the taller of the two called out behind me as they started to follow me.

I looked over my shoulder and began to walk faster when I noticed that they increased their stride and tried to catch up to me. My heart beat faster but I didn’t want to run and appear afraid. I knew these two guys definitely did not want to “just talk” to me. I resisted the urge to run and attempted to walk just fast enough to match their increased pace and maintain the distance between us.

“Yo! I *said* go ahead with all that!” I sharply replied.

I quickly walked down the block, my backpack leaping up and down. My grandparents’ house was about a block and a half away, and if I could make it to my block; my grandfather would see me and come to my rescue. He had

a house full of guns and I was confident he would shoot both of these kids on sight when he realized they were threatening me. Everybody who didn't already know, would learn that you should never to mess with Jackson Cyrus Simmons.

Of course, it didn't turn out that way. I remember hearing the two kids' voices draw closer, very close, behind me, as I turned down the block and saw the house of a neighbor who babysat me on a regular basis. I realized it would be better for me to try to make it to her house first, instead of trying to make it all the way to my grandparents' house. As I rushed up the lawn of my babysitter's house, I heard it one last time...

"Yo, nigger!"

I knew I should not even turn around, but some instinct in me made me do it. I felt blood rush into my face for a fraction of a second.

Then I saw darkness.

The next thing I remember was being in the passenger seat of my grandfather's car. The seat was fully reclined and he was holding a rag to my head with his right hand as he gripped the steering wheel with his left.

"My main-man," he said as he noticed that I had momentarily regained consciousness. "Which hospital do you want to go to? You want to go to the closest one, or the one that your mother works at?"

"I want to go to the one where Mommy works, please," I managed to blurt out weakly before the image of my grandfather's concerned face turned into darkness and I slipped back into unconsciousness.

I had been on my way home from grade school. I was barely six years old.

# Chapter 1...

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Please allow me to formally introduce myself. My name is Jackson Cyrus Simmons. My family either refers to me as “Jackson” or “Jax” – that is, when they’re not busy pretending I don’t exist. I’ll go into further detail later.

I was introduced to this world when I touched down in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on a cold day in early-November. I was born in the early nineteen-eighties; early during the presidency of Ronald Reagan. Have you ever heard of “Reaganomics?” If not, I won’t bore you with a history lesson, but you can easily research it online or at your local library if you have access to either. To put it simply, President Reagan’s policies had an extremely detrimental effect on the economy and were especially harmful to Black and brown Americans. My family was no exception.

My parents met while working together at a hospital in suburban Philadelphia. My father is originally from New York City. He was born in Harlem and raised in Jamaica, Queens. My mother, on the other hand, was born in Detroit, Michigan and raised in Chicago, Illinois. Coincidentally, they both moved to Philly in the same year – 1979.

They moved to Philly for different reasons, but their motivation was the same. They were both looking for a change and attempting to escape their pasts. My father, Lorenzo Simmons, decided to move to West Philly because his mother had moved there a few years prior. My mother, Diane Jenkins, moved to Philly because she was trying to decide between relocating to Philly or Atlanta. She had friends in both cities, but initially took a liking to Philly when she visited. My mother had broken off her engagement to be married before she moved, so she arrived to the city as a single, “not-so-ready-to-mingle,” young nurse.

My father moved into a house his mother owned, which was divided into a triplex. It was in a West Philadelphia neighborhood nick-named “The Bottom,” which is near the Philadelphia Zoo. My father, who is a few years younger than my mother was “ready-to-mingle.” His only problem was; he

*was not* single! Long-story-short, my grandmother had left my father the house in Queens when she moved to West Philly to marry her second husband. Lorenzo lived there with his first wife, whom he had married about a year after graduating high school, shortly after they had a baby girl together. The house eventually caught fire, so the three of them moved from New York into one of the apartments in my grandmother's house in West Philly.

Lorenzo and Diane met while working at a mental hospital – yes; a psychiatric ward! I need to clarify that they both were *employed* there, not admitted as patients. Lorenzo was an orderly, and Diane was a nurse. Lorenzo was tall – about six-feet, six-inches in height, dark-brown-skinned with a beard, earrings, a couple discreet tattoos and an athletic build. At first glance, he was not Diane's "type," in her private opinion. She never liked "street-guys," didn't typically entertain younger men and had been engaged to a doctor before breaking off the relationship and moving to Philly. However, Diane, who is very light-skinned and had a preference for darker-skinned men; was attracted to Lorenzo, so after repeated attempts to strike up casual conversation with her at work, she eventually gave him the time of day.

Sounds like a pretty decent love story so far, right? But you might have forgotten about the fact that Lorenzo was still unhappily married, and living with his wife and baby daughter in the third-floor apartment of his mother's house. So basically, the way the story was relayed to me, before my parents became my parents, they mostly interacted at work and went on occasional dates. My mother lived in Northeast Philadelphia at the time. My father lived in West Philly, worked at the hospital and was also a deejay at parties and clubs on the weekends. Between his busy schedule and having a toddler at home, he had plenty of excuses not to be able to see his new love interest outside of work very often. As they drew closer over the following months, Diane began to wonder why Lorenzo had never invited her over to his place and she eventually questioned him about it.

"Oh, Diane," Lorenzo told her. "You know I would, but I see how you are. You have a nice place, you're a nurse, you're going back to school, you have a good head on your shoulders and you're focused. And to be honest, I live in a really bad neighborhood and I'm embarrassed to bring you over there. I don't even like living there myself. The neighborhood is all tore up... I even

have roaches in my house. I can't seem to get rid of them no matter how often I clean and use boric acid! It's so frustrating. I really hate it there!"

Lorenzo wasn't lying about how bad the neighborhood was and his feelings regarding his living conditions. Diane was indeed a focused career woman in her mid-twenties. And although she was raised in tough neighborhoods on the West Side and South Side of Chicago, she was slightly "uppity" and fairly judgmental about neighborhoods and people's living conditions now that she was an adult and earned decent money of her own. But she liked Lorenzo. She liked him a lot.

"Zo, you don't have to be embarrassed with me," Diane attempted to reassure him. "I don't care about that. I want you to be comfortable with me. I care about you. That's why I let you come to my place. Now I want to see where you live."

"Uh... I appreciate that. I care about you too. But I don't know babe," Lorenzo objected. "I'm really not trying to bring you to the gutter. You deserve better than that! I'd rather wait until I can get my money up and move to a better neighborhood before we start spending time at my place."

Remember when I told you my mother is a nurse? I might not have mentioned that she is a nurse practitioner. She obtained her Master's degree and graduated with a very high grade-point average. She was an intelligent young woman, but people often ignore things that are right in front of them because it makes them feel better not to admit the truth to themselves. This was obviously a case in which she chose to do just that. My mother was suffering from cognitive dissonance. Any woman in her mid-twenties who had already been engaged, had graduated college and gone back to receive her Master's degree and who was smart and independent enough to successfully move eight-hundred miles from Chicago to Philly by herself should have realized that something about her boyfriend's story wasn't adding up. Six months into their relationship, the truth came out.

"Pssshhhhhh!" Lorenzo sighed as he placed his face in his palms while sitting down across from Diane during their lunch break one day at work.

"What's wrong, lover?" Diane asked, rubbing his hand. "I was wondering why I didn't hear from you this weekend. Is everything okay?"

“Naw. Not really,” Lorenzo confessed, barely able to make eye-contact with his girlfriend.

“What’s wrong, Zo? You can talk to me about anything.”

“Yeah, that’s what you say now!” Lorenzo chuckled in a vain attempt to mask his anxiety. “Trust me... you don’t want to hear about this!”

“Try me,” Diane said compassionately as she grabbed her man’s hands and held them tightly. “I’m here for you babe.”

“Well, Diane,” the young man hesitated. “I haven’t been completely honest with you since we started seeing each other.”

“What do you mean by that?” Diane asked as her expression changed and she loosened her grip on her boyfriend’s hands. “Honest about what?”

“I don’t know where to start,” Lorenzo stuttered.

“How about you start with the truth?” Diane stated calmly while pulling away from Lorenzo.

“Diane, babe. I really care about you.”

“Yeah, okay,” Diane rolled her eyes as she folded her arms across her chest and sat rigidly in her chair. “You really care about me... ‘but?!’”

“This is really hard for me. Please bear with me...”

“Boy, if you don’t just spit it out!” the irritated young woman interrupted impatiently. “Lunch break is only a half-hour so I really don’t have time for all this! If you’re breaking up with me, just let me know. It won’t be the end of the world! My goodness!”

“Diane, please calm down. I’m not breaking up with you,” Lorenzo petitioned.

“Oh, I’m calm,” Diane replied coldly as she switched to defense-mode. “I’m just too grown for whatever games you’re trying to play!”

“Okay, look,” Lorenzo began while trying to take Diane’s hands in his. She resisted as he began his confession. “I’m married.”

“You’re *what*?” Diane’s lips quivered as her eyes filled with tears. “You’re kidding me, right?”

“No, unfortunately not,” Lorenzo continued. “We’ve been miserable since before we moved to Philly but we have the baby and I couldn’t leave them stranded in New York after my house burnt down. But it’s over now.”

“Oh, I see! So that’s the real reason you never invited me over!” Diane snapped. “What do you mean, ‘it’s over now?’ You magically got divorced over the weekend? That’s why I didn’t hear from you? You were too busy getting divorced? Or were you busy making love to your wife? Or were you busy with some other dumb heifer who believed your lies?”

“Diane, please calm down,” Lorenzo pleaded. “I’m sorry I hurt you. I know you’re upset...”

“Hurt? Upset? Boy please! I’m just angry at myself for believing your dumb lies and wasting my time with somebody like you!”

“Diane, babe...”

“‘Babe?’” Diane interrupted. “You’re really calling me ‘babe’ when you have a whole family at home? You make me sick!”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you,” Lorenzo interjected. “We broke up for good this time. They moved back to Queens over the weekend.”

“Just like that, huh?” Diane replied skeptically. “They just moved back to New York over the weekend for no reason?”

“Naw... not for no reason,” Lorenzo hesitated.

“I’m done,” Diane snapped as she slid back in her chair and started to get up from the table.

“Diane, please just listen to me,” Lorenzo begged as he rose from his seat and gently grabbed Diane’s hand. “I’ll tell you everything. I don’t want to lose you.”

“Fine! Make it quick!” Diane commanded with tears in her eyes.

The two sat back down and Lorenzo paused for a moment before mustering up the courage to tell his girlfriend what had transpired. He went



into the details about how although he had grown to care deeply for her, he still spent time with his wife and daughter when he wasn't spending time with Diane, working at the hospital, making money as a deejay or in the recording studio making music. He also confessed that although he was truly unhappy in his relationship with his wife and felt as if he was in a loveless marriage, there were occasions since he had been seeing Diane romantically when he had been sexually intimate with his wife. The roller coaster of his relationship with his wife had culminated in a heated argument over the previous weekend in which she had revealed to him that she had been pregnant but secretly had an abortion because she did not want to remain married to Lorenzo. In addition, she revealed that she decided she wanted to move back to Queens and was now pursuing a lesbian lifestyle. The shock of being told that his wife was leaving him, had "switched teams" and had aborted their unborn child all at once was too much for Lorenzo to handle. He was already under the influence of a mixture of marijuana and powder cocaine, and the hurtful news, along with the blow to his ego caused him to lose control. Lorenzo and his soon-to-be-ex-wife were involved in a physical altercation which resulted in her immediately taking their young daughter and moving back to New York to live with her mother.

"I don't even know what to say, Lorenzo," Diane's voice cracked as she shook her head in disbelief.

"I know. I know. I'm so sorry for lying to you," Lorenzo apologized profusely. "I never meant to hurt you. I just felt like my back was against the wall and I didn't know what to do because I didn't want to lose my daughter. But I did anyway. I can't stand to lose you too."

"This is unbelievable!" Diane sighed as she fought back tears. "I really can't..."

"Please don't make a decision now, Diane," Lorenzo interjected. "Please just think about if you can forgive me and if we can move past this. I promise if you can find a way to forgive me, I'll make it up to you and you won't regret it."

"I don't know how you plan on doing that!" Diane snapped.

“Diane,” Lorenzo stated as he took Diane’s hands in his and looked her squarely in her eyes. “You’re only going to find out if you give me another chance. I believe things happened this way for a reason. I love you and I’ll prove it to you. I believe you love me too. Let’s not throw it away because I made some dumb decisions. We can move on from here and things will be so much better now if you’re willing to try. I’ll never lie to you again. Will you just take some time and think about it? Please?”

“I guess,” Diane stated coldly as she pulled her hands from Lorenzo’s grasp, got up from the table and quickly walked away.

Diane attempted to be strong and resist the urge to allow her emotions to control her actions and decisions. She did her best to avoid Lorenzo for the following week and to keep their conversation at work to a minimum. But she truly had fallen in love with Lorenzo over the preceding six months. She eventually broke down and allowed him back into her life. Lorenzo and Diane became an official couple and were free to behave as they wished now that Lorenzo and his wife were no longer together.

Shortly thereafter, Lorenzo and his daughter’s mother finalized their divorce. Lorenzo eventually regained Diane’s trust, and over time, their relationship grew stronger. Unfortunately, things weren’t always easy. They were raised differently, and it showed in their relationship. They loved each other nonetheless. Besides, no relationship is perfect.

As a nurse practitioner, Diane was very knowledgeable in the medical field. When her gynecologist told her that she wasn’t able to become pregnant through conventional means due to a hereditary medical condition, she wasn’t really fazed by it. She was still in school, working to get her second Master’s Degree and she wasn’t married yet. Being raised Catholic, she wasn’t planning on having children until after she was married.

One day, after Diane and Lorenzo had been an official couple for some time, Diane began complaining about being sick to her stomach. She thought she was constipated, so she bought some laxatives and tried to “handle her business.” The laxatives didn’t work. She was sick for days, and she could not understand why.

“Maybe you’re pregnant,” Lorenzo suggested one night, while Diane was complaining about how she still felt so sick, but couldn’t use the bathroom.

“You know that’s not possible,” Diane replied matter-of-factly.

“Yeah, I know what the doctor said, but I also know how women act when they’re pregnant, and I think you might be pregnant.”

After some coaxing, Lorenzo was able to convince his girlfriend to take a pregnancy test. They learned that Diane *was*, in fact, pregnant with yours truly. That’s when Diane and Lorenzo became my parents.

On another note: isn’t it kind of messed up, how my mother was trying to shit me out? She didn’t know any better, but my mother literally thought I was a piece of shit! Now that I think about it, that actually explains a lot of what has transpired since then. But I’m getting ahead of myself....

To be totally honest, my personality was historically what some people in my past have described as a “walking time-bomb.” I don’t necessarily agree with that, but I do acknowledge that I have a complex personality. I hope my story is able to reveal exactly just what makes this “walking time-bomb” tick and help others with similar personalities and circumstances avoid making the same mistakes I have made.

## Chapter 2...

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Let's fast-forward a little bit. Initially, my parents did not live together. When I was about six months old, my mother's younger sister, my Auntie Bella, moved from Chicago to Philly to live with my mother and me. At this point, the only family I had in Pennsylvania were my parents, my aunt and my grandmother – my father's mother. I was very close to the four primary adults in my life. My older, half-sister, Journe', still lived with her mother and cousins in Saint Albans, Queens, New York City. The rest of my mother's family still lived in Chicago.

My parents married a couple of years after I was born. About eight and a half months after my parents were married, my younger sister, Eva, was born. I was proud to be an older brother, and that's when I actively took on the role of protector of every female I care about.

Things were okay for a while. We moved around the city – West Philly, Northeast Philly, Germantown and other sections of the city and suburbs. My father was still spinning records at clubs and parties with my "uncle," and they used to play music and make songs in the small studio my father had set up in our apartment.

I forgot to introduce you to my Uncle Vernon. He wasn't my father's blood brother, but they had grown up together since my father had moved from Harlem to Queens as a child. When my father was about seven years old, his parents split and eventually divorced. He didn't see his father for about ten years and he and his two older sisters were raised solely by my grandmother after his father left. Vernon was the closest thing my father had to a brother; so much so, that I didn't even realize we weren't actually blood-related until I was older than I would like to admit!

A few years passed and my father was hired to work for a company where he was responsible for taking care of adults with "intellectual developmental disabilities;" formerly referred to as "severe mental retardation." The patients, who were referred to as "clients," lived in an apartment complex.

We eventually moved there and my parents didn't have to pay any rent while my father had that job.

My father and my Uncle Vernon were deejaying at parties and clubs and making music in the apartment, but some of the neighbors complained to the management about the loud music. Management threatened to evict us from the apartment if the noise complaints continued. My father was going to lose his job if we were evicted.

"This is bullshit!" My father complained as he exhaled a cloud of marijuana smoke and passed the joint to Vernon. "Where are we going to make music?"

My uncle still lived in Jamaica, Queens but he would come to Philly often to visit and handle other business and personal affairs. My father would also take me with him to New York regularly, which had become my second home.

"Well, Zo," my Uncle Vernon, an auto mechanic by day, replied, "Since you don't have to pay rent, we can open up a studio, and split the rent there. We can use some of the doe we get from these parties."

My father agreed. They found a spot in the Germantown section of Philadelphia; right on Germantown Avenue, where it intersects with Johnson Street. It was an ideal setup because there was a one-bedroom apartment attached to the back of the studio which was included in the rent. They rented that apartment to a single, young woman. The rent she paid my father and uncle covered their rent for the entire property, so they only had to come up with the money for the utilities each month.

So, that's how it began. My father worked at night, and he would take me with him to the studio almost daily. I loved being in there with him and my Uncle Vernon. At first, my father and uncle just opened the studio so they could make music and try to "cut a record" for themselves. It was a high-traffic location in Germantown, however, and guys started stopping in and asking them how much it would cost to record. My father and my Uncle Vern decided to start letting other people record in their studio for a fee. At that tender, preschool age, I officially fell in love with that environment.

This was the mid-1980s, and rap and hip-hop was becoming really popular – bigger than disco and all the other music that had been the most popular at the time. At least, it was bigger in the Black and brown neighborhoods. So naturally, most of the younger guys in the hood who didn't want a regular job, couldn't sing well, weren't good at sports and didn't want to sell drugs aspired to become rappers. With all these young people coming into the studio, willing to pay money to record music, my father and my uncle thought it was a good idea to start producing and eventually put together the funds necessary to start their own independent production company and record label. If Russell Simmons, a brother about the same age as them, who grew up about ten minutes away from them, could do it, why couldn't they?

The only problem was – my father had family and financial responsibilities, so he didn't really have much disposable income to invest. The young dudes who came into the studio to record music had plenty of extra money, though. If my father charged them sixty dollars for a few hours of recording, these young guys; some as young as seventeen years old, would pull out knots of bills wrapped in rubber bands – ten-dollar bills, twenty-dollar bills and higher. You may be wondering where teenagers got money like that. It was the mid-eighties and Reaganomics had ushered in the crack-cocaine era. Some people were making money from selling weed, but the highly-paid, or, “paid-in-full,” inner-city youngsters were selling crack.

After a while it got to the point where most of the people who were recording were hustlers. Some people were just struggling artists, who spent a portion of their paychecks to try to record a single, but most of those types of guys were R&B singers; you know, Prince and Michael Jackson wannabes.

Most of the musicians who were regulars in the studio were the drug dealers and hustlers who had become part-time rappers. They strolled into the studio with plenty of cash, blunts or rolling papers, their assortment of drugs, their guns and their thick neighborhood groupies. I, being the naturally-corrupt-from-the-womb-type of person that I am, loved it! Of course, at that young, preschool-age, I didn't realize all that was involved. Honestly, though, what pre-school-aged little boy wouldn't love hanging out with his

father all day, listening to music, while seemingly cool, young gangsters came through with beautiful hood-chicks who gave me attention, hugged and kissed this “cute little boy,” while placing me on their laps?

I never saw my father doing anything inappropriate, as far as his relationship with my mother was concerned; you know, cheating on her, or anything like that. I did previously mention, however, the circumstances in which my parents’ relationship began. In addition, my father was from the streets. Being involved in a certain element often puts a person in the position to engage in less-than-ideal behavior – especially for a married man with young children. I don’t know everything that happened back then, but I know enough – maybe too much. My father did his fair share of hustling, and at the time, he and my uncle would get high with the hustlers; and without them too. My father was never a heavy drinker, but he loved smoking weed. Being that he was a musician in the eighties, who grew up in New York City in the sixties and seventies, during the “Super-Fly” era, he did his fair share of snorting cocaine as well. My mother knew this, and this caused a lot of problems between them. Well, it was *one* of the things that caused problems between them.

One day my mother stopped by the studio; I assume unexpectedly. I guess she didn’t like what she saw because she snatched me out of there and said a couple of “choice words” to my father before we left and went home. I was about five years old. Later that evening, when my father arrived home, they started arguing. I guess my mother just kept thinking about whatever it was she was mad about for the hours until my father came home. When he arrived, she unloaded on him. That was a bad night. I will never forget that night. I don’t remember all of the dialogue. I don’t remember exactly how it started. I will relate to you some of what I do recall.

There was an extreme amount of yelling! We were in the apartment, and my baby sister and I were sitting on the sofa. She was barely two years old and she was crying because of our parents’ arguing, so I was holding her in my lap. I remember my father saying something to my mother but I don’t remember what he said. Whatever it was, it made my mother even angrier, and apparently, she couldn’t believe what she heard.

“I *beg* your pardon?” she asked, screaming, with her hands on her hips.

“What the fuck did you say to me?” my father asked, stepping closer to my mother, menacingly.

Like I mentioned before, my father is about six-feet, six inches tall, and was about two hundred and seventy-five pounds at the time. On the other hand, my mother is about five-feet, eight inches tall; substantially smaller than my father. She is a medium build, and she was even thinner back then. But she didn't seem to be intimidated by my father. I guess she didn't have any reason to be. He had never hit her. He was raised by a single mother and two older sisters. He was raised not to hit women.

In any event, my mother repeated herself, this time with even more attitude than the first.

“I *said*, ‘I beg your pardon!’”

I am fully aware of the fact that being under the influence can make people more easily agitated, but I never would have thought those four words would have made my father so angry. I'll never forget what happened next.

“Who the fuck do you think you're talking to?” he screamed. “I'm not your fucking son! ‘I beg your pardon?’ You must have lost your goddamn mind, talking to me like I'm a little mother-fucking boy!”

I had never seen my father that angry before; I mean he was literally foaming at the mouth. The only occasion that was comparable in my young mind was the time when we pulled up to the studio and a man he was supposed to be friends with was trying to steal his studio equipment. My father hurt him pretty badly. He beat him up, gripped him by his collar, and then forcibly held the man against the hot radiator until it had seared the flesh on his traitorous, thieving back.

I had never witnessed my father get so upset with my mother and I was slightly nervous. I guess my mother was a little bit afraid too, because she lowered her voice slightly at first. Unfortunately, she wasn't scared enough, because she called my father crazy and threatened to leave.

“Oh, you going to leave? Fuck it... leave then! But you're not taking my kids!”



“Yes, I am!” my mother screamed defiantly as she strutted closer to my father. They were standing in the narrow hallway of our apartment. I could see her eyes welling up with tears. “I’m not raising them to think this is okay and I’m done putting up with your shit! And you can’t do anything to stop me!” she screamed shrilly as spit flew from her mouth while she pointed her finger in my father’s face.

I then witnessed something I had never witnessed in my household before that evening and never again after. In a flash, my father hit my mother in her face and she fell against the wall. I couldn’t believe what I had just seen. I had never seen my father touch my mother in a non-affectionate manner before. It was foreign to me. It was like a bad dream. My father was usually a really good father and from what I could tell as a child, a decent husband. He always took care of us, and he tried to spend as much time together as a family as possible. He did, however, get high pretty regularly. If you look at pictures from back then, you’ll see that my father looked like he had been smoking in a lot of them; eyes low, blood-shot and all that. He wasn’t a junkie or anything; it was just what he did. He always kept a job. We always had food. I guess that’s just what he did to try to make himself feel better, or to try to have a good time with his friends. But he acted different when he was high. Back then I didn’t really realize it. I can’t remember him smoking marijuana or snorting lines of cocaine in front of me. As I grew older, I could think of specific times when he would act extremely out of character, and now I know he must have either been high or going through “withdrawal” and on edge due to his unplanned sobriety.

Well, anyway, my mother was as stunned as I was and began to sob. Shockingly enough, though, she pulled herself together and started yelling at my father again. I can still remember the guilt-ridden look on his face. My mother’s glasses were broken and she kept talking about how she promised herself she would never let a man hit her. My baby sister was screaming by this time and I was just holding her as we sat on the sofa. I guess the neighbors were tired of hearing all the fighting because there was a loud banging on the door less than ten minutes later.

My father opened the door and two police officers asked to come in. Long-story-short, they told my parents that one of them needed to leave

immediately. My mother had already begun packing our stuff because she, “wasn’t living like this.” She didn’t tell the police that my father had hit her though. She didn’t like my father at the moment, but she still loved him. She didn’t want him to go to jail. He had hit her, and that was wrong, but it wasn’t like he had made a habit of it or had beaten her up. Besides, as big as my father was, she knew that if he really wanted to do damage to my mother, he would have hit her harder. She had decided that she would just leave him. She was tired of arguing, and this was the last straw. She knew there was a reason why she didn’t want to marry a “street-nigga.” This was the type of household she grew up in, and she didn’t want the same upbringing for my sister or me.

I always respected my mother for the fact that she didn’t have my father arrested. It truly was an isolated incident, but I’ve seen women successfully attempt to get their boyfriend or husband arrested for much less. I guess my mother realized that getting the law involved over something that had only happened once would have created more problems than it would have solved. She would just handle it herself. She would leave my father. As much as I hated my parents breaking up – I guess she had made the right decision for the time being. I respected my mother for that.

That night, my mother, my little sister and I stayed at a friend’s house in Germantown. The next day, we moved to Chicago. I wish I knew exactly what started that fight! It was a slightly traumatic turning point in my young life, so it stuck with me. I can’t imagine what it’s like for people who grow up witnessing domestic violence on a regular basis. All I can say to you all is, “hold your head.” Get out if and when you can. Do everything possible not to repeat that cycle if and when you have a family of your own.

My mother told me when I got older that she didn’t want me to grow up thinking it was acceptable to treat your wife that way. That’s why she left. My father was and is a good man, though. He and my mother consider him to be a much “better” man now, in many ways, but I’ll tell you about that later.

My mother thought by taking me away from that situation, it would save me from being a so-called “thug.” But as you will find out, it didn’t quite work that way. I guess certain things are in my blood. Over the years I also have read several articles published by mental health professionals and

parenting experts which claim that studies show what happens in your life during the first five-to-seven years of your development plays a large role in the type of adult you become because of how the human brain develops, processes information and makes connections. That may be part of my problem.

There are some other factors from later in my life that make it hard for me to “be good.” You know what DMX said, “I tried being good, but good’s not too good for me...”

I just can’t seem to help it; no matter how hard I try. But you’ll get a better idea of what I’m referring to as my story continues.

## Chapter 3...

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**M**y mother, my baby sister and I moved to Chicago. We moved into my mother's parents' house on Carpenter Street. It was the house my mother had lived in since she was about eleven years old; when my grandfather had moved the family from the slums of the West Side to a neighborhood of mostly single-family homes on the South Side. They were actually one of the first non-white families to move into that neighborhood on the South Side. Within approximately six months, however, there wasn't a white family to be seen in their neighborhood. The term for that type of rapid change in neighborhood demographics was "White Flight," and it was common throughout the country; especially during the nineteen-fifties and sixties. This was the same neighborhood where those two Puerto-Rican guys eventually split my head open with a baseball bat. I still have the scar on my forehead to this day. By the time I lived there, you never would have thought the neighborhood had once been inhabited by all white folks. I would often listen as my mother and grandmother discussed how drastically the neighborhood had changed.

People were wiling in my neighborhood. We had a lot of gangs in Chicago back then. I have never spent an extended period of time in Los Angeles, but from what I do know about L.A., it is reminiscent of a warm-weather version of Chicago. The only difference was that Chicago wasn't about Bloods and Crips. The big gangs were the Gangster Disciples, Vice Lords, Black P. Stone Rangers, also known as the Stones or El-Ruk'n, Latin Kings, Four Corner Hustlers and a lot of other gangs. There were all types of subdivisions of the gangs too.

Being a young kid, spending my time mostly in Philly and New York up to that point, I didn't really have to deal with gangs, at least not major gangs. They had smaller gangs in each neighborhood. One of the more notorious gangs in Philly in the nineteen-eighties was the JBM – the Junior Black Mafia. In New York they had a few big gangs like the Lo-Lifes, and in Brooklyn they had the Decepticons. In Queens there was the Supreme Team and other notorious, high-traffic, violent drug gangs. Those types of

organizations were real-life versions of the portrayal of the Cash Money Brothers in the movie “New Jack City.”

From my experience, the thing with most of those gangs in Philly and New York was that they were primarily concerned with making money. They mostly had beef with people in other gangs, or other people involved in illegal activities. Don’t get me wrong, a lot of them would mess around, get high or drunk and rob somebody innocent. For instance, the Decepticons in Brooklyn, were known for smacking people in the head with hammers, robbing them and throwing their bodies in a nearby dumpster. Then you had the crack-heads who would snatch purses and rob innocent women for their jewelry, which actually happened to my grandmother on the train in Chicago. You also had to be wary of the run-of-the-mill, low-life lunatic who would rape a girl or something perverted like that. There were younger gangs who fought strictly over petty amounts of cash and neighborhood boundaries, also known as “turf-wars.” To my knowledge, however, it was much different in Chicago.

So many people, both male and female, were really “gang-banging.” It was really a way of life for a lot of people; even young kids in elementary school. For instance, if you lived in a neighborhood and the Stones ran that neighborhood and you were a young-boy coming up, the Stones might beat you up and rob you every day until you join. The gangs always wanted to recruit more members because, of course, there is strength in numbers and it also translated into more members to earn money for the gang. Often, they didn’t even have to employ any intimidation tactics because a lot of young people were eager to join due to the fact that they idolized the lifestyle and their older associates and family members who were already involved and they wanted to emulate that.

There were also bloody gang wars. Back in New York and Philly, most of the gang wars were over drugs. In Chicago, gangsters would shoot or stab people just because they were in a different gang and from a different neighborhood. They didn’t even necessarily have to do anything else to “violate.” If a gangster saw a tattoo on another person and it showed what gang he was in, like a pitchfork with a halo, for example, one of them was likely to get shot, stabbed or at least beat up. Or, if you drove through “the

wrong neighborhood” with your hat tilted the “wrong way,” your car might get shot up. It was wild.

I was five years old, moving to a new city. Well, it wasn’t exactly new to me. I had been there countless times to visit my grandparents and my aunt and uncles, but I always knew I was going back home. This time we weren’t leaving. It was August when we moved to Chicago, and my grandmother decided one day that she was going to enroll me in kindergarten.

The next day, my grandmother took me to register for school. My grandmother wanted me to go to a particular school in the suburbs because she thought it was a better school and she didn’t want me to go to school, “with the little hoodlums from the neighborhood.” The school actually wasn’t far from the hood, it was about ten minutes past the city limits. I guess my grandmother figured I was exposed to enough of that “hood mentality” after school, in the neighborhood, and she wanted me to go to a “better” school.

Unfortunately for my grandmother, the school district busted her bubble. After three days in that suburban school, school administration sent me to the school I was supposed to go to for my neighborhood, Marcus Garvey Elementary School. I didn’t mind... I liked that school better. I didn’t like going to a school where I was one of only a handful of Black people and most of those Black people acted “uppity.” I would rather be in my own environment, with people I felt comfortable around, you know – people from my block, people from other blocks, people from the projects – South Side people. Especially in Chicago, because people were so prejudiced!

All of those things were the least of my concerns, however. I missed my father. He called me every day, though. It was just hard being away from him like that. The only time I didn’t live with him before that was when I was too young to remember, before my parents married. This situation was ridiculous! He was in Philly and I was in Chicago – that’s almost eight hundred miles away! But at least he was still being a good father. He would call me and send mail addressed to me regularly. For my birthday that November he sent me a comic he drew just for me along with a Mickey Mouse watch. It wasn’t a little kid’s digital watch either! It was “big kid’s watch,” with one of Mickey’s hands as the hour hand and one as the minute hand. I wore that watch every day, and that’s how I learned how to tell time.

I was still a little kid, six years old now, but I was stressed out. I wasn't one of those types of kids who kept asking my parents if and when they were going to get back together. I just assumed they weren't going to. My parents argued pretty frequently before we left. When the cops came and told them somebody had to leave, I thought they were saying that my parents weren't *allowed* to be together anymore. Naturally, my mother wouldn't move that far away and get a job and everything for no reason. I started to hate the police after my parents separated. I blamed them for breaking up my family. And the nosy neighbors who called the cops in the first place; I didn't like them anymore either.

The good thing, though, was that we were living with my grandfather too. Since I couldn't live with my father, my grandfather was the next best thing. He always called me his "main man." We were so close. I was his first "real" grandchild, and he was so happy that his first grandchild was a boy. He was a probation officer for the Cook County Sheriff. When I wasn't in school, my grandfather would let me ride around with him in his big car; a shiny red and black Lincoln.

"Hey! My main man," my grandfather would holler. "You want to take a ride with your Grannydad?"

"Yup! Of course!" I would eagerly reply and run out the door behind him. I always wanted to take a ride with my grandfather; that is, unless I was in the middle of watching "Thunder Cats" or "Inspector Gadget!" Besides that, I was always excited to ride out with my grandfather, and most of the time I would stop watching either of my two favorite shows to make sure I didn't miss a chance to chill with my "main-man." My grandfather's car was so nice and he always kept it so clean. It was red with a black ragtop, shiny and big. I would sit in the front seat next to him while he blasted his jazz music the way younger guys blasted their rap music. My grandfather loved jazz, and I would gaze out the window at everybody and everything while he drove. Back then, there weren't any laws stating that little kids couldn't sit in the front seat, so naturally, I sat in the front seat. I was like his sidekick. It was fun, just chilling with my grandfather, because he was so cool – a real thoroughbred. Roy Jenkins, my "Grannydad" – he was one smooth old-head! In my opinion he was the coolest old-head to ever walk the face of the earth.

When I had been in Philly and New York, I had a street education, partly from just being in the environment I had been in. When I was with my grandfather in Chicago, he made sure he deliberately taught me things. Class was in session when I was with my grandfather!

“You see that nigga over there?” he would say. “That nigga right there, scratching himself for no good reason? That’s a wino. A wino can’t hold his liquor, and so he loses his job and his house and his family. And he’s scratching because he’s itchin’ for some liquor!”

“You see that skinny young-girl who just walked past us, smelling like last years’ dirty drawers? That’s a crack-head! That’s the drug that’s making the government richer!”

“You see that thirty-year-old lady who looks like a sixty-year-old lady sitting on the ground over there? You see those scabs on her arms and hands? She’s a dope-fiend, sticking needles with drugs in her arms.” He shook his head. “Heifer’s forearms look like Popeye!” he exclaimed under his breath. “Heifer could probably beat me in arm-wrestling!”

Some time had passed, and I loved Chicago, but I hated it too, because I was away from my father. I still talked to him every day, and my mother would talk to him for a little while after I was finished. My mother always made me leave the room when she would take the phone, so I never knew what her and my father had been talking about. After a while, those “secret” conversations grew longer and longer.

One Friday after school, my grandfather picked me up. He usually didn’t pick me up unless something unexpected happened, whether good or bad. There were a lot of kids from my neighborhood in my school and on most days, we would all walk back to our neighborhood together.

“Hey Grannydad!” I exclaimed as I ran to the passenger side of his running car. I was always happy to see my grandfather, especially when it was a surprise. Besides, it was wintertime in Chicago... I didn’t want to walk if I didn’t have to!

“What’s up, my main man?” My grandfather shook my hand after I sat down. “I’m taking you out!”



It only took about five minutes for us to arrive at the nearest Popeye's Chicken joint. In Chicago we had Harold's Chicken and some other good, local fried-chicken places, but when we wanted to sit down, we would go to Popeye's.

"Get what you want, my man," my grandfather said, smiling, "it's a special occasion!"

"Thanks, Grannydad! I'll have two drumsticks and two biscuits and a large red cream soda." Drumsticks were always my favorite part of a chicken.

I stood next to my grandfather as he ordered our food. He placed his hand on top of my head. I was excited to have some unexpected Popeye's chicken with my grandfather. Maybe we would take a ride around the city after we were finished eating!

"Grannydad... what's the special occasion?"

"I'ma have to let your mother tell you what the special occasion is... but I think you'll like it." He paused and looked at my finished drumstick, then looked at me again. "Boy, you don't know how to eat no chicken!"

"What do you mean Grannydad?"

I was puzzled. How could I not know how to eat chicken? I had been eating it *my whole life*!

"Look at all that meat you left on the tips of that bone!" He picked the drumstick up. "You need to eat all of that!"

"Oh, okay." I complied as I took a couple more bites of the drumstick. "Are we going to take a ride?"

"Yeah, my man. But first, I'ma take you home so your mother can tell you the good news and then we'll go for a ride."

After we parked in the small garage in the alley behind our house and went inside, I looked for my mother. When my mother saw me, she hugged me tightly.

“Jackson, baby... we’re going back home. Me and Daddy are getting back together!”

“Really?” I exclaimed, excitedly. “When?”

“Tomorrow. I’m going to finish packing our stuff and then we need to get to bed a little bit early because we have a long drive back to Philly.”

“Yeah,” my grandfather interrupted. “He’s going to hang with me for a while. I’m a take him around to see the folks and I’ll bring him back and get him ready for bed.”

I went for one last ride with my grandfather around Chicago. He took me to see all his people. I hung with the old-heads for a minute and listened to a lot of jazz music. We got home a little late, but not too late – around eleven-o’clock at night. My mother was waiting up for us when we arrived home.

“Daddy, I know y’all wanted to spend some more time together, but I wanted Jackson to get to bed early. I wanted to get to bed early myself too. We’re leaving really early tomorrow.”

“Ain’t nobody told you to stay up!” my grandfather responded gruffly. “Besides, I can get the boy ready for bed. You act like I ain’t raise y’all. Ain’t like he’s going to be doing any of the driving.” He paused and turned to look at me. “Say goodnight to your mother, my man.”

“Good night, Mommy,” I said as my mother gave me a hug and a kiss. “I can get myself ready for bed anyway. I *am* in first grade!”

I got into bed after I took a shower and brushed my teeth. It was about eleven-o’clock but my mind was racing – I couldn’t sleep. I have never been able to fall asleep quickly. I used to get in trouble in kindergarten because at naptime, when all the other kids had to take a nap for a half-hour, I was wide-awake, fidgeting. How could I take a nap? It took me longer than a half-hour to fall asleep when I went to bed at night – even when I was tired!

That night it was even worse. I was very excited to be moving back home with my father. I was so happy we were going to be a family again, and that my parents weren’t getting divorced after all. But it was so abrupt. We were leaving Chicago as suddenly as we had left Philly. I didn’t have any time to adjust. It was all good, though. I was just going to miss my grandparents,

especially hanging out with my grandfather. Considering how close my father and I were, I didn't know how I would have survived being so far away from him if I wasn't able to live with my grandfather.

All these thoughts raced through my mind. I looked over at the clock and it was twelve-thirty in the morning! I got up to use the bathroom. After I washed my hands, I heard my grandfather in the kitchen, so I went to see what he was doing.

"What you doing up, my man?" he asked when he saw me.

"I can't sleep, Grannydad," I responded as I sat down at the kitchen table.

"You're too young for those types of problems," he said. Then he looked at me with his head cocked sideways, as if he saw something he had never seen before. "Well, maybe you're not too young for those types of problems after all, my man! How about a midnight snack?"

My grandfather made each of us two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and a glass of milk. We ate them while watching "I Love Lucy" re-runs on the little ten-inch black and white television which sat in the corner of the kitchen table. I finished my sandwiches and my milk, and sat there, wide-awake, with my head down.

"I'll miss you, Grannydad," I said sullenly as I looked up at my grandfather.

"It's not that serious my main man," he responded without looking at me. "We'll talk on the phone, and I'll see you every now and then. You'll be back to Chicago to visit." Then he looked at me with an expression as equally as sad as the one plastered across my young face. He placed his hand on my shoulder.

"I'll miss you too, my man... I'll miss you too."

## Chapter 4...

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“Hey, baby-boy!” My father ran to the car when we pulled up to the apartment. He seemed extra excited, as if he had been waiting by the window all day. He took my little sister in one arm, me in his other arm and kissed us both. Then he walked over to the driver’s side door and kissed my mother. “Hey, babe. It’s so good to see you. I’m so glad y’all are home!”

“Me too,” my mother replied.

“Us too!” my sister and me chimed in, still in my father’s large arms.

“That was such a long ride,” my mother sighed. “I never enjoyed that ride! I’m so tired.”

“I’m not!” I exclaimed. “I didn’t even sleep the whole time!”

“Well,” my father said, letting me down onto the ground, “since you’re not tired, you can help me bring all this luggage into the house.”

I helped my father bring the luggage into the apartment while my mother and my sister went to bed. After we said “good night” to my mother and sister, my father made the two of us peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and we sat on the couch and watched old cartoons.

“I missed you, baby-boy,” my father said, patting my head. “It’s good to have you home.”

“I missed you too, Daddy,” I replied, looking up at my father. Even when we were both seated on the couch, he was so much taller than I was.

“How’s your Granny and Grannydad?” my father asked.

“They’re good,” I replied. Then I hesitated. “I’m going to miss them... especially Grannydad.”

“Yeah, I know,” my father put his hand on my shoulder. “Living with your Grannydad was probably like having another father around while you were so far away from me. I don’t ever want to be separated from y’all again. I

messed up... but I'ma do whatever it takes to make sure this family stays together now."

I saw tears in my father's eyes. I don't ever remember seeing my father even close to crying before. I hugged him.

"Yeah Daddy, it was hard being away from you. Grannydad helped take care of me; and Granny too, but it wasn't the same. I was just happy you called me every day. And I am happy we're back home for good now."

"Well, you're my only boy, and I love you," my father replied. Although he was a six-foot, six-inch tall, almost three hundred-pound, Black man from New York City, he was never afraid to share his feelings; especially with people he cared about. "I had to talk to you every day. If not, I would have gone crazy."

I could see he was getting tearful again, so I tried to figure out how I could change the subject. It made me a little bit uncomfortable as a young boy to see my father cry for the first time. He must have gone through a lot while we were gone. I knew he grew up without his father, so maybe he re-lived that experience while I was away from him. Besides, he had already been divorced once, and he almost was divorced a second time. I loved my father and I actually felt sorry for him. I forgave him for whatever it was that he was doing that made my mother leave him. I also forgave my mother for leaving him. It didn't matter anymore because they were back together.

"Um... are we going to the studio soon, Daddy?" I asked when I finally thought of something different to talk about.

"Oh," my father hesitated, "the studio... um, no. Jackson, the truth is... I don't have the studio anymore."

"What?" He must have been joking with me. I had spent *my entire life* in that studio! "What happened to it?" I asked in disbelief.

"Well," he replied hesitantly, "that studio and the whole music business is a major part of what almost ended me and Mommy's marriage, so I gave it up."

"So, you're not going to open the studio ever again?" I asked, clearly upset.

“No, sir!” my father replied half-joking, with a smile, trying to lighten the mood.

“What about the deejaying? Are you and Uncle Vern going to DJ anymore?”

“No. None of that either.” My father looked in my eyes and saw the obvious despair. “You have the same look on your face your Uncle Vernon had on his face when I told him!” he exclaimed with a half-smile, seemingly in disbelief. I guess he didn’t realize what our time together in the studio meant to me.

“Daddy... I loved the studio,” I replied sadly.

It wasn’t just the studio. It was the fact that I could spend all that time with my father. On top of that, making music was fun. My father and my Uncle Vernon would let me mess around on the equipment a little bit sometimes, when clients weren’t there. Now we couldn’t do that anymore. Plus, my father was a thorough guy and all the people who came in the studio knew my father was cool. He was somewhat of a trendsetter in his relatively wide social sphere of influence. He had a beard with all the cuts in it before anybody else was doing it. As I was thinking about that and I was looking up at my father, I noticed the only facial hair he had was a mustache and a small, triangle goatee directly under his lip – no beard.

“Daddy!” I exclaimed, alarmed. “What happened to your beard? And what happened to your earrings?”

My father jumped a little bit, probably startled at first that I had screamed over something seemingly so trivial.

“Jackson,” my father picked me up, sat me down on his knee and looked me in the eye. “I have been studying the Bible and I am going to be in a different religion. Well... I didn’t really do anything with a religion at all for years, but I am starting to now, and there will be some changes. Actually, there are going to be a lot of changes. They might be hard for you to adjust to at first, but they are for the better. They have made me a better person and they are the only reason why Mommy came back home. I’ll try to make it easy for you, though. Okay?”

“Okay,” I responded passively. My father kissed me on the forehead. “Um, Daddy... can we play Atari?”

My father looked at the clock, and then looked back at me. He hesitated for about thirty seconds. It looked like he had a dilemma. What was taking so long for him to decide whether or not we could play Atari? It was what some people call a “no-brainer.” We almost always played Atari before I went to bed. I looked at the clock. It was eleven-thirty. We had stayed up much later than that before. Besides, it was my first night back from Chicago and it was a Saturday!

“I would, Jackson,” he replied apologetically, “but I didn’t realize how late it is. We have to go to a meeting in the morning really early, so I think you should get some sleep.”

“A meeting? Oh, what... church? Oh, I’m not really tired, but I don’t need sleep for church anyway,” I replied.

“Well, we don’t call this type of meeting ‘church.’ It’s kind of like church, but I think you’ll like it better. But it’s early, at nine-thirty, so I think you should go to bed. Plus, you have to get adjusted to the time change from Chicago to Philly time. We can play Atari after the meeting tomorrow.”

“Oh, okay,” I replied, highly disappointed. “Goodnight, Daddy. I love you.”

I gave my father a hug, he kissed me on my forehead and I walked to the bathroom and washed up. After I brushed my teeth, I entered the bedroom my sister and I shared and climbed into the top bunk of our bunk beds. I couldn’t sleep, though. I had far too much weighing on my mind.

I was extremely happy to be home with my father. I was back with both of my parents and my little sister again, and we were all together. It was very different already – almost too different. I had only been home a couple of hours and I already had a couple of “bombs” dropped on me. *No more studio?* What was up with that? I loved the studio! I was going to miss it. I recalled how when I was helping my father bring in the luggage, I saw a couple of pieces of equipment from the studio lying around, like the reel-to-reel, turntables, microphones, headphones, and other random studio gear.

How could my father just close the studio like that? We talked every day and he never even mentioned it. He told me when my pet rabbit died, and he told me when an alley-cat knocked over my bird's cage and the bird flew away, but he just *happened* to forget to mention that he was getting rid of my favorite place on earth?

Not only that – he also took out his earrings and shaved his beard. Now we were changing religions and we were going to a different church. Not like I was all that crazy about the church we were already attending. My mother didn't take me regularly anyway. Honestly, we probably watched Kung-Fu movies more faithfully on Sundays than we went to church! We would always go for Christmas and Easter and all the holidays, and seemingly random other occasions. My father never went with us, though. He said he didn't mess with the Catholic Church. When we lived in Chicago, my grandmother took us every Sunday.

So, I just lay in my bed for a few hours thinking about what the next few days would bring. I grew anxious, so I tried not to think about it. I thought about one of my favorite songs at the time. Music was always therapeutic for me. The song was called, "Brand New Funk" by Fresh Prince and DJ Jazzy Jeff. I was usually pretty good at memorizing songs with little effort, but there was this one part of the song I was having trouble with. It was when Will Smith started rapping faster than he was in the rest of the song. It was my favorite part. I lay there and rapped to myself, under my breath, so I wouldn't wake up my little sister sleeping in the bunk beneath mine.

"You should have seen the people dancing and shaking and moving..."

I kept starting over from the beginning of the song every time I messed up. I was always a perfectionist, kind of obsessive-compulsive. I continued this until I finally drifted off into a deep slumber.

I thought about the situation as we drove to "the meeting" the next morning. Everything was changing so fast. We actually drove past the church my mother used to take me to when we did attend church before we moved to Chicago. I guess I wasn't ever going to see the inside of that church again. Oh well. Some of the other changes were a little bit drastic, though. I really wasn't feeling the whole, "no more studio, no more beard, no more late-night



Atari,” scenario. My head was hurting. I didn’t know if it was from being stressed out, or if it was from my father brushing my hair so hard before we left the house!

To make an already long story shorter, after we went to that first meeting, it was pretty much a wrap. My father is basically an all-or-nothing type of person. When he sets his mind on doing something, he does it until he is finished, and that’s how he raised me. As far as religion goes, especially this new religion, you are *never* finished. So, once we went to the meeting for the first time, we kept going. We went to all of the meetings. And I do mean *all* of them.

My father wasn’t lying when he said the “Kingdom Hall” was different than church! First of all, the only time I had really gone to church on a consistent basis was with my grandmother, when we lived in Chicago. When it was just my mother and me, and then my little sister too, we were very irregular with our church attendance. It was kind of a shock when we not only went to these meetings every Sunday, but had to go during the week as well. We had a shorter, hour-long meeting; the “Book Study,” on Tuesday nights consisting of a small group that usually met at one of the congregation members’ homes. We also had a longer meeting on Thursday nights at the big “Kingdom Hall” with the whole congregation. Those meetings were about two hours long.

I was slightly irritated because our new religious schedule conflicted with my television viewing habits. I wouldn’t be able to watch *Martin*, *Living Single* and *New York Undercover* on Thursday nights for years to come because of the long meeting and my parents’ new standards on entertainment. About six months after we moved back to Philly, my parents finished studying the Bible with the couple who was studying with them, and they were soon both baptized. All Jehovah’s Witnesses are expected to get baptized after they finished studying the Bible. I mean, they don’t really *have* to – nobody forces you to. But you won’t be officially recognized as one of Jehovah’s Witnesses unless you are baptized. Jehovah’s Witnesses do not practice infant baptism. In addition, everybody who is an active Jehovah’s Witness is supposed to go out and try to preach to people and teach them about the Bible. It’s a very strict religion. I’m not bad-mouthing it at all, I’m just

calling it like it is. Ask any one of Jehovah's Witnesses – they'll tell you I'm not lying.

So, my parents would take us to knock on people's doors *every* Saturday morning. Growing up, we were only allowed to stay home if we were really sick. Since my mother is a nurse, it was almost impossible to pretend to be sick and get away with it. So, you know that meant no Saturday morning cartoons either! I know this sounds wrong, but sometimes I was "praying" for the flu!

When my parents were baptized, everything was really different. I realized that a lot of changes had taken place. I didn't really care for a lot of the changes, but I talked about most of those already, so I won't go over that again. Some time had passed though, and I had been thinking about everything.

I was young, but I was always a deep thinker. I could always put things together. At that point, my assessment of my life events was the following: even though so much had changed when we came back to Philly, the only reason we came back to Philly, was because so much had changed. That must have been what my mother and father had started talking about on the phone when she would kick me out of the room. Even though coming home to so many changes was hard for me at first, I would rather come home to changes, than to never have come home at all. I realized that if my father hadn't changed, my mother would have never reunited with him, and we would have stayed in Chicago "forever."

After that, I tried hard to be good. I was still a young kid, so it wasn't like I was involved in any real crazy activities. I cannot lie to you – a lot of crazy stuff went on in my grade school back in Chicago, but that was mostly because of all the gangs and all the young guys trying to impress the older kids.

Back in Philly I would spend a lot of free time with my grandmother, my father's mother. My older sister would come down from her mother's house in Saint Albans, Queens and our cousins would come from the projects in Far Rockaway, Queens. We would all stay with my grandmother "down the Bottom," in West Philly. We stayed on Leidy Avenue, off of 41<sup>st</sup> Street and

Girard Avenue. Leidy Avenue was crazy back then. On that one block there was a bootlegger, or speak-easy, or whatever you prefer to call it, and two crack-houses. It almost seemed as if there were more drugs and illegal activity on that block than there were regular residential activities.

Those summers in the late 1980's and early 1990's were fun. My grandmother would take us to one of the city pools to swim, like the Kelly Pool, for instance. If all the pools were too crowded, my grandmother would take us to the Art Museum Area and we would swim in the water fountains. I know that is illegal now, and I'm sure those people down there were like, "look at those little ghetto-ass kids!" It was all fun for me until one day, to my surprise, I came up out the water with a piece of what I would like to think was a pretzel in my mouth. After that, if we couldn't go to the pool, I wasn't swimming!

After a long day of doing whatever, we would come back to my grandmother's house and hang out outside while she prepared our dinner. My female cousins and my two sisters would play double-dutch, and I would either play football on the concrete with the other boys from the block, or figure some other young-boy thing to do. Sometimes we would play in the abandoned buildings until we got caught by an adult and had earned ourselves beatings. Then we would get called into the house and eat dinner.

After dinner, I would come back outside, lured out by the loud sound of engines revving. The drug dealers would drag race up and down the street – Leidy Avenue was perfect for that. It was a very wide street, with very little traffic and very few cars parked on it. Most of the people who lived on Leidy Avenue didn't own vehicles. I loved to watch as the drug dealers would race their shiny, Mercedes-Benzes, Jaguars and BMWs up and down the block. It was so decent. I thought they were so cool. Some of them knew me and would nod to me. Then my grandmother would come out and bring me in from the stoop and tell me it was time for bed.

I actually had to sleep on the plastic-wrapped couch in my grandmother's living room; and I would have dreams about the struggle going on in my mind. It was crazy because I was a young kid – I wasn't even ten years old yet, but I was already coping with an intense internal struggle. I knew I wanted to "be good" and make my parents happy. Now that my family was

back together and my parents were practicing a new religion, I was very grateful to God for doing that for me and my family. I wanted to show Him how thankful I was for what he had done for us. At the same time, even at that young age, something about the streets was so attractive to me. Seeing these hustlers with these nice cars, nice clothes, pretty women, gold rings and chains with medallions... I would like to have those things myself one day. At the time, selling drugs seemed to be the easiest, most feasible way for a young, Black male to obtain those things.

My father had a broken-down looking Datsun at the time – that's what Nissans used to be called. I remember riding around with him a couple of times and the car caught fire under the hood. I wanted to get my father a nice car like the drug-dealers had. I also wasn't thrilled about getting my clothes from either Village Thrift on Broad Street in the Olney section of the city, or from my grandmother in Chicago who would sew me and my little sister matching clothes and mail them to us. Sometimes, if things were going better financially for my parents, we would get clothes from Bradlee's, Clover or Cal-Dor. And sneakers – I don't even want to talk about shoes! I don't think my feet would have known how to act if I would have even tried on a pair of Jordans™!

I didn't complain, though. I didn't want to make my parents feel bad. I knew they did all they could for us, so I kept it to myself. Plus, it wasn't even all that important. Don't get me wrong, though. It wasn't like we were dirt-poor. My parents just spent their money on the more important things, like rent, groceries, gas and regular weekend road trips to nearby cities. By the time they were finished paying for those things, there wasn't extra money for expensive clothes, cable television and other unnecessary luxuries like that.

So anyway, I put my "money concerns" to the side, and decided to try to focus on being a good kid. Like I said, my parents were very active in our new religion, so I was too. The Jehovah's Witnesses also have larger assemblies three times a year, all over the world. One of those is really big, with thousands of Witnesses; and the one in Philly used to be held at the old Veterans Stadium, before it was demolished. One spring, when the big convention at the stadium was approaching, a brother in our congregation announced at one of our meetings that anybody who wanted to be baptized

should approach the “presiding overseer” of the congregation and let him know. I immediately approached him once the meeting had concluded with the final prayer.

“Brother Davis, can I talk to you for a minute, please?”

I always liked Brother Davis. He was really nice. My parents were close with Brother and Sister Davis and I used to go to their house every day after school, so I became close with their children although they were much older than I was.

“Hey Jackson, how you doing?”

“Good,” I replied. “I was wondering... when can I go over the baptism questions? I want to get baptized in June.”

“Oh, that’s great, Jackson!” He shook my hand. “Let me talk to your father to see when would be a good time to come over the house, and I’ll let you know.”

“Okay, thanks!” I was satisfied. I was happy to be getting baptized. I had been working hard alongside my parents doing everything that a Witness should do, even though I was a young kid. I felt as if there was nothing preventing me from getting baptized. I had been telling my parents I wanted to get baptized for a while, but they kept saying I was too young, so I had to handle it myself. I studied for all the meetings, and I read the Bible on my own. I knew what I was doing. It wasn’t like I was just doing it for my parents. I was young, but I wasn’t stupid.

At home that night, after the meeting, my father came into my room and sat down on my bed.

“Jackson,” he said. “Brother Davis came up to me tonight and said you want to get baptized in June?”

“Yep!” I replied proudly. “I told him tonight after the meeting. They made the announcement and said we had to tell him as soon as possible.”

“Well, that’s good,” my father replied hesitantly. “Did you know you have to read the green book and go over the questions in the back?”

“Yeah Daddy, I did that already,” I replied as I walked over to my bookshelf and grabbed a thin green book. I brought it to him and showed him that it was all highlighted, underlined and notated. He thumbed through it for a couple of seconds and paused.

“Well, I guess you know what you’re doing!” he said, clearly impressed. “I see you’re definitely serious about this! I’ll call Brother Davis and tell him they can come over on Friday night.”

I went over the three sets of baptism questions with the overseers, called “elders,” in the congregation. The elders review sets of questions with baptismal candidates to make sure they know the basic teachings of the Bible and the religion. I was baptized that June at the Veteran’s Stadium in South Philadelphia. I had finally reached that goal and I was pleased with myself. I knew my parents were pleased with me too, and I hoped that God was as well. I just hoped I could continue to be “good” when I reached my teenage years which were fast approaching.

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## Chapter 5...

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There were a lot of changes that summer. As a matter of fact, that was the summer I learned that life is essentially nothing but a series of changes.

My family had made a permanent move to the suburbs. We lived about twenty minutes outside of Philly. At first, we lived in an apartment complex my mother grew to abhor within a few short months of moving in. She hated it because it was actually worse than where we had been living before. It was basically a suburban housing project, except it wasn't owned by the city or anything like that. It was all Section 8, though. We were one of the few families living in the complex who were not enrolled in the Section 8 rental assistance program. I guess that's what happens when you want to live in the suburbs, but you really can't afford it – you have to live somewhere you would rather not live.

We also had a ridiculous number of roaches in our apartment. Roaches were not new to any of us, but that did not mean we enjoyed sharing our living space with them. I guess we also didn't expect to have roaches in the suburbs. We thought it was a “city thing,” especially coming from living in big cities like Chicago, Philly and New York. We had roaches *everywhere* in that place. There were roaches coming out of the lights in the ceiling, coming out of the outlets and everywhere else you could think of – it was disgusting! Of course, we had mice too, because what would a suburban slum be without roaches *and* mice?

Then there were the shootings and stabbings, especially in the back of the complex. There were regular reports of women being raped back there. It was crazy. When people would argue outside, and I would watch through the window, my mother would yell at me and tell me to get away from the window so I wouldn't, “catch a stray bullet!” This was all happening in our “safe” suburban neighborhood.

My mother would come home from work and cry every day we lived in that neighborhood. She was so upset because she didn't want to raise her kids in conditions like that, *especially* in the suburbs. Then one day, our

building caught fire. My parents had renter's insurance, so we lived in a hotel for a little while. It was fun for me and my little sister, but probably not for my parents. After a relatively short period of time, my parents found a nicer apartment, so we moved there.

My mother always said that our building catching fire had been "the answer to her prayers." I never really commented on it as a child, but I strongly disagreed with her perspective. What about the other people who didn't have renter's insurance? They would be in a really bad situation due to the building catching fire and losing their belongings. I'm sure many of them ended up being homeless for a period of time. None of the residents of that apartment complex were well-off financially. I didn't think God would operate that way, especially from what I studied in the Bible and what I learned at the meetings. Burn down an apartment building and displace hundreds of people to answer *one* hysterical woman's prayers? Whatever, though. I didn't pursue discussing the matter since it wasn't really relevant to my family at the time.

Then, my grandmother, my mother's mother from Chicago, decided she wanted to help my parents buy a house. She was a realtor in Chicago, and she said she wanted her grandchildren to be able to grow up in a house with a backyard. So, she helped my parents with the money they needed for a modest down payment for a house in the suburbs. My parents had been looking for less expensive houses in the city, but my grandmother said that she wouldn't give her money to help buy one of those houses because, "they weren't worth putting a fire to." I love her to death, but I swear my grandmother can be so uppity sometimes. At least I know where my mother learned it.

We eventually moved into a modest, but nice house, about twenty minutes north of Philadelphia. I thought we were rich when we moved into that place. It didn't take long for me to learn I was wrong about that! It was much nicer than any apartment we had ever lived in. I was very happy about the move at first, but that was because I just didn't realize how much I was going to hate living in the suburbs. I'll go into more detail about that later.

We were moving into the house in August. I was baptized that June. My older sister, Journe', was moving in with us in July. Talk about a lot of



changes going on! It was cool, though. I was excited about my sister coming to live with us. Every time we would spend the summers together in West Philly, or when she would come down for the weekends, everything was all good. We had become very close, so I was excited.

While Journe' was relocating from New York to Pennsylvania, I was spending the first part of the summer in Chicago with my grandparents. There had been so much going on; I had almost forgotten that I was supposed to go to Chicago. My mother had approached me that spring and asked me if I wanted to visit my grandparents for the summer. Of course, I said yes. Our lives were hectic, but it was actually a good thing because the time flew by.

The last week of June, I caught the plane, by myself, to Chicago. I thought I was grown, but the airport staff thought differently. I had a chaperone, an airline employee, who accompanied me from the plane to the gate, and she kept checking on me during the flight. She said she had to do that for all unaccompanied minors under the age of fourteen. It was annoying, but the redeeming factor was the stewardess who kept checking on me was "fine!" She looked like a thicker version of Jada Pinkett when she was on "A Different World." She had the finger-waves and all that! Too bad she was a little too old for me, because I would have shown her "a different world" if she gave me the opportunity!

The flight from Philly to Chicago is less than two hours, so I just listened to my Jodeci tape and my Domino tape on my Walkman. By the time the Domino tape was finished, the plane was landing at the Midway Airport.

The Jada Pinkett look-a-like stewardess helped me get my belongings together and walked me from the plane to the terminal. I was hoping she was doing it because she liked me until the reality that she was probably more than twice my age sunk in and I remembered she was just doing her job. Older people often told me I was more mature than most kids my age, so I sometimes felt older and analyzed situations from the perspective of someone older than I actually was.

As we approached the terminal, I saw my grandmother waiting with two of her friends.

“My people are over there,” I said as I turned to the stewardess. “I’ll be okay from here. Thanks.”

“Oh, your people?” the stewardess replied. “Where are they? You know I’m supposed to walk you to them.”

“That’s my grandmother over there with those two other ladies.”

“Is that your grandmother... the light-skinned one with the blonde hair?”

“Yeah,” I replied as my grandmother noticed me and started to wave. “That’s my grandmother right there.”

“She looks too young to be your grandmother! She’s very pretty. I guess the good looks run in the family,” the stewardess said, smiling.

“Yeah, thanks. She’s pretty.” I ignored the comment about the good looks “running in the family.” I hated when older women would give me compliments to gas my head up, knowing they had absolutely no intention of giving me any play.

“Well, I guess I’ll let you go, then. Enjoy your stay in Chicago.”

The Jada Pinkett-look-a-like stewardess took my face in between her hands, rubbed my cheeks, then turned and walked back toward the airplane. I watched her walk away for a while until I caught myself. I felt bad for looking at her body. I was too young to be thinking about that type of stuff anyway. That is one reason why older women should not flirt with young-boys! I guess I would just have to wait until I got back to Philly to release my frustrations with an older female friend of the family who taught me everything I knew about female anatomy when we would “play doctor.” But that’s another story entirely.

“Hi, Granny,” I said smiling as I approached my grandmother and her two friends. “Where’s Grannydad?”

“Well, hello to you too!” my grandmother exclaimed. “Do you remember Mrs. Jenkins and Mrs. Watts?”

“Hi Mrs. Jenkins and Mrs. Watts,” I said respectfully. No, I did not remember them. Honestly, I wasn’t really concerned with remembering who

they were. I was just worried about seeing my family, especially my grandfather. “Sorry to seem rude Granny, but where’s Grannydad?”

“He wasn’t feeling too good today, and you know how I hate driving to the airport, so Mrs. Jenkins was nice enough to drive me, and Mrs. Watts came along for the ride. Now wasn’t that nice?”

“Yes, thank you Mrs. Jenkins,” I replied, trying to be polite, but not really too concerned. “I only have this one bag so we don’t have to go to the baggage claim.”

We walked to the car and I put my bag in the trunk. I got in the back seat with Mrs. Watts. My grandmother rode in the passenger seat, while Mrs. Jenkins drove. My grandmother must really hate driving to the airport, because it wasn’t even Mrs. Jenkins’ car – she was driving my grandmother’s car!

Before we even drove off, Mrs. Jenkins decided she wanted to turn the radio to the gospel music station and turn the volume almost all the way up. I knew my grandmother listened to gospel music at times, and she sings in the choir at church, but I also know she doesn’t like loud music in the car. I guess she didn’t want to tell Mrs. Jenkins to turn it down. Since I personally never liked gospel music, I put my headphones on and started listening to a mixed-tape I had made.

Somebody in the car must have said something to me because the next thing I knew, my grandmother was yelling at me, telling me how rude it was to listen to headphones in a car full of adults, and, “didn’t my daughter teach you better than that?” I took off the headphones and suffered through the gospel music. I guess some Black people think just because you are religious that means you’re supposed to listen to gospel music. I disagree.

Of course, even though I removed my headphones, nobody spoke to me as we rode back to the South Side. What did a kid my age have in common with three fifty-something-year-old women anyway? I started to zone out and think about other things while staring out the side window. Their conversation caught my ear when the women started complaining about a subject I was familiar with.

“Where does this Ice-T character get off, going on television, calling his wife a bitch?” my grandmother exclaimed.

“I know,” Mrs. Watts chimed in. “He said that he always calls her his ‘b’, and that she likes it! I don’t believe that!”

“Yeah, they were on the Phil Donahue Show. If you watched the rest of the show,” Mrs. Jenkins replied, “you would have heard the dumb young-girl say, ‘I *am* his bitch!’ I think they deserve each other!”

“What type of arrangement is that?” my grandmother asked, dumbfounded. “He calls her a ‘b,’ and she likes it?”

“He used to be a pimp,” I answered my grandmother’s rhetorical question.

“What?” my grandmother snapped as she whipped her head around and looked at me.

“Ice-T used to be a pimp,” I responded matter-of-factly. “That’s probably why he calls her that. Maybe he used to be her pimp. Or maybe he just still views all women like that.”

“What do you know about pimps?” my grandmother asked incredulously.

“A little bit,” I replied timidly. “Not too much. I’ve seen them around. I saw them when I was with Grannydad and I asked him why the guy was being rough with his girl in the middle of the street and he said he was a pimp and told me about them.”

“Oh, so your Grannydad told you about them, huh?” my grandmother replied abruptly. “I ain’t even going to touch that! Well anyway, what’s that movie he’s in? He’s all over the TV because of that movie he’s in!”

“Something about ‘Jack-You City,’ or something like that!” Mrs. Watts blurted out.

“It’s New Jack City,” I respectfully informed them.

“Is that my grandson again?” my grandmother asked in disbelief.

“Yeah, that’s your grandson!” Mrs. Jenkins replied loudly, chuckling. “He knows too much – he’s too grown!”

“Boy, what you know about some R-Rated movie at your age?” my grandmother asked critically in an attempt to mask her amused facial expression.

“I didn’t see it,” I said defending myself. “I just saw the previews on TV.”

“We always said this boy knew too much for his age,” my grandmother commented to her friends. “We used to call him a little old man, even when he was a baby! He was always too aware.”

My grandmother and her friends laughed about it for the rest of the ride home. I just zoned out and anticipated seeing my grandfather. I thought about how much fun it would be in Chicago for the month. I would be able to spend a lot of time with my grandparents, and I would also be able to spend time with my uncle, my aunt and my cousins.

I didn’t appreciate it when people talked about me as if I wasn’t there, but it was okay, because she was my grandmother. What she had told her friends was correct, though. I was too aware of what was going on in the world. And no, I hadn’t seen New Jack City – yet.

Shortly thereafter, we arrived in our section of the South Side. My grandmother dropped off Mrs. Jenkins and Mrs. Watts at their respective houses. I felt guilty about it, but I was so relieved when they were finally out of the car. I wasn’t expecting them to be there when my grandmother picked me up, and it was about a half-hour ride from the Midway airport to my grandparents’ house. I also didn’t really care for the instigating Mrs. Jenkins and Mrs. Watts had contributed to the conversation. I hadn’t come to see them anyway; I came to see my family.

“I’m happy to be back in Chicago, Granny,” I said to my grandmother as we pulled up to the curb in front of the house on Carpenter Street.

“We’re happy to have you here. I’m always happy to see my grandson,” my grandmother replied. “Your grandfather will be happy to see you too. He’s been waiting on you. From the way you acted at the airport, it seems like you came just to see him!”

I turned to my grandmother and she was half-smiling, but she also seemed somewhat offended.

“No, Granny,” I answered quickly, trying to redeem myself, “I’m happy to see you too! I was just surprised Grannydad didn’t come to the airport with you.”

It was true that my grandfather and I were extremely close, but I was also happy to see my grandmother. I didn’t mean to hurt her feelings. I could tell she was trying to act like her feelings weren’t hurt, but that they really were. My mother had also inherited that trait from her – constantly trying to put on a tough exterior. In reality, they are almost overly-sensitive, with feelings that can be hurt just like anybody else; even unintentionally.

I was truly surprised, though, that my grandfather hadn’t picked me up from the airport. My grandmother told me he wasn’t feeling well, but I could not even recall an occasion when my grandfather had been sick before – not even with a headache or a cold. I even remembered my mother telling me that ever since my grandfather’s cousin, James Stromand, who was a prominent politician – an alderman, in Chicago, helped him get a job working with the Cook County Sheriff, my grandfather had not even called out sick once in all of those years. So, it was kind of strange to me that my grandfather didn’t feel well enough to pick me up from the airport.

“Well, ain’t no point in sitting in this car all day burning up gas!” my grandmother exclaimed. “Let’s go in and put your stuff away so you can see your Grannydad.”

I walked into the house after holding the screen-door for my grandmother while she unlocked the front door and walked in. As soon as I entered the living room, I heard the faint sound of bass guitars, horns and drums. As I walked further into the house, through the small living room and dining room and into the kitchen, the sound grew more distinct. I walked to the room where I typically slept at my grandparents’ house, put my luggage on the bed and came back out to the kitchen where once again, I heard the sounds of the horns, bass, guitars, drums and other instruments come together. It was my grandfather’s favorite form of music – jazz. He was listening to one of his countless vinyl records. From where I was standing in the kitchen, I could see him sitting on the sofa in the backroom. I felt a smile come to my face that I thought might not be able to fit between my ears if it continued to grow. When I called my grandfather, he greeted me with a similar smile.

“Grannydad!” I quickly walked over to him and hugged him.

“Hey, what’s happening? How’s my main-man doing?” my grandfather said as he stood up, shook my hand and hugged me.

“Nothing much Grannydad! I’m happy to see you!” I could barely contain my excitement. It had been almost two years since I had seen my grandfather. I hadn’t seen him since we had moved back to Philly.

“I’m happy to see you too, my man!” my grandfather said enthusiastically as he reclaimed his seat on the sofa. I sat down next to him. It was good to finally see my grandfather after all this time. “You’re getting big, Jackson! You’re practically a grown man by now!”

“Yeah, okay! Thanks, Grannydad!” I chuckled as we both laughed at his ridiculous comment. We sat on the sofa and listened to the rest of the record that had been playing when I first came in.

“This is real good music, my man,” my grandfather schooled me. “These guys just went into those juke-joints with their instruments and started jamming! They ain’t need nobody telling them when and how to play... they were just feeling it! But you already know this is my kind of music,” my grandfather acknowledged. “What do you like?”

“This jazz is cool,” I replied, “but I really like rap and R&B.” I hesitated before I continued to respond. “Well, I’m not really allowed to listen to rap that much anymore since we became Witnesses. My parents said it talks about stuff that is inappropriate.”

“Oh, I see,” my grandfather noted, as if I had said something profound. He always made me feel important, like he respected my opinion even though I was just a kid.

“So, now, I mostly listen to R&B,” I continued. “I really like Jodeci, and Boyz II Men, and Christopher Williams has a decent song out right now. Shanice is fine too, and ‘I like her smile!’” I laughed at my own cleverness – Shanice’s most popular single at the time was entitled, “I Like Your Smile.”

“But I can’t stop liking rap, though. I feel bad. I used to just like Run DMC and LL Cool J, and DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince, and my parents really didn’t mind that. But now that I’m older I like other rappers too.”

“Now that you’re *older*, and your taste has matured, who do you like?” my grandfather asked without bringing up the fact that I was still only a little kid.

“I like Kool G Rap, Rakim, Big Daddy Kane, Lords of the Underground, Naughty by Nature and guys like that, but I know my parents would not want me to listen to them. I try not to, but I love their music! I feel bad, but I only listen to it sometimes, when it comes on the radio.”

“Why do you feel bad my man?” my grandfather asked. “Why wouldn’t your parents like those rappers?”

“Um,” I hesitated, not knowing how he would respond to my answer. “They um, kinda talk about shooting people sometimes. Especially Kool G Rap. He’s kind of hardcore!”

“Oh,” my grandfather exclaimed. “Well, I can see why your parents wouldn’t want you to listen to that stuff. They probably don’t want you to end up acting like one of those hardcore knuckleheads.”

“Yeah, I know. I just feel bad because I don’t want to be sneaky. I’ll be listening to the radio, and one minute ‘Forever My Lady’ will be playing and the next minute Kool G is talking about shooting somebody from the Luciano Crime Family or something like that,” I confessed.

“Wow, my man! That music sounds kind of crazy!”

“I guess,” I admitted reluctantly. “But it’s weird,” I continued, “because back when my father had the studio, that’s what a lot of the rappers were starting to talk about... you know, selling drugs and stuff. Some of them were still talking about funny stuff, or just how good they can rap, but a lot of them were starting to talk about serious stuff.”

“Yeah, well it sounds like you have given this a lot of thought,” my grandfather noted. “I’m not too crazy about the rap music myself. Try not to feel too bad about all of that though. Make sure you listen to your mother and father, though, okay?”

“Okay. So, Grannydad, are we going to go out?”

“Oh, um,” my grandfather hesitated. “My man, I’m not feeling too good. I think I’mma need to take a nap.”



“Oh yeah,” I replied. “I forgot you’re sick. Can we go out later?”

“Tomorrow will probably be a better idea,” he replied apologetically. “Maybe your grandmother can take you out.”

“Oh, okay Grannydad,” I replied, dejected, while trying not to sound too depressed. I didn’t want to make my grandfather feel guilty for being sick. I knew he would take me out if he could, and I knew he would have picked me up from airport if he could have. It was just strange to me, because I don’t ever remember my grandfather taking a nap during the day. It was kind of crazy. “Have a good nap, Grannydad.”

My grandfather’s nap turned into him sleeping all night, so I was glad he didn’t promise to take me out later. The next morning, I woke up fairly early, as usual, at about seven-o’clock. I went into the pantry and grabbed the box of Corn Flakes, a large bowl and the jar of sugar. I sat at the kitchen table and ate a bowl of Corn Flakes while watching Bozo the Clown on the little ten-inch television my grandparents had on the kitchen table. After I finished eating and put my bowl in the sink, it dawned on me that my grandfather didn’t seem to be awake yet. He was always up first thing in the morning when I was there. I walked into the back room where he was sprawled out on the couch, and saw him sleeping soundly.

“Grannydad,” I said softly, not wanting to wake him too abruptly. I was surprised he was still asleep and in the same position that he was in when I had left. “Grannydad,” I said again. No response. I tapped him gently on his shoulder, and said his name again. Again, there was no response. He must have been really tired. I wanted to wake him, but I didn’t want to scare him so I gradually tapped him harder and harder, while saying his name louder and louder, until I was almost frantically shaking him and yelling his name. “Grannydad, wake-up!”

“Huh... what the hell?” My grandfather woke up abruptly, but looked confused.

“Wow Grannydad, you must be tired! I’ve been trying to wake you up forever!”

“Boy! Then why didn’t you let me sleep if you thought I must be that tired?” he asked.

“Um, ‘cause you said we could go out today,” I replied timidly.

“Oh yeah,” he acknowledged as if he had suddenly remembered. “I’m a sleep a little while longer, and then I’ll get ready and take you out.” He looked at me and saw my obvious disappointment. “Don’t worry, my man, I’ll take you out! I promise. Your Grannydad is just extra tired these days.”

After I took a shower and got dressed, I went back to my room and grabbed a pad of paper and a pencil. I listened to my headphones while I drew pictures of random stuff. The time passed quickly and I hadn’t even realized how much time had elapsed until the new Mary J. Blige tape I was listening to stopped. I looked up at the clock and realized about an hour had gone by. Frustrated at having to wait so long, but not wanting to wake up my grandfather again if he needed the sleep, I walked into my grandmother’s room.

“Hey, Granny,” I sighed while leaning against the door.

“Hey, Grandson,” she replied, diverting her attention from the talk show she had been watching. “What you doing?”

“I’m waiting on Grannydad to wake up and take me out. I woke him up earlier, but he said he needed more sleep. I don’t want to wake him up again, but I can’t believe he’s sleeping so much!” I exclaimed.

“Yeah, he is sleeping more than usual, but that’s what happens when people get old. Your Granny and Grannydad are getting old,” my grandmother sighed.

“Y’all are *not* old!” I protested. “How old are you anyway?”

“Well, I’m fifty-six and your Grannydad just turned fifty-nine,” my grandmother informed me.

“See!” I exclaimed triumphantly, “Y’all are not old! You’re not even senior citizens yet!”

“Boy, what you know about senior citizens?” my grandmother asked incredulously as she placed her hand on her hip. I was beginning to realize

that my grandmother seemed to like to ask me, “what you know about?” things that I obviously knew something about!

“Y’all not retired yet, so you’re not old! Besides Granny, you still look young! Remember when I was in kindergarten and you took me on that field trip and that bus driver winked at you?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right!” my grandmother laughed. “Let me check on your grandfather.” She left the room and came back about thirty seconds later. “Well, Jackson, your grandfather is out cold. I had plans, but it doesn’t look like he’s going to be waking up and taking you out anytime soon. Why don’t you come out with me?”

“That’s fine,” I replied. I was happy to finally be doing something. I needed somebody to take me out! I could have just stayed home in Philly if I wanted to spend my summer staying in the house all day drawing.

“We’ll probably be gone for a while,” my grandmother informed me. “Why don’t you bring your pad with you so you can draw?”

We left in my grandmother’s car and drove for a while until we came to a parking lot. I noticed a big van already parked in the lot when we arrived. It had a lot of graphic designs on the side of the van.

“Jackson, we’re going to meet one of my friends and go with him, okay?” I grabbed my pencil and pad, along with my Walkman and got out of my grandmother’s car. “Hey Ronald,” my grandmother said to the man who had exited his van when he saw my grandmother’s car pull into the parking space next to him.

“Hey Eileen,” the man put his hand on my grandmother’s hip and leaned in to kiss her on her cheek. My grandmother subtly moved away from him, and simultaneously nodded in my direction.

“Ronald, this is my grandson, Jackson. Jackson, this is my friend, Mr. Ronald,” my grandmother introduced us as if nothing had just happened. I guess she was hoping I hadn’t noticed how Mr. Ronald tried to kiss her, but I was too observant.

“Hi Mr. Ronald,” I said in a concise but respectful manner, trying to act as if I hadn’t noticed what he had just done. “Your truck is nice.”

“Thanks, young man,” he stretched out his hand to shake mine. I looked at his outstretched hand for a second, not wanting to shake it. Then I looked at his face and shook his hand. I couldn’t be rude. He was an adult, and my grandmother’s friend. I just didn’t trust him. What was he doing trying to kiss my grandmother? I didn’t care if they were friends – that was out of pocket, and I’m sure my grandfather would’ve felt the same way. My grandfather probably would have smacked the mustache off Mr. Ronald’s face if he knew he tried to kiss my grandmother. I figured he probably wouldn’t have even tried that if my grandfather had been present. I tried to keep my attitude in check and remain respectful as the three of us entered his van. He was an adult, and my grandmother had told me that he was her friend. I also tried to figure out why Mr. Ronald looked so familiar to me. I felt like I had seen him somewhere before, but I couldn’t figure out where. Oh well. Maybe it would come to me later.

“You like the designs on the truck, huh?” he asked. Without waiting for me to answer, he continued. “You’ll want to look at this book, then.” He handed me a binder. I opened it and started to look at all of the pictures of different cars and trucks with graphics on the sides. “You like that, don’t you? That’s my work on those vehicles!”

“That’s nice,” I responded half-heartedly as I closed the book and put it on the seat next to me. I did not like this Mr. Ronald guy, and I wasn’t feeling this whole situation; even though the cars did look decent. But after all, I *was* with my grandmother, and *she* wouldn’t do anything inappropriate. I could trust *her*. After all, she *is* my grandmother!

I just sat there, looking out the window as Mr. Ronald drove his big, cool truck down the street. “Hey, boy,” he said to me all of a sudden, after whispering something to my grandmother. “You like McDonald’s?” He said it so loud and abruptly, like he was angry or something!

“Um, yeah. I like McDonald’s.”

“*Yes*,” my grandmother corrected me. “You need to be respectful when speaking to your elders. You don’t say ‘yeah’ to grown folks!”

“*Yes*, I like McDonald’s,” I replied. I couldn’t believe she corrected me about how I responded to this nigga! I mean, my grandmother always

corrected me whenever I said “yeah” to her, or to my parents or somebody like that when she was around. But *this nigga*, though? Was she serious? I just met him, and I already didn’t respect him. I mean, it’s kind of hard to respect somebody who tries to give your married grandmother a kiss right in front of your face and then acts like it didn’t happen. On top of that, he tried to suck up to me by showing me pictures of graphics on cars and trucks, then tried to close the deal by attempting to bribe me with McDonald’s like I was stupid or something! I didn’t say anything, of course, because I was with my grandmother, and I wouldn’t think of disrespecting her. Plus, she’s my grandmother – there *had* to be a reasonable explanation for the whole situation.

So, to make an already long story shorter, we went to McDonald’s and my grandmother bought me a meal. Mr. Ronald didn’t even pay for it! I mean, I know I’m not his grandson, but I figured if you were trying to make somebody like you and you offered that person McDonald’s, you would at least pay for it! I guess that’s not how he did things. Then, when they asked what I wanted and I asked for a medium six-piece nugget meal, he had the nerve to say that a six-piece nugget meal was “too much” for me, like I was a baby or something. He didn’t even know me! I was barely ten-years-old, but I was tall for my age. Anyway, he wasn’t anybody special to me, so what made him think he had the right to restrict my chicken nugget intake? To make things even worse, my grandmother listened to him! I was just sitting in the back of the truck, eating my four-piece, baby-nugget meal, and my grandmother told me to say, “thank you,” to Mr. Ronald. I had already thanked her, so why should I thank him? First of all, he didn’t pay for it, and second, he made it so I couldn’t even get what I wanted. I didn’t want a corny Happy-Meal with a toy – I wanted a medium, six-piece nugget meal. Of course, I said, “thank you Mr. Ronald,” because I didn’t want to disrespect *my grandmother*.

After I was finished eating, my grandmother suggested that I listen to my headphones. I was kind of confused about that, because she had just told me the day before, on the drive home from the airport, that it was rude to listen to headphones when you’re in a car with adults. But, whatever; she *is* my grandmother, so she *must* have a good reason to contradict herself like that. We drove around all day and went to a couple places - you know, to the park,

stores and places like that. Then it started to get dark outside and my grandmother told Mr. Ronald that we needed to go back home.

You'll never believe what happened next. We arrived at the parking lot where my grandmother had left her car. Mr. Ronald and my grandmother got out of the truck and my grandmother told me to wait in the car for a minute. After sitting in the truck for a little while, I took my headphones off and started to wonder what was going on. Then I noticed in the side mirror that *this nigga* had his hands on my grandmother's waist! Only this time, she didn't pull away. I did the only thing a little kid can do in that situation – I turned my head away and tried to think of a reasonable explanation as to why they would be hugging like that. I mean, that is *my grandmother* – there *had* to be a reasonable explanation for the whole situation. I assumed Mr. Ronald's mother had probably died recently and my grandmother was about to hug him and I just happened to see the part when his hands were on her waist. I mean – it had to be something like that. She *is* my grandmother after all. ***She wouldn't do anything wrong.***

After a couple minutes, my grandmother stuck her head into the car and told me we were going home. I didn't really say anything, and I played like I was half-asleep, even though I rarely ever got tired during the day. I acted tired so my grandmother wouldn't get upset when I didn't say "bye" and "thank you" to *that nigga*, Mr. Ronald.

We entered my grandmother's car and before we pulled off, she turned to me and asked me if I had a good time, as if that was even possible considering the circumstances. I lied and told her I did, because I didn't want to hurt her feelings.

"That's good," my grandmother replied. "I'm glad you had a good time." She then turned and looked at me before proceeding. "Jackson, I need you to do your Granny a favor. I need you not to tell your Grannydad that we went out with Mr. Ronald. He doesn't really like Mr. Ronald too much. Can you do that for your Granny? Just keep it between me and you?"

"Yeah Granny, that's fine." I thought about how it was weird that we went out with a man my grandfather didn't like, and that my grandmother made sure she asked me not to tell him about it. This time, she didn't even correct

me for saying, “Yeah.” She just thanked me as we drove away from the parking lot. She didn’t even turn on the radio.

That was a confusing day. I kept looking out the side window as we drove home. I didn’t even listen to my headphones, even though I hated being in a car with no music, especially when nobody is saying anything. I was trying not to add things up in my head, because they made sense, but they didn’t make sense. My grandmother knew I was very aware, and I thought about how *she* was the one who always mentioned how I was “too grown.” I assumed since she realized that, she wouldn’t do anything wrong, *especially* when I was around. There *had* to be a reasonable explanation for what happened that day. My head was hurting. I think I would have rather stayed home all day long and drawn in my pad and watched TV or went over to Bobby’s house or something. I wondered what my grandfather did after he woke up. I wondered if he was still tired. I wondered if he was annoyed when he woke up and saw I wasn’t there, even though he promised he would wake up and take me out later. I guess it was my fault – I should have just waited for him to wake up, and then my head probably wouldn’t have been hurting.

## Chapter 6...

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**M**y grandfather actually did take me out twice during my visit to Chicago. The first time he took me out, we went to Harold's, got some fried chicken and drove around the South Side and the West Side for an hour or two. The second time he took me out was the day before I left to go back home to Philly. We stayed out all day that time.

My grandfather told me he wanted me to meet some of his relatives I had never met before. We went to this one house on the West Side. When we got back to the South Side, we stopped at the Robert Taylor Projects. It was the biggest projects I had ever seen. I had been in a lot of different projects, especially in Harlem and Queens where some of my aunts and cousins lived. Robert Taylor was different. All the walkways had metal fencing, so it literally looked like a zoo with cages. No wonder a lot of people act the way they do in the projects! They set it up like you're an animal, and then the cops treat you like you're an animal – how do they expect people to act? Especially when you're poor and hungry...

My grandfather parked the car on State Street, and we walked across the concrete to one of the buildings. As we walked, I noticed some girls arguing and getting ready to fight. We walked past a group of guys who were playing craps and they nodded to my grandfather. It was a typical summer day in the projects. We went into the building and took one of the small elevators, which reeked of urine, up a few floors. When we got out of the elevator, I was shocked to see a man lying motionless on the ground.

"Is he dead, Grannydad?"

"Naw," my grandfather responded. "He looks like a junkie... he probably just passed out there."

We stepped over the man's body and walked down the hallway. There was gang graffiti all over the walls, mostly Gangster Disciple graffiti. I'm pretty sure they were the biggest gang in Chicago back then. There were pitchforks, crowns, stars of David and "GDs" spray-painted all over the



walls. We walked down the hallway until we reached our destination. My grandfather knocked on the apartment door.

“Hey, Roy!” a smiling, brown-skinned woman said as she opened the door. “Come on in!” she said loudly as she motioned with her arm and stepped aside so that we could enter the apartment. She was very friendly and she had a nice big smile which displayed her ultra-white teeth. “Is this your grandson you said you were going to bring over?”

“Yeah, this is my main-man,” my grandfather responded as we walked into the small room filled with people. “Jackson, these are your Grannydad’s relatives; and yours too.”

The small living room was filled with about twenty-five to thirty people. My grandfather went around the room and introduced me to everybody. They were all really nice. It was strange to me that I had so many relatives I had never met before. They were all either brown-skinned like my grandfather, or darker-skinned than he was. I was the only light-skinned one in the room. There were a couple of caramel-complexioned people in there, but I was definitely the lightest one in the room. I could be sure that the high-yellow part of my family was definitely not on my grandfather’s side!

Everybody was nice to me. They didn’t treat me the way my mother and grandmother said a lot of my grandfather’s family had treated them in the past. We sat around the relatively small apartment, laughed, played cards, listened to music and just “busted it up.” A lot of them drank, but we left before anybody got too drunk. It wasn’t even three-o’clock in the afternoon yet and they were already guzzling forty-ounce bottles of Olde English and all kinds of liquor! They had been drinking all day! After a while my grandfather announced that we were leaving. Everybody gave a hearty “good-bye” and said it was nice to see me. Some people said it was nice to see me “again” although I didn’t recall ever meeting them before. After we left, my grandfather told me he had wanted to make our exit while, “everybody was still having a good time.” He said, “You know how colored folks act when they get too much liquor in them!”

“I had a good time, Grannydad!” I always loved hanging out with him. It was always fun.

“Well I’m glad about that, my man. I did too! Now, what do you want to eat?”

“Um, I can go for some more fried chicken!”

“Harold’s or Popeye’s?” my grandfather asked.

“I’ll take Popeye’s, please.” I loved Harold’s, but I was trying to stay out a little while longer, and we would be able to sit down and eat at Popeye’s. I was leaving the next day, so I wanted to spend as much time with my grandfather as possible because I figured he would take a nap when we got back to the house. He was looking pretty tired by the time we left the projects.

When we arrived at Popeye’s, I had a few chicken wings and a large red-cream soda. My grandfather just watched me as I ate. He didn’t eat anything because he said he wasn’t hungry. He said he was too tired to eat. Then he looked at me with a sad expression on his face, much like the expression he had when I moved back to Philly from Chicago. This time there seemed to be an extra measure of sadness.

“What’s wrong, Grannydad?” I asked. I wasn’t used to seeing my grandfather look so sad. I never knew him to be an emotional person.

“Oh, nothing, Jackson,” he responded at first. He paused before he continued. “It was fun hanging out with my main man. I just wish I could have spent more time with you since you’re leaving tomorrow.”

“Oh, don’t feel bad, Grannydad,” I reassured him. “I had a lot of fun. And we can do it again the next time I come. I might try to come to Chicago *every* summer!”

“Oh, that would be nice. I would like that.” He seemed distracted. I assumed he just had something on his mind. It must have been “adult stuff,” so I didn’t ask him about it. When we got back to the house, my grandfather said goodnight and went straight to bed. My man was so tired. I felt bad for him – I couldn’t imagine being tired like that all the time! I would hate that – especially since I was hardly ever tired.

I could hardly sleep that night. I had so much fun in Chicago. Sometimes I wished we could live in Chicago again, only this time my father would be

with us too. That would be the best of both worlds – living with my father and being able to see my grandfather all the time too. I never knew my father's father, so these were the two men I was closest to. My grandfather was like a second father to me. I would have loved to live in Chicago again. I would miss my other grandmother though, my father's mother in West Philly. It's like you can never have the best of both worlds – something always has to suffer!

The next morning, my grandmother and my uncle took me to the airport. My grandfather was too tired to drive. I felt so sorry for him, especially because I could tell he felt badly about not having the energy to take me to the airport.

When we arrived at the airport, my grandmother walked me to the terminal while my uncle parked his car. They sat with me while I waited to board the plane. When the airport staff made the announcement to board the plane, I hugged my grandmother and my uncle shook my hand and patted me on the head. I said my goodbyes and they told me to call them when I got home. I carried my bag onto the plane and sat down. I put on my seatbelt and waited for the plane to take off as I gazed out of the window. I put on my headphones and started listening to a Boyz II Men tape. I took that tape out when "It's So Hard to Say Goodbye" started to play. The song was making me depressed. I didn't realize at that moment how appropriate that song was for my departure from Chicago. And little did I know that the pain I would feel would be unlike any other pain I had ever felt before.

## Chapter 7...

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I had mixed emotions when I arrived at the Philadelphia International Airport and exited the plane. I was happy to be home, but I felt like I hadn't spent enough time with my grandfather. We spent as much time together as he had the energy for, but it wasn't nearly as much time as I had grown accustomed to spending with him during my previous stays in Chicago.

I also was a little apprehensive about my older sister, Journe', coming to live with us. I had been so excited the whole school year about her moving into the new house with the rest of the family. Ever since my father told me Journe' was moving in with us at the end of the school year, I had been sharing my good news with my classmates, as if they cared. Journe' and I had grown close from the times she stayed with us over school vacations and from the time we spent together when she and my cousins would come to West Philly during the summer. But after staying at my Auntie Nessa's house and seeing how badly my step-cousins had treated her, I was afraid my sister would try the same nonsense with my mother.

My cousins hadn't always treated my aunt that way. The dynamic in the relationship between them had changed since they had become teenagers. It seemed as if they had grown comfortable consistently speaking abusively about my aunt behind her back and giving her a hard time. When I stayed over that summer, I picked up my cousin, Raquel's, book and started to read it, but noticed some writing in the first few pages. Raquel and my other cousin, Jaheem, had written comments back and forth about my aunt, and they said some really disrespectful stuff. Of course, I didn't live there, but based on what I knew about her, I didn't think my aunt deserved that. I was in an awkward predicament after I read that. I found a pencil to erase the writing so my aunt wouldn't stumble upon their conversation like I had. My Aunt Nessa noticed me erasing something from my cousin's book, asked me what I was doing, then took it and read it before allowing me to respond. She was so upset. It caused a lot of drama between my uncle, my aunt and my two cousins. My aunt never revealed that she got the book from me, but I still felt awkward around my cousins after that. We were cool, and I liked hanging

around my guy cousin, Jaheem. He was several years older than me, bigger and stronger, so I liked when he would try to bully me and slap-box because it would help me to improve my hand-to-hand combat skills.

In any event, I hoped to avoid having those types of family conflicts between my mother and Journe'. I didn't anticipate that happening, but you never know. I had never lived with my older sister full-time before and she was fourteen years old now. I knew for a fact that her mother didn't like my mother at all, so I could only imagine all the trash-talking that had been going on in their house for years. Hopefully it wouldn't be a bad situation. A lot of changes took place that summer, and I was hoping everything would go relatively smoothly.

All these thoughts were racing through my mind as I walked off of the plane into the terminal and saw my father and Journe' waiting there for me.

"Hey, y'all," I said with a forced smile as I approached them. Don't get me wrong – I was happy to see them; I just had a lot on my mind.

"Hey, Jax!" my father said as he grabbed my bag and carried it for me. "How was your flight?"

"It was good," I replied. "It's not a long flight, though. I always hear about people watching movies on the plane, so I asked the stewardess if I could watch one, but she told me the flight was too short for a movie. And this other kid had McDonald's and all I had was peanuts and soda. When I asked the stewardess if I could have McDonald's she said that the kid's parents paid for the McDonald's with the ticket, or something like that. I wish I could have had McDonald's instead of some cheap peanuts and half a can of soda!"

"Boy, you didn't need no McDonald's on the plane! You get enough McDonald's at home," my father replied.

"I guess," I sighed. "But whenever Mommy gets me and Eva some McDonald's, she buys the two-hamburger meal and asks for an extra cup and splits the soda and the fries between me and Eva! That ain't enough for me. I'm getting too old to be splitting meals with her!"

"Hey, *buddy*!" my sister interrupted. She gave me a hug and a kiss on my forehead. I resisted the urge to push her away. I didn't want to hurt her

feelings but she was entirely too affectionate. I didn't really like hugging and kissing my sisters unless it was a special occasion. It just felt awkward.

"Hey Journe'," I replied as I fought the compulsion to wipe off the spot where she had kissed me.

We talked as the three of us walked to the car. I observed the Philadelphia city skyline as my father drove. I loved seeing the skyline because it made me feel like I was finally home. I noticed it was so much smaller than Chicago's skyline. Neither Philly's skyline nor Chicago's skyline could compare to Manhattan's skyline though.

"Philly's skyline isn't that wide compared to Chicago's," I commented.

"Yeah," my father replied, "when I first came here from New York, they only had a couple of tall buildings in Philly. It was because of some charter that said they couldn't build any buildings taller than William Penn's head on top of City Hall. Ain't that kind of stupid? They had just started building tall buildings when I got here. I always thought Philly was kind of a backwards city. Even the people acted like they were back in the fifties, especially the old guys like Larry, my mother's second husband. They even had old-school haircuts!"

My father was always dissing Philly. He said he liked Philly, but he said he was glad he grew up in New York. He would diss Chicago too when he wanted to antagonize my mother and start a playful debate about why New York was better than Chicago. She would get offended and start bashing New York. The one thing they could agree on was that they were glad they didn't grow up in Philly. I didn't feel that way. I love *all* the cities I came up in and around – Philly, Chicago and New York.

"So, how was your stay in Chicago?" my father asked, changing the subject.

"It was good," I replied. "I had fun." I decided not to comment on any of the drama associated with my aunt and my cousins, or with my grandmother and that *nigga*, Mr. Ronald. "It was weird though, because Grannydad was so tired all the time."

"Oh, yeah?" my father responded. "What do you mean?"

“He slept all the time,” I informed him. “He was too tired to take me out most of the time. He only took me out twice!” I complained. “He was sleeping most of the day and at night too. Granny said it was because they’re getting old, but they’re not old!”

“That’s true – they’re not old,” my father agreed. “Maybe he was just sick.”

“Yeah, maybe... but the whole time, though? Besides, Mommy said Grannydad never got sick her whole life – not even a cold!”

“Yeah, well he got sick for once and maybe he stayed sick longer because his body wasn’t used to it. He’ll be okay. He’s tough.”

My father was right; my grandfather was tough! My father’s reassurance put my mind at ease. My grandfather and my father were the toughest guys I knew. He’d be okay. Maybe he had the flu. I forgot all about it. When I called and spoke with my grandparents after that, I never even thought to ask if my grandfather was still sick and neither of them mentioned it. I figured everything was okay. My grandfather must have made a full recovery.

If only that had been the case.

About two months later, I walked past my parents’ bedroom door in the new house – their room was right next to mine, and I overheard my mother talking. She had hung up the phone a few moments earlier. I realized my mother sounded upset and knocked on the half-open door.

“Are you okay, Mommy?” I asked as I walked into my parents’ room after being given permission to enter. My parents were sitting on the bed and my father was hugging my mother.

“Grannydad is sick – very sick,” my mother responded dejectedly.

“Oh, he’s sick again? He’ll get better,” I reassured her.

“No, Jackson, he won’t,” my mother replied, her eyes welling up with tears.

“What do you mean?” I asked, puzzled. “He *has* to get better.” That didn’t even make sense to me. My mother was a nurse practitioner – I thought she should have known better than that.

“Your Grannydad has a type of sickness that people don’t get better from,” my father explained, looking me in the eyes while still hugging my mother. They weren’t making sense. My father observed the puzzled look on my face. “Your Grannydad has cancer, Jackson. He has the type of cancer people don’t recover from.”

“Oh... well Grannydad isn’t ‘people.’ He’ll get better,” I replied matter-of-factly.

“No, he’s not, Jackson!” My mother broke down. “My Daddy’s going to die! Oh no, my Daddy’s going to die!” my mother sobbed as my father hugged her closely and spoke to her softly, trying to comfort her.

I sat on the bed next to them and hugged my mother. I didn’t say anything else, because she obviously didn’t believe me. I just hugged her for a while as she sobbed and kept repeating, “my Daddy’s going to die,” over and over again. I felt so sorry for her, but I would have thought that she would have known better. I guess they didn’t know my Grannydad like I did. He was so tough – even my father had said it. My grandfather wouldn’t die from being sick. Even if it was cancer – my grandmother had breast cancer before and she was fine. They cut off one of her breasts, but she had survived. It didn’t matter even if he did have a type of cancer most people die from. My Grannydad was too strong for that. They didn’t know my grandfather like I did. He would be fine. He was only fifty-nine years old. He was too young to die anyway. I didn’t really stress over it because I was convinced that he would be fine.

My mother made several trips to Chicago over the next six months. I wanted to go with her every time, but I wasn’t allowed to because I would have missed too much school. After about six months passed, my mother told me that me and Eva were going to drive with her and my Auntie Bella, who I was also very close to, to Chicago so we could see my grandfather. I was so happy! We left a couple of days later.

Going to see my grandfather at the hospital gave me an eerie feeling. I didn’t like hospitals. We used to visit my great-grandmother in the nursing home until she had to go into the hospital. She died shortly after being admitted to the hospital. She probably stayed in there for several months, but



as a kid, it seemed like I only visited her a few times in the hospital and then she was dead. My mother had been in the hospital several times for different problems and she was okay, but I just didn't really like hospitals.

Wait a second – something just dawned on me while writing this! That's where I knew that *nigga*, Mr. Ronald from! He worked at the nursing home where my great-grandmother stayed when I was a kid! He used to help take care of her. So, *that's* where my grandmother met him! *I knew that nigga looked familiar!*

Anyway, I don't know what was I was thinking, but when we walked into my grandfather's hospital room, I was expecting him to look the same way he always looked. I was shocked to see that he had lost so much weight. He was about five-feet, eleven inches tall and he was solidly built before. Now he was skinny, almost frail, and he had lost all of his hair. He didn't have any hair at all – not even his eyebrows, his mustache or that triangle goatee under his lip. I was shocked at my grandfather's appearance. He looked like a completely different person.

Anyway, I ran up and hugged him. He hugged me back, but his hug was kind of weak. He also asked me not to hug him too hard, because it hurt. He laughed and said I was getting too strong. I didn't say anything, but my feelings were hurt that it caused him physical pain when I hugged him. I was only a kid. I was tall for my age, but nowhere near his height, and definitely not as strong as a grown man! It was like he wasn't strong anymore and that hurt my feelings. We sat with him and talked. He must have been in pain because he grimaced randomly throughout our conversations although he didn't complain. It was sad to see him like that, but I tried to act like I was fine. Before we left, one of the nurses brought my grandfather some vanilla ice cream. He motioned to the nurse and told her to, "Give it to my main man." He always looked out for me. My mother told him he was spoiling me.

Then, it was time to leave and I grew very sad. I hugged my grandfather again; softly this time, which was hard because for one thing, I wasn't used to having to do that, and also because I wanted to give him a big hug because I wasn't going to see him again before I went back to Philly. My grandfather wanted to walk us to the elevator, but my mother insisted that he get some rest. My mother and sister gave him a hug and kiss and the three of us walked

down the cold, white, sterile hallway. As we waited for the elevator, my mother scolded me for something I had jokingly said while we were in still in the room with my grandfather.

“Didn’t I tell you to stop yelling at the boy?” my grandfather said as he slowly shuffled around the corner. “It’s not that serious, girl.”

I wasn’t upset with my mother even though she was yelling at me for something trivial. I knew she was under a lot of stress.

“Daddy, I told you to rest,” my mother responded frustrated. “You need your rest!”

“Well, I’m a grown man and I know what I need, and I needed to see y’all one more time before you leave. I don’t know when I’ll be seeing y’all again.”

“Hey, Grannydad!”

“Hey, my man,” he said as he patted me on the head. “Don’t y’all be driving your mother crazy!”

“I won’t, Grannydad,” I conceded as the elevator door opened. I hugged him again before I stepped into the elevator. “I love you.”

“I love you too, my man. I’ll see y’all later.”

“I’ll be back to Chicago to see you as soon as I can, Daddy,” my mother reassured my grandfather, and herself, as she kissed him on the forehead and then stepped onto the elevator.

My grandfather stood there and waved as the elevator door closed. We all waved back to him.

**The next time I saw my grandfather he was in a casket.**

Not two weeks had passed when the phone at my house rang. It seemed as if it rang louder than it had ever rang before. I was in my room with the door closed, drawing and listening to music on the boom box my Aunt Nessa had sent me from Chicago. I walked to my bedroom door and opened it. I heard my mother hang up the phone and start sobbing. I walked into my parents’ bedroom and asked my father why my mother was crying even though I

already knew. My grandfather was dead. My Grannydad was gone. I still can't describe how I felt. Besides the fact that it was so hard to see my mother like that, I couldn't accept the fact that the coolest old-head I had ever known, one of the toughest men alive wasn't alive anymore. But I didn't cry. I just walked over to where my parents were sitting on the floor, sat down next to my mother and hugged her. I couldn't cry – I had to be strong for her.

We left for Chicago that weekend. The night of the funeral I had gotten dressed and was waiting to leave when I walked past my grandmother's bedroom and saw her sitting on the bed in silence with her head down. She was all dressed and ready to go. But she was not *really* ready. Her bedroom door was already open, so I knocked on her doorway and softly asked her if she was okay. She didn't even look up. I walked in and sat on the bed next to her and put my arm around her.

“Granny,” I said, “it will be okay. I love you.”

As soon as the words left my mouth my grandmother leaned on my shoulder and started to sob. I wanted to do the same, but I didn't. I had to be strong for her.

A limousine picked us up from my grandmother's house to take us to the funeral. That was the first time I had been in a limousine and because of that, I hated limousines for literally well over a decade. When we arrived at the funeral home I was thrilled to get out of that damn limousine. It was raining, of course. I actually found comfort in the feeling that the universe empathized with my mood.

I was surprised to see so many people as we walked into the funeral home. There were at least three hundred people at my grandfather's funeral. I didn't even realize my grandfather knew that many people. He didn't go to church or anything. I guess all those people he took me to see over the years came to his funeral. In addition, as I previously mentioned, my grandfather's first-cousin was a prominent politician in Chicago. A lot of the people at the funeral were probably there because of my grandfather's relationship with his cousin. People had to stand in the large foyer of the funeral home. The foyer was filled with people even though the auditorium of the funeral home was quite large. I thought of the irony in that funeral homes and churches in

the hood are usually some of the most beautiful and opulent buildings in the area. I guess those are professions that have always been profitable – especially with all the urban youth and Black and brown people who meet with premature, untimely deaths.

We walked to the front of the auditorium and sat down with the rest of the immediate family. I sat between my father and my aunt. My younger sister, Eva, was sitting on my father's lap, and my mother was sitting on the other side of my father. Almost everybody was crying – but I wasn't. I had to be strong for the rest of my family. I looked up at my father and saw a tear fall out of his eye and roll halfway down his cheek until he wiped it off with his hand. My little sister was bawling, but I don't think she had a good idea of what was going on. I think she was crying mostly because of the fact that everybody else was crying. She was still relatively young. The preacher started speaking and invited the family up to view the body.

***“View the body? His body is in here? What the hell is going on?”***

I looked over and saw my grandfather in an open casket in the front of the room. I didn't have any idea why somebody would have a dead person's body around, as if the funeral itself and the fact that he was dead weren't already depressing enough! My family was one of the first to view the body up close. We walked down the aisle towards the casket and stood next to it. I looked at my grandfather's body and a feeling I can't describe with words came over me. It was much worse than helplessness and sorrow. One day, when I invent the word that can describe how I felt, I'll let you know, and I'll enter it for submission in the dictionary so everybody else who has seen the dead body of someone they love can use it. My mother was crying so hard. Then she did something that took me by surprise – she bent over and started kissing my grandfather's face. She appeared to be in a trance. I felt so sorry for her.

My grandfather looked so different. He looked so skinny and sick – even more so than he had when I had seen him in the hospital. I could tell that the undertaker had put a lot of makeup on him, but my grandfather still didn't look right. My father gently took my mother's arm and led us back to our seats. I knew for sure that I never wanted to go to another open casket funeral. Why the hell would anybody want to see his or her grandfather dead

in a box? I was getting angrier and more depressed as I thought about it. It hurt me to see my grandfather like that. I would have rather been able to remember watching him wave to us as the elevator door closed at the hospital. Instead, I have to remember seeing him in a casket with his eyes and mouth sewn shut and all this powder on his face as the last time I saw him. He looked sick at the hospital, but at least he was still walking and talking – he was still alive!

I was furious with the unidentified, sadistic, insensitive person who had come up with the idea of an open casket viewing. I was mad at the world. I was mad at God for letting my grandfather die. I was mad at myself for fooling myself into thinking my grandfather was too strong to succumb to cancer. How could he die? He was too young. He was too strong. It wasn't fair. I couldn't be strong anymore. I leaned into my father's side and broke down. I started crying uncontrollably. My father put his arm around me and kissed me on the top of my head. I hated to cry. I felt so weak. Now I was mad at myself for crying. But there was nothing I could do about it. Why did my Grannydad have to die?

I gained a measure of control after about five minutes. My grandmother went up to the casket and just stood there looking down at my grandfather's lifeless body. Then she started to talk and cry simultaneously.

"I tried, Roy. I'm sorry... I tried," she uttered. Then her voice and her crying grew louder and louder, until she was almost screaming. "I tried Roy! God, I tried! I'm sorry! I tried! I didn't mean to do it! I'm sorry! I tried Roy; really I tried!"

My grandmother collapsed to the floor as she continued to cry and scream. She was hysterical. My father got up immediately and helped her get off the floor. My uncle grabbed a wheelchair while my father supported my grandmother and tried to comfort her. When my uncle rolled the wheelchair over, my father helped my grandmother into the wheelchair and began to push it down the aisle towards the foyer. I stopped crying immediately – it was time for me to man-up and be strong again for my grandmother. I grabbed her shoes, which had fallen off, and walked with them down the aisle. My grandmother was quietly sobbing, and almost whispering by the time we got to the foyer, "I tried, Roy... I tried."

We took that dreadful limousine back to my grandmother's house. A lot of people came to her house after the funeral. There was a lot of food – fried chicken, sweet-potato pie, cornbread and a plethora of other food I loved. I wasn't hungry. All these people were at the house; some laughing, some talking, and some crying. I wasn't crying anymore. I didn't even recognize half the people in my grandfather's house. It was like they were having a party after the funeral. Black people do this all the time, but I decided it was the dumbest thing I had ever heard of – next to open casket viewings. What type of disloyal, insensitive person has a party for you after your grandfather dies?

To make matters worse, some people – people I didn't even know, started arguing over things my grandfather supposedly had told them they could have when he died. What type of insensitive, materialistic people would argue over things my grandfather supposedly said they could have, especially at this point in time? The funeral hadn't been over for an hour yet, and my "relatives" were arguing over irrelevant, materialistic nonsense. It was like Sonny said in the movie, *A Bronx Tale* – "nobody cares." I sat in silence and thought about how stupid the whole situation was. You didn't hear me asking for my Grannydad's stuff; and I was his "main-man!" These self-centered "grown folks" I didn't even really know were more concerned with guns, jazz records, old books, movies and model cars than they were about the fact that my grandfather had died and the whole family was suffering. They made me sick. I know this is going to sound messed up, but I wished they had died instead of my grandfather. That way, he would still be there, in his house, and they wouldn't be there arguing over his belongings.

**I hated them all.**

That was the defining moment when I started to change. That was when things in my life started to get hectic.

## Chapter 8...

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Several years passed, and to tell the truth, I was never the same after my grandfather died. I'm still not the same. Something in me died along with my grandfather. Now that I think about it, that was such a long time ago, over twenty-five years ago; so, I guess in a sense, I have been the same for the more than twenty-five years that have passed since I lost my grandfather.

For one thing, I grew very depressed, which I guess is natural for most people who lose someone they love. It was very hard for me to smile, let alone laugh. To this day, I don't smile or laugh much.

Another thing that changed in me was that it grew harder and harder for me to want to do the things required by my religion. I continued to do everything I was "supposed" to do, according to my religion and the Bible, for several years, but it seemed to get harder and harder every day. It became especially difficult when people I knew consistently harassed me for being one of Jehovah's Witnesses. People always make fun of Jehovah's Witnesses. They are often the butt of jokes regarding the door-to-door preaching they are known for. There is even a large family of well-known Black comedians from New York City who always make fun of Jehovah's Witnesses and how the Witnesses, "sell magazines." I later found out that this successful family of comedians was raised in the religion.

So, if people on TV always make fun of the religion, you can be sure my peers were antagonizing me at school. They would always make negative comments and I started to hate living in the suburbs even more. It was already hard enough moving to the suburbs where there weren't that many other Black people. They also made fun of me for being a Witness, and it irritated me to no end. At first, I would defend my religion, and some of the kids I was friendly with would listen when I explained that I wasn't just a Witness because my parents wanted me to be. I explained to them that the religion saved my parents' marriage and that I didn't plan on discontinuing practicing the religion when I turned eighteen, like so many other children of

the religion talk about doing. You'll find out later how that actually turned out.

After a while, though, it seemed to me like I was actually trying to convince myself. I felt guilty about it, but I was so discouraged. It had always been harder for me to "be good," because I felt like I had too much of the streets in me, even as a little kid. I was always drawn to the street element, and before we moved to the house in the suburbs, I would get in trouble for hanging out in front of the building with the so-called "OGs." If you really know anything about the streets, you know there is illegal activity everywhere you go, even in the suburbs. So even when we lived in the white-washed suburbs, I always seemed to gravitate towards the guys who were into the illegal way of life. I don't think moving to the suburbs made much of a difference – I think it was in my blood.

The fact that I felt this way, coupled with the fact that I was growing bitter towards God for my grandfather's death and my situation in life made it increasingly more difficult for me to, "do the right thing." I tried to convince myself that I shouldn't be mad at God for letting my grandfather die. I knew everything the Bible says about why people die and the hope for people to be resurrected in the future to live on Earth and never die, but it was just becoming what people call, "head-knowledge." I knew all of it in my head, and I could explain it to people when I went preaching door-to-door. I could explain it to kids at school, and I even tried to convince my family members who weren't Jehovah's Witnesses – most of my relatives are not Jehovah's Witnesses – to try to help them feel better about losing my grandfather. But it didn't make me feel better at all. I would cry suddenly sometimes for what seemed to be no apparent reason. When I thought about my grandfather while I was crying, it made me cry even more heavily. I hated it. I have always hated crying, especially as a male. I know people say, "Jesus wept," and I don't necessarily think other guys are punks when they cry, as long as they have a really good reason. For instance, when Jesus cried, it was because his friend died. So, I understand crying when somebody close to you dies is reasonable. I guess I have always hated crying so much because it makes me feel like I don't have control over my emotions. If I could stop myself from crying when I was a little kid, why the hell couldn't I stop myself from crying at thirteen years old?



So, I started to pray more often. At least, that's what I did at first. I asked God to help me "be good," because I felt myself slipping. It didn't seem to work. My entire seventh-grade year was a major struggle to "be good." The struggle ended that summer after seventh grade, when I stopped fighting.

I started hanging out with a guy I met in sixth grade, my first year in junior high school. His name was Nassir. He was really cool and we became friends right away. I also liked the fact that he respected my religion. He never made fun of it. He also witnessed the change in me firsthand. He saw me change from a strong, devout Jehovah's Witness who tried to do everything I was supposed to do as a Witness; to somebody who just "didn't give a fuck." He asked me one day what caused me to change. I told him that if God didn't care about me, it didn't really matter what I did and there was no point in me trying to be good. If God hadn't helped me to be good even when I asked him to help me, he obviously didn't care what I did. Nassir couldn't really argue with my logic. His mother and grandmother, who he lived with, were Baptists, but he and his mother didn't attend church regularly. Only his grandmother attended church regularly. His father was a Muslim, but he still lived in West Philly.

There was another guy I became close with around the same time, named Gee. He was always cool, much like Nassir. We didn't really hang out as much outside of school back then, though, because we didn't live as close together as me and Nassir did. When I started wilting, Nas was right there with me. At first, we weren't acting too wild. We were just messing with females and the other activities teenage boys typically engage in. He was dating a white girl for a while. She was really nice; her name was Aubrey. I wasn't really into white girls myself. I really wasn't attracted to them for the most part. I liked females of color; Black girls and Latinas. I was initially apprehensive about dealing with the girls at my school, because there were several kids who went to school with us who were also Jehovah's Witnesses. I didn't want my behavior to be exposed to other Witnesses who knew my parents. After a while, I grew too horny to care. I'm sure you can relate, especially if you were ever a thirteen-year-old guy!

I eventually began to feel guilty for how I was behaving. Not only was I going out, messing with girls, smoking weed and all that, but I was also lying

to my parents about why I came home late from school. It wasn't a problem all of the time, because my mother worked during the day and my father worked at night and would sleep during the day. Sometimes, if I got too "involved" in what I was doing, though, I would get home too late, and my mother would be home from work and my father would be awake. My solution was to proactively lie about where I was going to be for several hours after school.

There wasn't a school bus that came to my neighborhood for my junior high school because we lived in a neighborhood that was on the border between the two junior high schools I could have attended. So, I had to take a bus that went to Nassir's neighborhood and then I walked home, which took about fifteen minutes. He lived in a lower income neighborhood of co-op housing, which was made up of row-homes which were used for military housing during and directly following World War I. When I was a teenager, mostly all of the Blacks and Latinos who live in those suburbs lived in that large development. I used to hang out there every day with Nassir and my other associates who lived there. As I mentioned before, we would smoke weed, fight and all that. It was fun to me because it reminded me of my days as a young-boy back in my old neighborhoods. It was also a release for all my pent-up anger and frustration.

I concocted the "perfect" excuse to enable me to continue my daily, after-school routine. My parents knew I was having trouble with math in school. My math grades had been suffering since we had started Pre-Algebra in the beginning of eighth-grade. I told my parents I stayed after school for a couple hours every day to get extra help with math. It was a good excuse, especially due to the fact that there were a few times I really had stayed after school for help. I knew to tell my parents the late bus coming home left school at four-forty-five and I wouldn't get home until close to six-o'clock by the time I walked home from the bus stop. That gave me plenty of time to wile-out between two-forty in the afternoon, the time I really left school, and six-o'clock when I got home. This was the "perfect" situation. Because I was so bad at algebra, I was able to use this excuse in ninth grade too, when I went into high school and took Algebra. I'll tell you more about that later.

After a short while, I started to feel increasingly guilty about lying to my parents and everything else I was involved in. One day after school, when I was over Nassir's house chilling, I started to tell him about how depressed I was.

"Man, I'm trying to get the fuck out of here, yo! I feel like my life is so fucked up," I groaned.

"What the hell you talking about, 'your life is fucked up' nigga? You better be glad you at least live with *both* of your parents, man! You're lucky!" he replied. Nas' parents were divorced. He still saw his father but he always wanted to spend more time with him. It made him feel depressed at times, and I understood. I remembered what that felt like.

"Oh, I know what you mean, man. That's not what I'm talking about, though."

"What you mean, then?" Nassir asked. He seemed genuinely concerned. He was a good friend. He was much nicer to me than all the phony Jehovah's Witnesses I knew.

"Man, I just mean my shit is so fucked up! Being a Witness ain't for me, yo!" I exclaimed, highly frustrated. "It's hard enough doing this shit already, and then when shit ain't right at home, and when I'm all depressed and shit... You remember when my mother had left a couple months ago, right?"

"Yeah, I remember," Nassir acknowledged. "She came back after a week, though, right?"

"Yeah, man, but I thought my parents were really going to get divorced! And the way my father was talking, it seemed like he thought so too! He was talking about me and Eva going to live with my mother. It was bullshit! Plus, my older sister is always starting shit with my mother! We used to be close, but she's is pissing me off!"

"Yeah, but everybody goes through shit like that, Jax," Nas tried to reassure me.

"Jehovah's Witnesses ain't supposed to go through it, though!"

“Who the fuck says Jehovah’s Witnesses aren’t supposed to go through it? Where did you get that from?” he asked, puzzled.

“The Bible,” I replied adamantly. “The Bible says that if you live your life the way the Bible says, that you will deal with bad shit, but it will only be the type of shit that happens to everybody. It won’t be the type of shit that happens to people who live fucked up lives and don’t follow Bible principles. My parents live by Bible principles, so their marriage shouldn’t be fucked up like that!”

Nassir didn’t have a response. He just looked at me, speechless, so I continued.

“Me, on the other hand... I deserve what happens to me. I fuck around all day, every day! I deserve every fucking thing I get! And that’s why I’m leaving home.”

“You’re going to run away, Jax? Naw, man! Don’t do that,” Nassir protested.

“Don’t say ‘run away’ and shit,” I corrected him. “You make me sound like a bitch, or a little kid or some shit! I’m leaving home and die in the streets. I’m going to Harlem.”

“Nigga – what? What do you want to do that for? And what the hell are you talking about dying for, nigga?”

“Because, ‘when I die, I couldn’t choose a better location.’ You know how Prodigy says in ‘Shook Ones’ about Queens. Anyway, for real, I love Harlem, that’s the only place I really feel at home for real anymore. But on some real shit, I’m depressed as hell, and I’m not going to go out like a bitch and pop myself, so I’d rather just live reckless as hell in these streets and let the nigga who can handle it, kill me. Besides, I’ve been acting so fucked up, and I don’t want to stay around and let my parents find out how I’ve been acting. It would break their hearts. They’ve been trying so hard since we became Jehovah’s Witnesses to raise me right. I don’t want to make them feel bad. It’s too hard for me though; I think it’s in my blood or some shit. Besides, I think my father would blame himself if he knew. I’d rather just go back to Harlem and run the streets till I die.”

“Damn, nigga! You on some crazy shit!” Nassir said, seeming very surprised. “You too young to be on that shit! We’re only thirteen, nigga!”

“Well, you know I told you about how I ain’t been the same since my grandfather died.”

“I know Jax, but damn...”

“It’s like Tupac said in that song, ‘So Many Tears.’ ‘My every move is a calculated step/to bring me closer to embrace an early death/now there’s nothing left.’”

“I think you need to stop listening to Tupac then!” Nassir chuckled, half-jokingly.

“Naw, man. He ain’t make me think that shit!” I protested, ignoring the fact that Nas was just messing with me. “I just like the fact that I can identify with the shit he says.”

“Oh. Well, when are you going to leave home?”

“Tomorrow,” I replied as we walked out the front door onto his stoop. It was Friday and I planned to leave on Saturday.

“Oh well, Mark’s having a birthday party tomorrow... why don’t you come through before you go to New York?” Mark was Nas’ younger cousin. He lived down the block and we all used to hang out together often. “What, are you going to do, take the bus to New York?”

“Naw, the train. I’m a take the train down the block to the station in Trenton, and then catch the one to Manhattan.”

“Well, I hope you change your mind, but even if you don’t, come to the party anyway,” Nassir urged. “Mark said there’s going to be mad bitches there.”

“Yeah, I’ll definitely come through,” I assured him. Nas was like a brother to me. We shook hands before I left. “I’ll holler at you tomorrow.”

“Alright, man,” Nas said as I walked down the block. “And yo, Jax!” he hollered from behind me.

“What’s up Nas?” I asked as I turned around.

“Chill with all that death shit, my nigga!”



## Part 2: Rebellion

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(Mid 90s - Late 90s)

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## Chapter 9...

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I typically had a difficult time falling asleep and that night was one hundred times worse. I was upset because I knew after I left, I wasn't going to see my family again. After dwelling on it for about an hour, I grew emotional. I cursed at myself under my breath, something to the effect of, "man up, you little bitch-ass nigga!" I forced myself to stop crying and fell asleep.

I woke up early the next morning, but nobody in my family went in the door-to-door ministry that morning. My mother wasn't feeling well when I tried to wake her up. My father was working a double-shift from the night before to cover somebody else's shift. I went back to my room and listened to music for a while. First, I listened to Raekwon's, purple tape, "Only Built 4 Cuban Linx." Then I listened to Biggie's first album "Ready to Die," which was his only album out at the time. I listened to them both all the way through. They were my two favorite hip-hop albums released that year.

I decided to do my laundry so I could pack my clean clothes and leave in time for the party. While I was washing my clothes, I gathered my tapes and CDs, organized and packed them, and ironed the clothes that I was going to wear that day. When all of my clothes were clean, I put them in my big duffle bag and placed it outside of my front door. I didn't want to lug it all around the house in case my mother happened to wake up while I was leaving. I had already gotten dressed. It was the middle of April and the weather was still slightly cool, but pleasant – probably in the low-sixties. I had been contemplating leaving for some time, but there was no way I was going to leave in the middle of the winter.

I went upstairs to say goodbye to my mother. She was sleeping on the sofa. I bent over and kissed her on the cheek. She was in a deep sleep, as usual, but she woke up slightly. I told her I loved her and that I was going out.

"I love you too, baby," my mother mumbled, half-sleep.

"Do you need anything before I leave?" I asked her. She didn't respond. She had already fallen back to sleep. I turned around to walk away, then

hesitated and turned back around to look at my mother one last time. I thought about how much I loved her and the rest of my family and started to get choked up, until that natural instinct in me told me to, “man up!” I turned around, went downstairs and walked out the front door with my headphones on, listening to Biggie’s, “Ready to Die” tape – specifically the “Suicidal Thoughts” song. The song mirrored exactly what I was personally feeling. I grabbed my duffle bag, made my way down the block and didn’t look back.

I arrived at Nassir’s house about fifteen minutes later. As I approached his neighborhood, the sound of loud Caribbean music filled the air. I guessed Mark wasn’t the only one having a party that day. The music and vibes filling the atmosphere reminded me of block parties in New York, especially Harlem. I would be back in Harlem soon enough. I walked up the stoop and knocked on Nassir’s door.

“Hi Miss Daniels,” I greeted his mother as she opened the door.

“Hey Jackson,” she said with a smile. “You spending the night?” She was looking down at my large, full duffle bag.

“Yeah, Ma,” Nassir interjected, “he’s spending the night tonight.” Nassir ran to the door and invited me in. “We’re going to Mark’s birthday party.”

“Yeah, well, y’all have fun!” Ms. Daniels replied. “I’m going to a party too!” She waved as she grabbed her keys and her purse and walked out the front door. Nassir turned to me as he closed the door behind his mother.

“So, I guess you didn’t change your mind, huh?” he asked, motioning towards my duffle bag. “Your parents are going to be fucked up in the head man. Remember; you’re not mad at them.”

“I know, man,” I acknowledged, “but it ain’t got shit to do with being mad at them. Like I told you yesterday... I don’t want to hurt them by doing all this foul stuff all up under their noses. I’m just go to Harlem and do my thing.”

“You got any money?”

“Yeah,” I pulled out my wallet and counted a little over one hundred and forty dollars. “I got about a buck-forty. I saved this from working with my father the past couple weeks, cleaning that dentist’s office. I’ll spend about twenty getting to Harlem though.”

“Shit – that ain’t going to last long in New York, man,” Nas replied. “I wish I had some money to give you, but I just spent my last on a birthday present for Mark. I bought him a Tommy Hilfiger shirt. Plus, I bought myself a pack of condoms for this party. Wait... let me double-check.” He reached in his pocket and pulled out his wallet. “Oh, I got five dollars I can give you. It ain’t much, but you can have it. You can buy something to eat in New York.”

“Good looking out man, but it’s cool.” I appreciated his offer, but I didn’t want to take his last five dollars. “You keep that in case somebody got some weed at the party that you want to go in on. Shit – I know I will!”

“You sure?” he asked. I looked at him and nodded. “Oh, alright. Well, we got a few hours before the party starts... What you trying to do? You want to go to the courts by the Hut and see if anyone is playing ball?”

“Well,” I started, “I ain’t trying to run ball ‘cause I already took a shower and all that... you want to watch *Menace II Society*?”

“Alright,” Nassir said as we walked into his living room. I sat on the couch as he found the tape and put it into the VCR.

“Man, I can watch this movie over and over again!” I said enthusiastically.

“Yeah, that’s my shit!” Nassir agreed. “O-Dog is crazy as shit though!”

“Yeah, he is,” I commented, “but Cain is my nigga though. He’s a real nigga! You know, like how he’ll beat down a disrespectful-ass nigga? But he does it on some real shit, not on some bullshit. Like when Chauncey was all drunk, fucking with his girl; I would have pistol-whipped that nigga too! And when that other nigga came to his grandparents’ crib, all disrespectful and shit; I would have stomped that nigga too. That’s how I’m going out – like Cain... on some real shit!”

“Yeah, Cain was a G,” Nas acknowledged. “Hey... where are you going to live when you get to New York? With one of your aunts?”

“Naw, man. I can’t fuck with none of them. If I try to stay with them, they’ll call my parents as soon as I show up at their crib. Besides, I ain’t

going up there for that shit. I'm going up there to basically just disappear... you feel me?"

"Naw, nigga," Nas admitted. "I really *don't* feel you! Your family loves you and you're going to leave and shit and they're going to bug the fuck out! And niggas not even going to know where the fuck you are. Then you always talking about dying and all that... You're too young for this shit man! We're supposed to party and bullshit like Biggie said, na'mean?"

Nassir looked at me intently. He was sincerely trying to get through to me. I knew he couldn't understand, but that was because he wasn't raised the way I was raised. I appreciated the fact that he was such a good friend and was trying to help save my life. Regardless of how hard he tried, his attempts to get me to change my mind were useless. My mind was made up.

"Well, nigga, that's what we're going to do tonight. Matter of fact, let's head over to Mark's crib and see what the deal is!"

With that, we left Nassir's house and walked half a block up to his younger cousin, Mark's, house. He was a year behind us in school, and we hung out with him pretty often. There was another guy, Tommy, who was the same age as Mark, who we regularly associated with as well. The four of us were pretty close. We used to call ourselves "The Clique" and hang black bandanas out of our back pockets and carry knives – typical "juvenile delinquent" behavior! Any time we would fight other groups of guys who thought they were tougher than us, we would always yell, "don't fuck with The Clique," or, "we told you not to fuck with The Clique!" They all lived in the same development of co-op housing, and I lived in the development of houses next to them.

"My niggas!" I greeted Mark and Tommy as Nassir and I walked through the small backyard towards them. "What's the deal y'all? How's The Clique?" We slapped hands and half-hugged each other.

"Ain't shit, my nigga," Mark said happily. His voice was huskier than average for someone his age. It was his twelfth birthday and his voice had been that way for a couple of years. "We're just waiting for the party to start."

“Yeah,” Tommy chimed in, “ain’t shit popping off yet! I’m waiting for the bitches to get here! But at least The Clique’s here!”

“Yeah, The Clique’s here, nigga,” Nassir interrupted. “But this nigga is breaking up The Clique!” Nassir was visibly frustrated.

“What’s my cousin talking about, Jax?” Mark asked, putting his hand on my shoulder. “You ain’t riding with niggas no more?”

“Naw nigga, you tripping!” I protested. “Me and Nas started this shit here! It ain’t even like that...”

“What the fuck you talking ‘bout then Nas?” they questioned him before I had a chance to finish.

“I ain’t even about putting my boy’s business out there and all that,” he hesitated. He was obviously torn. I guess he wanted to tell them what we had talked about to see if they could talk me out of all the “crazy stuff” I had expressed to him. “Jax moving to New York, y’all,” Nassir revealed, sadly.

“Aw, my nigga, Jax!” Mark yelled. “You going to N-Y?” Mark was always very animated. I never met his father, but it seemed Mark had inherited his animated demeanor from his mother, Peaches. She was very lively, and somewhat “rough around the edges.”

“When you leaving, my nigga?”

“Tonight,” I responded nonchalantly.

“Damn! Tonight? Well then I guess this will be a birthday party and a going away party!” he said, hugging me. Mark was so animated sometimes that people who didn’t know him would probably think he was drunk or high.

“Damn, cuz,” Tommy spoke up, “that was kind of sudden! I ain’t seen no moving trucks out front the crib. You getting kicked out or some shit?” I looked at Nassir before I responded.

“Um, well, you could say something like that, I guess! Yo, Tommy... I’m a be right across the bridge from your peoples in Newark – I’m a be in Harlem.”

“Oh, word?” Tommy sighed as he looked to the ground, sort of depressed. “Yeah, I need to tell y’all something too. My parents getting divorced and we’re moving back to Newark.”

“Damn, Tommy! That’s fucked up! I’m sorry, man,” I said, patting him on the shoulder.

“It’s whatever, though,” he said, acting as if he wasn’t bothered. “It’s corny down here anyway. I’d rather be in Newark.” I was going to say something about how he didn’t have to act like his parents getting divorced didn’t bother him, but I figured I’d mind my business and let him deal with it the way he wanted to.

“You ain’t lying!” Mark blurted out. “It’s corny as hell out here! And y’all niggas ain’t making it better, breaking up The Clique like that! Me and Nas going to have to expand down here and y’all niggas going to have to make a New York chapter!” he exclaimed.

We looked at each other and erupted in laughter. Mark was crazy! To get everybody’s mind off the depressing news, we talked about a series of brawls “the Clique” had been involved in at school a few months prior. By the time we had finished reminiscing, the DJ had arrived, more partygoers had arrived, the girls came and the party officially started.

We were sitting in Mark’s backyard, relaxing and listening to the music. Mark and Tommy were talking to some girls and Nassir and I were talking and rapping along with the music. The DJ was playing all the popular music we liked that was out at the time: “You’re All I Need,” by Method Man and Mary J. Blige, “Get On Up”, by Jodeci, “Woo Hah,” “Everything Remains Raw,” and “It’s a Party,” by Busta Rhymes, “Renee,” by the Lost Boyz, “Follow Me” by BuckShot, “Craziest,” by Naughty by Nature, “I’ll Make You Famous,” by Da Youngsta’s, and all the real hot songs that were out at the time. I’ll go into more details about the relevance of that “I’ll Make You Famous Song” a little later.

“Them niggas talking to them young-girls, man,” I said to Nassir, pointing across the way to Mark and Tommy.

“Yeah, you know,” Nassir responded matter-of-factly. “They’re younger than us.”

Just then, a half-Mexican, half-Puerto-Rican girl, named Liza, who we went to school with, walked by. Liza lived around the corner. She greeted Nassir when she saw him and said hello to me when she saw me. She stopped and took a double-take when she realized where I was.

“Jackson! What are you doing here?” Liza gasped. “You know you shouldn’t be at a birthday party!”

Liza was one of Jehovah’s Witnesses too; well, sort of. Her mother went to the meetings, and her father went sometimes too, but neither one of them were baptized because they lived together and they didn’t want to get married. They were “common-law” and everything, but didn’t feel “ready” to be officially married. At the time, Liza actually took being a Witness more seriously than her parents did, but she wasn’t baptized yet.

“Liza, we just talked about this yesterday, shorty. Why you sweating me and shit?” I asked nonchalantly.

“Ooh, Jackson! You’re at a birthday party *and* you’re cussing! I tried to talk you out of that mess that you were talking!” she complained. We were really cool. She was one of the nicest, but coolest Witness girls I knew.

“Oh, he told you too?” Nassir asked, seeming surprised.

“Y’all the only two people I told,” I explained. “Y’all should feel special!”

“Special, huh?” Liza snapped. “I feel sorry for you Jackson. No, really,” she continued when she thought I was about to interrupt her. “Nassir, please help your friend!” She stormed off.

“I don’t know why everybody’s tripping!” I complained. I looked at Nassir and saw him ready to respond and I interjected. “You know what? I actually don’t even feel like talking about it anymore! What I need is some pussy or some weed or to beat a nigga the fuck up or some shit! I’m tired of sitting around here not doing shit! It was cool until the DJ started playing this bullshit!”

The DJ had started to play a song I didn't feel like hearing. It was LL Cool J's song with Boyz II Men, "Hey Lover." I wasn't in the mood to hear "soft stuff" like that. I actually liked the song, but I was agitated and felt like hearing something that would stoke my negative, aggressive mood. I would have rather heard his, "I Shot Ya," song with Foxxxy Brown, Keith Murray, Prodigy and Fat Joe. That song fit my mood a lot better than "Hey Lover" did.

"Well, what I *do* know is that Liza is fine as hell!" Nassir said, obviously looking to change the subject to something he knew we could agree upon.

"You ain't lying either!" I concurred. "She looks just like that girl from that *Money Train* movie with Wesley Snipes that came out a little while ago – what's her name, Jennifer Lopez? Yeah... she's tough as hell man! But I hope you ain't even trying to smash!"

"Man, please!" Nassir objected, "I could have her if I wanted to!"

"Oh, so you don't want her? 'Cause you don't have her! Look, man, I'm not trying to shit on your game or anything," I explained, "but first of all, she's a Witness, but not like me. She's trying to be good, for real. Me and her are cool as hell; and believe me, my nigga – ain't *nobody* hitting that until they marry that! You see how mad she got at me for being at a damn birthday party! Do I even need to mention your reputation with the shorties?"

"Alright, Jax," Nassir cut me off, looking somewhat conquered. "I hear you!"

The night had progressed, the sun had set, and I was already growing agitated. No girls I felt motivated to pursue had come around, so when some other guys Nas and I knew came around and said they had some weed, we went with them and smoked a couple of blunts. As we were walking back towards Mark's house, we approached the lot behind his house and heard a lot of commotion. Apparently, some guy had come around talking loudly, trying to disturb the party. Come to find out, it was a relative of my enemy, Javier, from the previous brawls at school. Javier's cousin was a half-White, half-Puerto-Rican guy about our age, named Lonnie. He came around talking shit for no apparent reason; I guess it runs in their family. I don't know if he was high or drunk or what. I had never personally met this guy in my life, but



I had seen him around the neighborhood. Nassir and I walked up to see what's going on.

"Yo, son!" I yelled to Lonnie from about ten feet away. "What the fuck's up, kid? Who the fuck you think you are?"

"Who the fuck are you, homey?" he retorted. At that very moment, Mark's mother, Peaches, was frantically running out of the house with a butcher knife, yelling and screaming.

"I'ma kill this motherfucker! I'ma kill this motherfucker!" she was yelling at the top of her lungs, waving the knife around.

"What the fuck did this nigga do, man?" I asked Mark, as he held his mother back with one hand, while brandishing a small baseball bat in the other hand.

"White-boy called my little sister a bitch and told her to tell us to turn the music down!" Mark said in his husky voice. "As soon as my mom goes back in the house I'ma give him a beat-down!"

"Mark," I said softly as I turned to him and his mother. "Why don't y'all go back over to your yard and enjoy your party?"

"Naw, man!" Mark snapped. "This is bullshit! This pussy needs to get his ass whooped. He ain't going to disrespect my family at my party and shit, and the whole Clique's here too!"

I looked down at his little sister who was crying. Then my eyes transferred to Peaches, Mark's mother. She looked disheveled. Her hair was all over her head, and she was still clenching the knife so tightly that her light brown knuckles were turning white. I placed my hand on Mark's shoulder and proceeded to speak very quietly to him, while watching Lonnie out of the corner of my eye. I tried to calm him down and reassure him. Lonnie was making it hard because he continued to make smart comments under his breath every couple of seconds.

"Mark, you're right... The Clique's all here," I reassured him. "We'll handle this. We ain't going to let nobody disrespect your sister. Your sister is like our sister. We'll handle it. It's your birthday, my nigga. Go over there

and calm your moms down, get her a drink, and then go fuck with that shorty you were talking to over there. Alright my nigga?”

“Alright my nigga, Jax. Good looking out,” Mark said, half-heartedly as he placed his arm around his mother’s shoulder and led her back to the house. I knew he wanted to handle the situation himself, and I couldn’t blame him. But why should he have to deal with this on his birthday? Besides, I needed to get some aggression out, and it looked like Lonnie was going to be the recipient.

“Alright, my nigga!” I yelled behind him. “Go get some pussy!”

“He *is* a pussy,” Lonnie chimed in before I had even finished my sentence.

“Ay yo, shut the fuck up, B!” I commanded as I immediately stepped in Lonnie’s face, looking up at him. He was fairly tall, but thin. I was about five-feet, eight-inches tall and I weighed about one hundred and sixty pounds at the time. Lonnie was about six-feet tall and weighed roughly the same as I did.

“What the fuck are you going to do?” Lonnie sneered, flicking his wrist. When his wrist moved, I noticed a shimmer in the dark. The streetlights reflected off the metal from the small pocketknife he had pulled out. I uttered a loud, abrupt laugh at the sight of the small knife. My laughter seemed to catch him off guard. “What the hell is so funny, *maricon*?”

“Oh, this bitch-nigga cussing at me in Spanish now?” I chuckled loudly. “Well, *maricon*,” I replied belligerently, “I’m wondering why you’re asking me what I’m going to do, and then pull out a little bitch-ass knife like it’s going to do something to me! That’s why I’m laughing... *maricon*!”

He stared at me, puzzled, for about ten seconds. I guess he thought I wasn’t angry because I was laughing and joking. I was actually laughing because I couldn’t believe the audacity of this fool.

“Can y’all believe this bitch-ass nigga?” I asked rhetorically, looking around at the handful of people who had stayed nearby and hadn’t gone back to the house. I looked Lonnie in the eye again and addressed him calmly. “Nigga, I got a knife on me that’ll cut your shit into pieces, so if you’re going to pull a knife on me nigga – matter of fact, if you’re going to carry a knife,

make sure that shit is worth carrying! And if you're coming to see me, or anybody I fuck with, you better respect..."

Without finishing my sentence, I suddenly lunged at Lonnie and grabbed his neck around his Adam's-apple, then stepped to the side of him and put him in a headlock. I immediately locked my grip around his neck with my arm and squeezed tighter and tighter by the second. Lonnie dropped his knife almost immediately and desperately tried to remove my arm from his neck with both hands. After about ten or fifteen seconds, somebody who was standing around screamed that I was going to kill Lonnie. I thought about it for a couple of seconds, then I threw Lonnie on the ground and started to kick him in the chest and stomach. I don't even remember how many times I kicked him. I wouldn't necessarily say I "blacked out" when I started to kick him, but I did go into a sort of blind rage. That was, until Nassir grabbed me and told me somebody said they were calling the cops. I immediately disengaged Lonnie and ran into Mark's house with Nassir.

"Jax, you was going to kill that nigga, man!" Nas exclaimed. "What you trying to do, be like Cain?"

"What?" I panted. "What the hell are you talking about; 'be like Cain?'"

"Earlier we were watching *Menace II Society* and you were saying all this shit about, you want to 'go out like Cain,' and all that shit! Is that what you're trying to do?" Nassir interrogated me. "Because, man, the way those people in the neighborhood was talking... you might catch a case. You ain't going to die in the streets like you were talking about. You might go to jail!"

By that time, it was about eleven at night and most of the people had left Mark's house. The people who had stayed were watching *A Low Down Dirty Shame*, so they weren't really paying attention to our conversation.

"Well, it's a good thing I'm going to Harlem tonight, then," I replied. "It didn't have shit to do with trying to be like Cain, though. I'll be damned if I was trying to be like Cain! That's a movie, my nigga! This is real motherfucking life! That nigga disrespected Mark's sister, who happens to be your cousin, and then pulled a knife on me! I don't give a fuck about a nigga like that! I said I'll die in these streets, but a nigga has to earn it. I ain't going

to just give him a free body! Besides, I haven't made it back to Harlem yet. I said I wanted to die in Harlem!"

"Nigga, you crazy!" Nassir sighed, half-smiling.

At the same time, our friend Kyle's father arrived from South Philly. He came to pick Kyle up from Mark's party. When he entered the small living room, he mentioned that there were police cars outside in the back lot where I had damn near choked the life out of Lonnie. That's when he caught everybody's attention.

"Oh, shit!" I exclaimed. "I got to get the hell out of here, now!"

I had never been arrested and I was not trying to make that the first night! The people back there would probably tell the cops that I went into Mark's house. I didn't know what to do. They would probably be there in a couple minutes, plus I had weed in my system! I couldn't even go over to Nassir's house to get my bag, because I would have to pass right by the cops. *Damn!* I was wasting time thinking. *Shit!*

"Yo, Kyle," I whispered, "can you ask your father if I can get a ride with y'all?"

It was my last resort. They were just about to walk out the front door. I didn't really know anybody in South Philly besides Kyle, but I would find something to do until I could catch a bus back up to Nas' house and get my bag. I would just have to catch the train to New York the next morning instead of that night.

## Chapter 10...

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When we arrived in South Philly, I thanked Kyle's father for the ride and started walking. I had never met Kyle's father before. He seemed like he was pretty cool, but he was almost too cool. He seemed too tired to be concerned with the details of where I was going that late at night. I was a young teenager but he let me go about my business with no questions asked. I guess he figured I wasn't *his* son so I wasn't his responsibility. It didn't really bother me though. He was doing me a favor and I didn't want him to give me the third-degree anyway. I walked until I saw what seemed to be a party in the projects and I remembered Kyle had mentioned how his cousins lived in the projects in South Philly and that they were having a party that weekend. I approached the doorway and saw a big, dark-skinned man wearing a long, thick Sunni beard, cutoff jeans and timberlands standing at the door. He looked Muslim, but a lot of guys in Philly dress like they're Muslim, even if they aren't.

"What's up, ahk?" he greeted me. He must really have been Muslim.

"What's the deal?" I replied.

"Who you know in here, young-boy?"

"Kyle, from 24th Street is my nigga, he said y'all would show a nigga some love if I came through tonight," I responded.

"Oh, yeah?" the Muslim man responded happily. "That's my people! But you have to be eighteen to get in this party, my young-boy!"

"I'm sixteen," I responded nonchalantly. I was lying, but I knew I could pass for it. I had done it many times. I figured since I was friends with Kyle, the doorman might let me in if I said I was sixteen, but if I told him my real age, he definitely wouldn't.

"Oh, alright," the tall Muslim man said as he looked at me sideways. "I guess it's cool, since you're cool with our people. But you can't smoke none of the shit or drink none of the shit 'cause we ain't responsible for no young-boys getting weeded or drunk at the party!"

“Too late!” I laughed. “I’m already bent!”

“Aw, shit, my nigga!” the Muslim man laughed hysterically. “You’ll fit in at this party! But you’re Kyle’s people, so you already know how we do out here! My name is Mook,” he grabbed my hand and shook it vigorously, then pushed me through the doorway. He pushed me in a happy, friendly, cheerful, kind of way, but he still pushed me. I think he was too hyped; you know; a little bit too excitable. I was kind of caught off guard, and I had to catch myself to prevent myself from stumbling through the doorway.

“Alright, Mook,” I said as I regained my step and walked into the apartment. As soon as I entered the apartment, I noticed that it was a much different vibe than the party at Mark’s house. I expected that, because I had associated with older people before, but this was even different than those times. This reminded me of something – it gave me a familiar feeling. As I looked for an empty seat, I nodded at people who happened to look in my direction. I spotted an empty seat on a sofa and nonchalantly strolled over to it.

When I sat down, I realized that the DJ had started to play one of the same songs that had been played at Mark’s party. It was a song by a group of young guys, probably a little older than I was at the time. They were from Philly, called themselves Da Youngsta’s and the song was entitled “I’ll Make You Famous.” It was a real hot song, and the chorus sampled a part of Biggie’s, “Big Poppa,” song, when he says, “drop-top B-M’s/I’m the man girlfriend!” It’s all about sex. Another part of the chorus says, “I’ll make you famous/girl, can’t you see/it only takes one night for you to freak with me!”

I was nodding my head to the song and singing along to myself when I noticed a shapely, brown-skinned girl gazing at me from a few seats away. She was sucking on a Blow-Pop really hard. It was very conspicuous; she was trying very hard to be sexual about it. That was actually the main reason why I noticed her – because I heard a faint sucking noise, even over the loud music, turned slightly and saw her sucking on it while staring at me sensually. I wasn’t mad at her though! When I looked at her, she took it as an invitation to come talk to me. She immediately came over and sat on my lap.

“What’s up, baby?” she asked as she put one arm around the back of my neck and twirled the lollipop in the other hand between her fingers. “I noticed you were fashionably late to the party. You didn’t want to come see me?”

I was usually cool, calm and collected around females, even when they were really pretty, but this girl was confusing me. She was talking to me as if she thought I was somebody else, so I wasn’t sure if she was intoxicated and had me confused with her boyfriend or something, especially since she was acting so familiar. I decided to play along.

“Naw, baby,” I said as I looked into her eyes. “I just had shit to handle around my way.” I said, “Around my way,” in case she was confused and thought I was somebody else from her neighborhood so she would finally realize that I wasn’t that guy.

“Aw, you’re cute!” she said, pecking me on the lips. “You ain’t miss a beat, did you? I’m Shavonne. What’s your name, baby?”

“Jax,” I replied. She was staring me straight in my face. She was not at all shy, but I’m sure you picked up on that already.

“I saw you zoning to this song,” she commented. “Are you a freak, Jax?” she asked bluntly with a seductive smile on her face.

“I’ll make you famous!” I replied with a sly grin on my face.

We both laughed. Before I could continue, she moved her hand down the front of my pants while she kissed me passionately for what seemed to be two hours. In actuality it was only a minute or two. She stopped suddenly and looked at me.

“Let’s go to my car before the hating-ass, Wilson Projects niggas start drawing.”

Shavonne grabbed her purse and her keys. She gripped my hand firmly and quickly led me through the living room of the apartment and out the front door, past Mook, to her car. It was a relatively nice car. I mean, it wasn’t brand-new or anything. The year was 1996, and it looked like a 1990 or 1991 Toyota Camry with tinted windows. I wondered if it was her car, her father’s car, or if she was trifling, maybe even her boyfriend’s car.

“Hurry up and get in, baby,” Shavonne instructed as she unlocked her door, opened it, and unlocked my door.

“Yo, Jax!” Mook called out to me as I closed the car door. “What you doing, nigga? You getting some pussy already, my nigga?”

I didn’t even have a chance to respond because Shavonne pulled off as fast as she possibly could without losing control of the vehicle. The tires screeched loudly and I smelled the rubber on the tires burning, like back when the drug dealers used to drag race on Leidy Avenue in West Philly.

“I hate niggas around here!” Shavonne exclaimed as she drove around the corner and pulled over. “That nigga was just mad ‘cause you was about to get some and he’s not!”

“Don’t even sweat that, shorty,” I tried to reassure her. “It ain’t even that serious. I ain’t worried about what he thinks. I don’t even know Mook like that. I just met him.”

“Like you just met me?” Shavonne asked, staring into my eyes, obviously looking for reassurance.

“Well, on the low,” I said with a grin as I placed my hand on her leg, “He seems cool, but I like you a lot better than I like Mook....”

She smiled at the compliment. She had a pretty smile, which I hadn’t really noticed before. She was a very good-looking girl. I took a few moments to look at her more closely. I had noticed that she was attractive before, but everything had escalated so quickly. I took the time to pay attention to the details – her short, healthy hair that was cropped and highlighted with blonde streaks, the brown lipstick she was wearing, and the shape of her body. She was built very nice. She had nice sized breasts; not too big, but not small at all, and a small waist. I couldn’t see her behind now that we were sitting in the car, but I remembered what it looked like from before, and I was pleased with what I had seen. She noticed me evaluating her appearance.

“You’re nice,” she said. “That’s why I need to get away from these Wilson niggas. They’ve all known me for the past seventeen years, so they’re used to



me. They're so fucking ignorant." She hesitated. "Do you really think I'm pretty?"

"I ain't going to bullshit you, shorty," I replied. "If I didn't think you were tough, I wouldn't have left the party with you."

As the words left my mouth and reached my ears, I realized how harsh they might have sounded to a female, especially one who suffered from the insecurities Shavonne seemed to be struggling with.

"Look, Shavonne," I continued, "I'm not going to lie to you and tell you you're pretty if I didn't mean it. You're a very pretty girl."

She smiled again, this time from ear to ear. She reached into the back seat of the car and started shuffling through the CDs that were strewn all over the back seat until she apparently had found what she was searching for. She took a CD Single out of its case and put it into the CD player.

"You're so sweet, Jackson," she said as she kissed me. "I just put our song on," she said as she started to kiss and lick on my neck. Da Youngsta's song, "I'll Make You Famous," started to play. "You hear that, baby?" she said softly as she bent over and unbuttoned my pants. "I'ma make you famous."

About twenty-five minutes later, we pulled up in front of the building where the party was still going on. After Shavonne had finished administering fellatio, she looked at the time and realized that she needed to go back home so her father could take his car to work. Shavonne drove back around the block and dropped me back off at the party. As I was about to exit her vehicle, she leaned in to kiss me but I declined; not because I didn't want to, but because of what she had just done to me. She looked disappointed and I felt guilty for hurting her feelings, but I could not bring myself to kiss her on the mouth. I asked Shavonne for her phone number and promised I would call her the next day. She used a pen to write her phone number on my hand, and I kissed her on the cheek and left.

As I walked up to the house, I felt uncomfortable because I didn't have the opportunity to wash up after me and Shavonne's encounter in her car. I was walking in a slightly awkward fashion when I went back into the party. I was

happy Mook wasn't still standing outside because he would probably have started talking loud again and embarrassed me, and I didn't feel like dealing with that at the time.

I walked back into the party and looked for somewhere to sit down. I had no idea what I was going to do about getting back to Nassir's house and getting my stuff so I could catch the train to New York. I wasn't sure if the buses still ran up that way at that time of night. It was about two-o'clock in the morning, and the buses usually stopped going to the suburbs around twelve-thirty. While I was thinking about it and looking for a place to sit, a bald, light-skinned guy with a mustache and a light beard called out to me.

"Yo, my nigga," he said. "You can sit over here." He motioned for me to come over to where he and his female companion were sitting. As I approached, the girl got up from her seat and sat on his lap. "I know ain't no seats in this motherfucker! It's two-o'clock in the morning and niggas still want to party!"

"Good looking out," I said. "But what I don't understand is, if niggas want to party so bad, why the fuck is nobody partying? Niggas is just sitting around getting weeded and listening to music!"

"That's how old-heads party, my nigga," he chuckled. "Your eyes look kind of low yourself... how old are you, like fifteen or sixteen?"

"Something like that," I responded. I never told people my real age when they were generous enough to add a couple of extra years. People always thought I was older, so I let them think I was. I was tired of getting made fun of for being young, as if I had any control over when I was born.

"But that's what I'm saying," I continued. "That's what I like to do! I would think old-heads would do something different at parties."

"That's probably why you fit in with the old-heads and they ain't kicked you out this motherfucker! You ever think about that, B?" the young man asked, laughing. "Look, my nigga," he explained, "with street-niggas like us, the only difference in what you do, is that when you're older, you ain't got to ask for your mother's permission to do the shit. You ain't got to sneak around, 'cause you grown. You feel me?"

“Yeah, I feel you.”

“My fault B,” he said before he continued. “I’m being rude. I ain’t even introduce myself. I’m Damien, and this is my wife, Tisha.”

He extended his arm and we shook hands. When he extended his hand, I noticed all the tattoos on his arms. He was relatively muscular and had a firm handshake. Then his wife shook my hand.

“I was just saying how you look like you could be Damien’s younger brother,” Tisha said.

“Oh word? My name is Jax.” When I looked at him more closely, I could see the resemblance. I just didn’t have a beard and a mustache yet. “Well, I always wanted an older brother!” We all laughed.

“You seem like a cool young-buck,” Damien said. “I said that to wifey earlier when she said you looked like me. She noticed when you were talking to shorty earlier before you left. You played it real cool with shorty... until she snatched you up out of here with a quickness!”

“Uh, yeah, she was kind of aggressive,” I chuckled. “But she was cool though.”

“Yeah, I’m sure she was!” Tisha laughed, while looking at Damien.

“Yeah, nigga,” Damien lowered his tone, “be careful with shorties like that, B. I don’t know her or anything, but I’m saying; do you know her?”

“Um, naw,” I hesitated. “Not really. I’m not from Wilson.”

“Yeah, neither are we,” Damien responded. “We’re from New York. I come down here a couple times a month on business, and we decided to come for this party tonight.”

“Oh, word?” I said, intrigued. Judging by his tattoos, beard, earrings, and all that, I assumed when he referred to “business” he didn’t mean the stock market. I decided not to touch the subject – I had just met him. “My father and his whole side of the family are from New York and I’m moving back to Harlem tomorrow.”

“My nigga!” Damien surprised me with how excited he became so quickly. “We’re from Harlem – I was raised in Saint Nicholas Projects.” He gave me a pound and we started to discuss different parts of New York and we started to talk about all types of stuff.

They told me about how they weren’t really married, but that Damien always referred to Tisha as his wife because they were both twenty years old, they had been together since they were fifteen and she was “might as well be” his wife. He said he was definitely going to marry her soon. They told me about how they had a son who was four years old. His name was Damien Junior and Tisha related how she wouldn’t even discuss naming him anything other than Damien Junior because she loved Damien so much. I thought that was really nice. I wished I could have a girl who was down for me like that one day. I could tell she wasn’t just saying it because it sounded good – she was genuine. It was evident from the way she looked at him when he spoke, even when he wasn’t speaking, that she was so in love with him and that she thought he was the greatest man in the world. I just hoped he treated her right. I know a lot of guys date, impregnate or marry “good” girls like that and wind up messing them up in the head because they cheat on them or beat them. Then they mess her head up and her mentality changes for every other guy that girl has a relationship with afterwards. I couldn’t really read Damien like that yet. He seemed really cool, though, but it’s more difficult to see a man’s true nature until you see his behavior around other men in the absence of women.

“It’s getting late, though,” I said when I looked at the time after we had been talking for a while. It was almost a quarter-to-three in the morning. I wasn’t tired, but I was still trying to figure out how I was going to get back up to Nassir’s house and get my stuff. I was sure the buses weren’t running back up to the suburbs by that time. In fact, about three quarters of the people had left the party. The DJ had left, and the remaining partygoers were playing music on a stereo, drinking forty-ounces of liquor, smoking weed, and grinding on each other to the music. A few couples were in the corner kissing. “I need to use the bathroom. I’ll be right back.”

When I walked to the bathroom, I passed by a half-opened bedroom door. As I walked by, I noticed a couple having sex in the room. I didn’t really

want to see or hear that, and I was sure nobody else wanted to either, so I did everybody the favor of discreetly closing the door. I used the bathroom and came back out to say goodbye to Damien and Tisha.

“Do you drive?” Tisha asked as we walked outside. “Where’s your car?”

“No, I don’t drive,” I responded. I wasn’t lying. What I had omitted, was the fact that I was too young to drive.

“You live close by?” Damien asked. “We can give you a ride.”

“Not exactly,” I answered. “My stuff is at my man’s house, way out in Montgomery County.”

“How the fuck you going to get out there at this time of night with no motherfucking whip?” Damien asked.

“Good question,” I responded matter-of-factly. “I was wondering the same thing.”

“We’ll give you a ride,” Tisha volunteered.

“Naw, that’s crazy! Y’all got to drive back to New York,” I protested.

“It’s cool man,” Damien said. “You need to get your ass back to Montgomery County. Just tell me how to get there. I got some idea... I’ve been to Norristown plenty of times. I can just hop on the turnpike after I drop you off.”

“Well, it’s actually closer to the Willow Grove Mall.”

“Norristown, Willow Grove, whatever! Let’s go, my nigga!”

## Chapter 11...

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We arrived at Mark's house at about three-thirty in the morning and I knocked on the door. When Damien and Tisha dropped me off, I thanked them about a dozen times for being so nice and giving me a ride even though they had just met me. Based on our conversation, I felt we had gotten to know each other relatively well during the forty-five-minute drive from South Philly back to my neighborhood. Before I got out of the car, Damien wrote down his contact information on an index card and insisted that I did not lose it, and also insisted that I call them as soon as I got myself settled in Harlem so that we could chill. He said I, "seemed like a thorough young-buck."

Mark answered the door when I knocked. I knocked relatively softly in case people were asleep. His face lit up when he saw me at the door.

"My nigga, Jax! We were waiting on you!" Mark exclaimed as he shook my hand and gave me a hug.

"Yeah, what's the deal, kid? Is everybody sleep?" I asked as I walked through the door.

"Naw, man. Me and Nas just woke up. We were watching *Friday*. Tommy and the bitch I was fucking with are still sleep," he said. Then he came close and started to speak very quietly. "This bitch named Crystal, that my moms knows, came through right before you beat up Lonnie. She saw you and wanted to talk to you. When you came in the crib, she was about to talk to you, but you left before she got a chance. She been talking about how salty she been about it all night. She fell asleep waiting for you to come back, my nigga!"

"Shit!" I said under my breath. "Tonight must be my night!"

"What's up, my nigga?" Mark asked, obviously anticipating a story.

"I'll tell you about it later," I responded. Then I thought about Shavonne and looked at my hand so I could transfer her number to a piece of paper. There was a problem, though. The number was gone. I must have washed it

off when I washed my hands after I used the bathroom. “Shit!” I exclaimed out loud when I realized what happened.

“What’s the problem, Jax?” Mark asked, when he heard me. We were still standing in his kitchen.

“Uh... nothing man, nothing,” I said. “It’s cool. I just thought of something.”

It wasn’t like I was upset because I wanted to have a long-term relationship with Shavonne. First of all, I was way too young to have a long-term relationship. Second, she had sucked me off not ten minutes after she met me, and even though I already knew it, Damien confirmed on the ride home, that you never wife a female who gives it up on the first night, unless there were extenuating circumstances. Even so, the relationship still usually doesn’t work.

I still wanted to call Shavonne, though. I promised I would call her and I didn’t want to seem like one of those “typical niggas” who get what they want and never call, especially since she seemed to have self-esteem issues. Besides, she seemed like a relatively nice girl. Unfortunately, there was really nothing I could do about it. The next afternoon I would be in Harlem and I didn’t have Shavonne’s number anymore. Maybe I could ask Damien to come back to Wilson with him on one of his “business trips,” look for Mook and see if he knew where Shavonne lived. Maybe...

“You sure, man?” Mark asked. “You seem upset.”

“Naw, Mark. I’m good,” I reassured him. “Thanks, though,” I said, trying to put Shavonne out of my mind. “Now, where’s this other shorty... um, Crystal?”

“Oh,” Mark thought about it for a moment. “I think the bitch is upstairs, sleeping. She was trying to stay awake, waiting for you, but she fell asleep before everybody else, so my mom told her to go upstairs and sleep in my bed. You want me to go get her?”

“Yeah, please do that. Good looking out, man,” I said as Mark started to walk towards the other room that led to the stairs. “Yo, Mark,” I said,

catching his attention before he had completely left the room. “Why they all got to be bitches?”

“Huh?” he grunted, seeming perplexed.

“I was just wondering why you call every female a bitch – even when you could use her name.” He paused for a moment and raised his head slightly, as if he was looking in the air for the answer. Then his eyes lit up and he replied.

“Cause it’s easier!” I shook my head and chuckled as he ran up the stairs. I walked into the small living room where Nassir was watching *Friday*. Tommy and the other girl were still asleep.

“Wild-ass night, huh, cuz?” Nas said as we sat and watched the movie.

“You ain’t lying, kid!” I responded. We sat, talked and laughed as we watched the movie. Nassir told me about what happened after I left. He told me about how Crystal was asking about me and about how the police never even came to Mark’s house. He said that upon questioning, everybody claimed they didn’t see who had beat up Lonnie. Even the person who had called the cops grew “forgetful” by the time the police arrived, and Lonnie said he didn’t need any help from the police. Nassir told me the police kept asking Lonnie if he wanted to press charges. They claimed they needed to notify his parents because he was only fifteen-years-old, which was not old enough to deny medical attention on his own, and that they would take him to the hospital because he was having difficulty breathing. They told him he had no choice. Nassir also told me that the police said it would be Lonnie’s parents’ decision as to what would happen next, so they put him in their car and drove off. Nassir proceeded to tell me that when the cops left, the woman who had called the cops said that she didn’t want me to get arrested or anything. She claimed she only called because it looked like I was going to seriously hurt Lonnie and that she knew Lonnie was the one who started all the trouble in the first place.

A little while later, Mark had come back downstairs and Tommy had woken up. Roughly ten minutes had passed by the time we finished discussing the events of the evening.



“Mark, did you wake up Crystal?” I asked, looking at my watch. “It’s been a minute since you went up there!”

“The bitch,” he started, “I mean, *Crystal*, is doing her hair all over again and shit ‘cause she was sleeping. She said she wants to look perfect for you. She is washing her face, and brushing her teeth and all that.”

“Oh... well, I can’t hate on that! I can’t be mad if she wants to look good for me!” I chuckled. “Shit... I wouldn’t want to be all up in somebody’s face with crust in my eyes and tart breath either!”

We laughed and everybody resumed watching the movie as I anticipated meeting Crystal. Mark insisted that I had met her before, but I couldn’t remember. As I was sitting there, I wasn’t really paying attention to the movie, because I was racking my brain trying to remember when I met Crystal before. A shadowy figure appeared in the corner of my right eye, but I wasn’t paying attention because I was still trying to remember what Crystal looked like. I heard a soft voice say something once, and then again, but I didn’t understand what it said because I was preoccupied. Then I felt a sharp pain in my left arm.

“Jackson!” Nassir yelled after punching me in my left arm. “Nigga, the girl Crystal is standing here calling your name and you sitting here looking like a fucking nut!”

I looked up, half-startled, feeling embarrassed. Crystal was standing there, looking at me, shyly, with her arms crossed.

“Oh, my fault, shorty,” I said as I jumped up and hugged Crystal.

“It’s no problem,” she said quietly with a smile. “You’ve been avoiding me all night.”

“Naw,” I protested. “Never that, ma. It’s not even like that. It’s just been a real crazy night, you know?” I figured she wasn’t serious, but I didn’t want to take the chance of hurting her feelings. I hated to hurt girls’ feelings, especially when I first met them. I thought about the fact that Shavonne was probably going to think I played her when I didn’t call her the next day, and I really felt badly about it. I quickly decided I couldn’t let that interfere with what was going on with Crystal.

“Y’all niggas going to have to let me and Crystal sit on the couch, if y’all don’t mind.”

Nassir and Mark nodded and got up to let me and Crystal sit on the small sofa. They went over and sat on two chairs on the other side of the room.

When we sat down on the sofa, Crystal quietly started to tell me about how she had been anticipating talking to me again, and how she thought it was so nice that I beat up Lonnie to defend Mark’s little sister so that Mark could enjoy the party. She talked about how it had, “turned her on.” As we were talking, I was also thinking about the fact that there was no way that I could possibly have met this girl before and not remembered her, that is, unless I was extremely high or something. This girl was beautiful. I typically dealt with very attractive girls – Shavonne was extra pretty. But Crystal was like a goddess in my young mind. She was light-skinned with green eyes and long, curly, sandy-brown hair. I’m not just saying she so looked good because she was light-skinned with light eyes – I don’t give a damn about that! It was that everything about her appearance seemed flawless. She had full lips coated with shiny, light red lip-gloss. I was enamored and I couldn’t stop staring at Crystal’s face. I guess she had reapplied her makeup after she woke up too. Mark said that she had said that she wanted to look “perfect” for me, and she did. She was built perfectly too. As we conversed, she noticed me admiring her.

“Am I your type, Jackson?” she asked sincerely.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I know you probably get with a lot of girls, because you’re so damn cute,” she smiled. “But am I your type? I mean... what type of girls do you like?”

I looked into her green eyes and touched her face gently before I responded.

“I like you. You are beautiful, and ever since I saw you, you’re my type.”

She sighed, smiled with satisfaction and leaned on me. Without a word she softly kissed me on the cheek, grabbed a small blanket that was folded over the arm of the sofa, unfolded it and placed it over our laps. Then she

quietly unbuttoned my pants and gently started to rub on my private parts. When I started to caress her, I could tell she enjoyed it, but when I started to insert my fingers, she winced and grabbed my hand. “I’m a virgin,” she whispered.

“What you doing over there, Jax?” Mark blurted out, apparently noticing what had happened. “You fingering her? Is she tight?”

“Nigga, stop drawing, man!” I reprimanded him. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” I turned to Crystal. “I’m sorry,” I said in a low tone. “My fault – I didn’t mean to...”

“It’s okay,” she replied. “Let’s go upstairs, baby.” Crystal gently took my hand after we both fastened our pants and led me upstairs. As we walked past the group, Nassir discreetly shook my hand and placed a small, plastic square in it. I looked down to see what it was before I put it in my pocket. It was a condom. I nodded at him.

When we got upstairs, Crystal led me into the bedroom that she had been sleeping in. We walked in and lay on the bed and began talking again. She started to ask me more personal questions. She told me things about herself – real personal things. I was surprised at how open she was with me without me even probing. The fact that she was being so open with me about things made me want to be open with her, so I started to tell her about my life and about some of the issues I was dealing with. I didn’t go into full detail, but I gave more detail than I normally would have. I also told her that I was moving to Harlem and I explained why; except, I didn’t go into all the details about wanting to die. She didn’t need to know all that!

“So, you’re moving? Like, today?”

“Yeah,” I answered as I simultaneously nodded my head.

“Who are you moving with?”

“Me, myself and I!” I replied.

“But Mark and them said you’re only sixteen!”

“Oh, word? Y’all been talking about me, huh?” I said jokingly. That was nice of them to try to boost my “game” by telling her that I was older than I

really was.

“Yeah,” she replied, matter-of-factly. “I asked them how old you were and they told me you are the same age that I am. So, what are you doing moving by yourself to New York?”

“I’m a be an emancipated minor,” I responded, using a term I had read about. “You know all those problems I’ve been telling you I’ve been causing? Well, I don’t want to hurt my parents anymore, so I’m a be an emancipated minor so they won’t have to be bothered.”

“Oh, Jackson,” she took my hand, “you’re like the perfect young thug for me. I want you to be my boyfriend!”

“The perfect young thug?” I chuckled and thought to myself that there was nothing perfect about me. “Well it’s nice that you think so.”

“No, for real, Jackson,” she protested. “You are like the perfect young thug. I bet you get a lot of girls! Every girl wants the perfect young thug!”

“Thanks,” I said. “But what do you mean by that?” I paid close attention to her response.

“Well,” she started, “I mean, like... first of all you’re cute, but you’re not a pretty-boy. You take care of the way you look, and you look good, but you don’t look like a punk – you still look like a roughneck! But you don’t look like you’re trying to look hard; you just look like you’re being yourself. And then, on top of that, you love your family. Your friends all have good things to say about you, but you’ll still fuck a nigga up, if he crosses the line, like you did to that Puerto-Rican nigga at the party! And you’re so nice to me, but you aren’t all pushy to try to have sex. You’re the perfect young thug! Please, whatever you do – don’t change! If a lot of girls like you... that’s the reason why.”

I was silent for a couple of minutes as we lay there and I caressed Crystal’s thigh. I was processing what Crystal had just told me. First, I was thinking about the comment she had made and about how nice it was that she thought of me that way. Then I thought about the fact that up until about a year earlier, most girls didn’t give me too much attention. It dawned on me that they were all Jehovah’s Witness girls who were under the same strict

guidelines I was under. I thought about the fact that recently, I had been receiving a lot more attention from females; especially since I had been acting the way I wanted to act. Then I thought about the way Crystal was looking at me when she was explaining to me why she kept calling me “the perfect young thug.” It reminded me of the way Tisha looked at Damien. I know it sounds premature to say that. When I thought about it, I actually thought it was premature for me to think that. I looked back over at Crystal and saw she was still looking at me that same way. She was clearly infatuated and I didn’t know why. I guess she had just explained it to me, but I still didn’t know why she was developing feelings so quickly. First it was Shavonne, and then Crystal – something weird was going on that night. It must have been a full moon or something! In any event, the way Crystal was gazing at me with those green eyes was almost hypnotizing.

“Are you a virgin?” Crystal asked quietly, but bluntly. She had already informed me that she was, but I hadn’t told her whether or not I was.

“Well,” I hesitated, “kind of. I’ve done a lot of stuff, but I’ve never actually... you know.” She just looked at me, waiting for me to finish. “I’ve never actually went in; you know – penetrated.”

I let out a sigh, as if it was the most difficult thing I had ever said. I never enjoyed discussing specific sexual activities I have participated in with other girls with the person I’m dealing with at the time. Especially not when we were about to do something, or when I was trying to do something.

“Yeah, well, I haven’t really done too much of anything,” she confided in me. “I really like you, though.” She held my hand to her breast and stared into my eyes. “I want you to be my boyfriend, Jackson. I live in Germantown and maybe you can come around my way instead of going to New York. You would be the coolest nigga at King High School!”

“I don’t know,” I hesitated. “I feel like this is something I need to do, you na’mean? I told you what’s been going on with me.”

“Yeah, but...” she looked away. “I just thought maybe.”

“Yo, Crystal,” I gently turned her face back towards me. “I’m really feeling you, but I got to do what I got to do. You know the deal, ma.”

“Yeah,” she agreed reluctantly. “I know. Is there anything I can do to change your mind?” She smiled slyly as she unbuttoned her shirt.

“Um,” I stuttered, “I’m not the type to turn that down... but, I wouldn’t feel right lying and telling you that if you let me have sex with you, I won’t move to Harlem.”

“Damn!” Crystal sighed, defeated. Then she got up and put a CD into the boom box. She came back to the bed and sat down facing me. “Well, then, I guess it will have to be a going away present.”

Crystal finished unbuttoning her shirt as “Touch Me, Tease Me,” by Case and Foxy Brown started to play – just loud enough to disguise the noise.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” I asked. I didn’t want her to feel like I took advantage of her, and I didn’t want her to regret it later.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” she smiled and kissed me. “I’ll be able to tell all my girls that I lost my virginity to my perfect young thug.”

After we had finished, I took a quick shower. She had fallen asleep by the time I got out of the shower. By that time, it was five-o’clock in the morning, and I still hadn’t slept. I wasn’t really tired, but I probably could have used a nap. Since I knew I had to leave for New York as soon as possible, and I didn’t know if I would be able to wait for Crystal to wake up in order to get her phone number, I decided to write her a note. I don’t remember exactly what I wrote, but it was about a page and a half long, and I talked about how nice she was and how pretty she was and about how nice it was to have spent time with her and to have “really spent time with her,” and how it was “the most fun I had ever had.” I didn’t write anything overtly sexual because I know some teenaged girls like to keep notes like that and I didn’t want her to get into trouble if her parents found it. I also said that I might come back to Philly one day and surprise her at school. I ended the letter by thanking her for being so nice and for, “gassing my head up,” by calling me “the perfect young thug” and going so far as to explain it so that I knew she “wasn’t bullshitting.” Then I signed it, “Sincerely, Your Perfect Young Thug.” I mean how else should I have signed it, realistically? I just made sure I wrote “Sincerely,” instead of “Love,” because even though a lot of people think it’s

not a big deal when you're writing a letter, I never use the word "love" when communicating with females unless I really mean it.

When I came back downstairs to the living room everybody was sleeping. I woke Nassir up, and asked him if we could go back to his house, so I could get my stuff and catch the first train to New York. The train station was only a couple of blocks away from both of our neighborhoods. I was very anxious to leave and I was excited, full of energy and ready to go. He reluctantly got up, and we walked down the block to his house. When we walked in the house, Nassir was so tired that he couldn't even make it up the stairs to his bedroom. He just crashed on the sofa. I looked through the train schedule to see what time the train was leaving for Trenton. The first train wasn't leaving until six-thirty, so I had over an hour to wait. I didn't want to spend the whole time waiting outside at the train station, so I decided to sit in the loveseat for a little while. After about ten minutes I grew extremely tired and faded into unconsciousness.

The next thing I heard was frantic banging on the front door of Nassir's house. Nassir's mother came running down the stairs with a large duffle bag and opened the front door. A woman came over to me, crying and uttering unintelligible words, waking me from my slumber. I was disoriented and I didn't understand what was happening. I looked at my watch and it was six-fifteen in the morning. The first thought that came to mind was that it was about time for me to leave to catch that train. It took about five minutes to walk to the train station, and I still had to buy my ticket to Trenton.

The dramatically emotional woman kept pulling on me and crying. She was saying something, but I couldn't understand what she was saying. Nassir's mother then handed the duffle bag to the hysterical, middle-aged, Black woman. The sobbing lady tried to force me to stand up, and I began to realize what was going on.

"Jackson! Come home! Please come home!" My mother was sobbing, crying hysterically with my duffle bag full of clothes, tapes and CDs in her hand.

Without a word I went with her. I walked out of Nassir's house and down the stoop to a minivan waiting with the side door open. The woman who was

driving was a woman from our congregation. My mother put my duffle bag in the back seat, through the open side door and got into the front passenger's side. Guess who was sitting in the backseat when I got in? My friend, Liza! She had "snitched" on me and told my parents where they could find me! She thought she was helping me and my family.

When I had left home, I had written a note; actually, a five-page letter. What can I say? I guess I've always been a writer! I told my parents everything I explained earlier about why I was leaving, and I even included all that "wanting to die in the streets," stuff. I guess my parents started to ask around if anybody saw me, and Liza said she did, so early that morning she brought them to Nassir's house. When they dropped us off, both of my parents talked to me for a while, and then my father and I had a very in-depth conversation.

My father was really good about everything. He was really calm and understanding. He tried to figure out what had been bothering me for so long. I didn't really want to talk, but I didn't want to shut him out since he was a good father and he was trying to help me, so I talked as much as I could. Actually, when I started talking, I just started to cry. I just pretty much went from not saying anything at all, to just crying like a little bitch. So much for the "perfect young thug," huh? I hate crying, but I'm pretty sure I told you that already. My father hugged me and tried to comfort me. He told me that "Jehovah" made sure that Liza saw me at the party and maneuvered events so I didn't make it onto the train to New York. For some reason, I didn't believe that. I guess it was because I still believed that God didn't care about me, so why would he do those things? I knew it was just coincidence, but I didn't want to bust my father's bubble, so I just listened to him.

I didn't tell my father about any of the stuff that had happened that night. First, of all, I didn't want to cause any more problems than I already had. On top of that, the things that I had done were unacceptable according to my religion, and the Bible. I could be expelled from the congregation, ("disfellowshipped"), for doing those things, which would lead to all kinds of crazy complications for my family. I'll go into details about all of that later. I had been doing most of those things before, but I think the impact hit me that night when I officially lost my virginity, as a young teenager, at the



end of my eighth-grade year of junior high school. I decided I wouldn't share any of this information with my family just yet – maybe never. So, even though my father was trying to help me spiritually, his efforts were futile because I felt I was a lost-cause spiritually. I didn't want to do anything that had to do with religion. I still had my plans to go to Harlem – I just put them on hold.

While I was with my parents, I did what they wanted me to do, and acted like a good Jehovah's Witness. When I wasn't around them, my behavior grew worse and worse. I took the meaning of Crystal's term, "perfect young thug," to a whole new level.

## Chapter 12...

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I entered my freshman year of high school even more focused and determined to get out of the suburbs. I know that may sound strange, possibly even foolish to most people. We always hear about people trying to, “get up out of the ghetto.” After having a relatively well-rounded upbringing, spending time living in both the city and in the suburbs, I have to say that I would rather live in the city around “my people.” Please don’t misinterpret what I’m saying. I hate being broke. I do not enjoy living with roaches, mice or rats and living in an apartment that smells like garbage and having a landlord that won’t fix anything when it is broken. Contrary to what some people believe, all of that is not necessarily what city life is about. I have experienced all of that and more, but I am trying to make a point. What I am saying is this:

I *do not* enjoy being ostracized because my skin is a little bit darker, my lips are a fuller, or my hair is “nappy.” I *do not* enjoy being pulled over in random traffic stops by police officers when I am breaking absolutely no traffic laws. Then when I ask the officer why he pulled me over and he checks my paperwork and doesn’t have anything to arrest me for, or even to write a ticket for, he just tells me to “be on your way,” or worse, continues to harass me anyway. I *do not* enjoy stepping onto an elevator dressed in a suit and tie, when an older white woman, who already happens to be standing on the elevator, clutches her purse when she sees me, but who was perfectly comfortable riding on that same elevator with a white guy wearing a hooded sweatshirt, a skullcap and jeans, while filling the elevator with his offensive body-odor. I *do not* like to be talked down to and followed around as if I were a thief even though I’m a grown man and a regular, paying customer in certain retail establishments while a young, white, teenager who happens to be shoplifting, is shown more respect than I am in the same establishment.

It might sound strange to some people that I’d rather spend my time in “the hood,” living around “my people,” many of whom are just as ignorant as the “other” people I was just complaining about. The difference is, if I have conflicts with others in predominantly Black neighborhoods, at least I know

“my people” are typically being difficult because they are just plain ignorant – not because I’m Black. And to tell the truth, I *do not* have any desire to struggle and spend exorbitant sums of money to live in a so-called “White neighborhood” like some people do; as if living in the suburbs was a life or death matter. I truly believe Black and brown people who do so are actually shooting themselves in the foot. Believe me, I know from personal experience. Remember what I told you what my family’s financial situation was like ever since we moved to the suburbs? I decided at a relatively young age that being “house-poor” in order to rest my head in a so-called “better” neighborhood was not worth it.

I also don’t want you to think that I’m saying that I *can’t* be around white people. All I’m saying is that I judge people based on how they treat me, not on what race, culture or nationality they happen to be. At the same time, however, I am aware that not everybody feels that way. So when other people treat me in a way I feel is unacceptable – rude, ignorant, etcetera – if I am subjected to that treatment by too many people of a different culture on any given occasion too often, it seems to be too often to be coincidental, so I’m going to feel like I am being discriminated against. It might be true that *some* of the people in that situation might be racist, and *some* of the people might just be plain ignorant. But, in those situations I’m going to attribute the negative interactions to racism, and not just the portion of what really *should be* attributed to overt prejudice. I *am* human, and I’m definitely not a mind reader – I can only base my feelings on my personal experiences and how I interpret those experiences. In any event, I’m not a psychologist or anything, so let me just get back to my story.

Basically, the whole reason I went into all of that was to let you know why I decided that I wanted to spend as little time in “my parent’s neighborhood” as possible. I had reached the point where I wasn’t even referring to it as “my neighborhood” anymore. About a week after Mark’s party, I called Damien and told him my plans to relocate had been postponed. We didn’t start hanging out right away. I was really trying hard at first to maintain a good relationship with my parents, because we had always been extremely close. I also tried to continue to be a good Jehovah’s Witness, but that lasted a total of about two months. Extreme guilt consumed me at first, especially since my father had put forth so much effort to try to help me. I

finally realized you cannot successfully practice a religion or any way of life if your heart is not truly in it. If you don't feel that connection, it's not going to last. So, I gave up trying.

I started spending as much time as I possibly could in New York; Harlem to be specific – Saint Nicholas Projects to be even more specific. Damien and I were becoming very close friends. It was cool with both of us, because as we both said when we met at that party in the projects in South Philly – I always wanted an older brother, and he thought I was “a thorough young-buck.” Damien took me under his wing as his surrogate younger brother. He schooled me to some of the things I hadn't already known about the streets. I was pretty savvy when it came to surviving on the block, but there's always more to learn. Damien was a lot older than me, and he had been through a lot, so I was happy to learn anything he could teach me. Besides, street guys grow more ruthless every day, and I welcomed whatever insight an “old-head” like Damien was willing to offer me. For instance, he had just been released from prison about six months before we met. He served two years in the prison in Rahway, in north Jersey for having an unlicensed firearm. He shared a lot of prison stories with me and taught me a lot about what to do to if I ever had the misfortune of being incarcerated.

The time I did spend in the suburbs was funny, because I knew more than most of the young people who lived in that area about illegal activities and other “street shit.” Most of what they knew about it was what they had seen on television and movies, or what they had heard on a rap record, while Damien and I were living it. Don't get me wrong, there were plenty of “suburban thugs.” There were guys like Nassir and Mark who naturally gravitated towards criminal activities and were able to prosper in them. “Real-recognizes-real,” and anybody who has truly lived the illegal lifestyle can attest to the fact that you can find “real” gangsters in virtually any neighborhood on the planet. Conversely, a lot of people, both in the suburbs and the city, attempt to emulate what they see in gangster movies and rap CD booklets because they think it looks cool; and they do so very poorly.

Damien's “wife,” Tisha, always told Damien to make sure he didn't school me on the drug game that he was into. She never actually said this in front of me, but Damien would tell me about how Tisha would, as she put it,

“check up on him, to make sure he wasn’t corrupting me too much.” He told me how she would say she understood that, “a street-nigga has to know street-shit in order to survive, but any nigga who knows too much shit will end up in too much shit!”

Back at my high school in the suburbs, I had met a lot of new people but I did not associate regularly with most of them. Since I didn’t waste time playing immature mind-games, and chasing after the freshman girls, a lot of the seniors didn’t realize that I was a freshman. I had been associating with several senior girls, and messing with some of them sexually, before I realized that they thought I was a senior. One girl asked me what school I had transferred from and why she never saw me in any of her classes. I played it off by telling her that I had gotten left behind and I was new to the school. I was never there anyway. I would have told her that I was really a freshman and that I was several years younger than she was, but I figured that was an awkward conversation to have for the first time in her parents’ bedroom, considering what we had just done. I confessed later and she was not happy to learn my real age.

Females always acted so upset when they found out I was younger than they were, like it made the sex feel different or something. I only remember one occasion when I actually outright lied to a female and told her that I was older than I really was. Females usually just assumed I was older. I started to grow a beard and a mustache when I was fourteen years old, my voice changed to be very deep at that age also, and I was about five-feet, ten-inches tall at the time. It wasn’t just my appearance that led people to believe that I was older, it was also my demeanor. Even my parents’ friends would say that I was “extremely mature.” So, either an older female would look at me and assume that I was older, and suggest in conversation that we were the same age and I wouldn’t correct her, or since most of my friends were older, they would hook me up with older females and lie about my age for me. I’m only human, so if it was going to get me some sex, what kind of “female-loving” teenager would I be if I were to say, “Well, shorty, I must be honest... before you bless me with the yams, I have to admit that I’m not really eighteen?” *Exactly!* I don’t think the average sex-crazed teenager would have the strength to do that – would you? Besides, if the girl was, let’s say, nineteen years old, and she couldn’t tell while we were having sex that I was only

fifteen years old, and not eighteen, then I was obviously doing exactly what I was supposed to be doing!

Now that I'm much older, I understand I was committing "lies of omission" by intentionally withholding important information. I see how damaging that can be. Back then, however, I was not very concerned about it, my intent was not malicious and I felt like nobody was getting hurt by it. So, out of all the things I felt guilty about, I chose to ignore my conscience when it came to the subject of hiding my age.

It was around this time that I really started to feel the need to have some extra money. I was spending a lot of my weekends, and some weekdays when I skipped school, in Harlem. There was a particular bodega I visited regularly to buy drinks, blunts for rolling weed, candy and other small items like that. One day I asked the manager if I could work there a few hours a week. He told me to come back on Friday and speak with the owner, who I also knew.

That Friday, I made sure I skipped school. As usual, I woke up, got dressed and left the house on time, to make my parents think I was going to school. I walked to school, so I had to leave the house no later than six-fifty-five in the morning to be on time. When I was going out to "do dirt," I would have an early start to my day. For some reason, I didn't need a lot of sleep in general. I hadn't really needed much sleep since I had been a little kid. As a teenager, I could pretty much stay up until four in the morning and sleep until six and wake up and be okay. It was fine with me because it gave me more time to run the streets! That particular Friday, I caught the train to Trenton, then to New York and went to the bodega extra early. I was there by nine.

"Hey, how you doing Mr. Ramirez?" I greeted the older Puerto Rican man as I walked into the bodega. Mr. Ramirez owned the store and he was always there early in the morning to open it and stayed there until about two in the afternoon. It was like clockwork. He was a creature of habit, much like I was.

"Hey, Jay-Jay!" he exclaimed, smiling when he saw me as he threw his hairy arms in the air, hugging the wind. I hated it when he called me "Jay-Jay," but I figured he probably did so because his English wasn't the best and

he wanted to come up with a unique nickname for me. He had a nickname for everybody he had grown to like who happened to be regular customers in his bodega, so I didn't want to insult him by asking him to stop calling me "Jay-Jay." I figured it wasn't a big deal, so I could live with it. "Ricardo tells me you want a *trabajo*!"

"Huh?" I said, not wanting to look stupid, but not able to help it because I had absolutely no idea what he was talking about. I had dated several Puerto Rican girls, so I knew a few Spanish words, but they were mostly curse words. "Um, Mr. Ramirez... I don't know what Ricardo told you, but I was..."

"What, you dunno your language? Aw, poor Jay-Jay!" Mr. Ramirez started to laugh, as he put one arm around my shoulder, covered his face with his other hand and jokingly began to act like he was about to cry for a moment before he continued. "You *Dominicano*, right Jay-Jay? Your parents been in New York too long?"

"Naw, Mr. Ramirez," I politely corrected him. "I'm *Black*, not Dominican."

Depending on which neighborhood I was in or who I was with at the time; people would mistake me for Latino more often. If I was in a neighborhood that was predominantly Black, people almost never assumed I was anything but Black. Sometimes people would make fun of me for being "high-yellow" but I grew accustomed to that at a relatively young age. If I was in a predominantly white neighborhood, some people would try to convince me that I *couldn't* be full Black – I *had* to be mixed, which would irritate me. If I was in a Latino neighborhood I would often be mistaken for Dominican or Puerto-Rican. When I was in Harlem, there was no telling what people would think, because even though I was in a predominantly Black area, there were a lot of Dominican, Puerto-Rican, Jamaican, Trinidadian and all other types of people there.

"Well, that explain why you dunno the language!" Mr. Ramirez exclaimed as he busted out laughing. He was funny. He was always so happy and laughing all of the time and making jokes. He was a nice guy. That's why I

figured he would give me a job. “*Trabajo – job!* Ricardo say you want to work, right, Jay-Jay?”

“Oh, yeah, Mr. Ramirez,” I responded. “I was wondering if I could do something around here on the weekends and a couple of weekdays, you know, like stock shelves and bagging and cashier or whatever you need me to do. I need more money.”

Mr. Ramirez looked at me, flared his nostrils and contorted his face as if he had suddenly caught wind of a foul odor.

“You don’t want to do that, trust me,” he said, putting his arm around my shoulder.

“Well, I mean, I just need some extra money,” I explained. “I’ll do whatever you need me to do around here. I figured since I’m always in here anyway, I might as well work here.”

“Well...” Mr. Ramirez stroked his chin as if he were in deep thought. “Since you say ‘*work*,’ I do have something you could help me with. Follow me!” He walked into the back room of the store as me and Ricardo followed him. The three of us sat down in the back room and Mr. Ramirez rolled his chair over to a safe and started to speak as he unlocked it.

“Jay-Jay,” Mr. Ramirez began sternly, “I see you come in here all the time with these different *chicas*, and you know they always want to spend you money – so you going to need more money than some stocking shelf money.” By this time, he had unlocked the safe, retrieved a package and locked it back up. He rolled his chair back over to us and was facing me again. He held a yellow envelope, wrapped in tape, about the size of a brick, as he continued. “Jay-Jay... Can I trust you?” he asked resolutely, as he looked me squarely into my eyes.

“Yeah,” I replied, looking straight back into his eyes. “You can trust me, Mr. Ramirez. Why, what’s up?”

“If you stock shelves here for what, seven dollars an hour, for ten hours a week,” he explained, “I pay you only seventy dollars a week, right?” I nodded in agreement. “Say you take this package,” he waved the yellow package in the air, “to a bodega on 95<sup>th</sup> Street and 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue, and bring my



money back to me. I will give you two hundred dollars, today. What you rather do?"

"I'll deliver that package for you, Mr. Ramirez," I answered without hesitation. Wouldn't you rather make two hundred dollars a day than seven dollars an hour?

"That's what I know you say!" Mr. Ramirez chuckled. "Now, you need to give the package to a man named Sanchez. He about your height with a scorpion tattoo on he neck. Don't give the package to anybody else! If he not there, wait only five minute for him. If he no show up, come back here right away and let me know."

"Okay," I agreed. "I got you." Mr. Ramirez handed me the package. He opened one of the drawers in his desk, pulled out a large black gun and handed it to me.

"As soon as you give Sanchez the package, he give you an envelope with a lot of dollars in it. You no need to open it or count it, but, if he act funny about giving it to you... I mean, if he hesitates for *one second*..." Mr. Ramirez's demeanor changed completely before he continued. "You pull this little lever down on this motherfucker, you cock that motherfucker back, you shoot that motherfucker in his motherfucking face and you bring my package back to me, *okay*?"

"Yeah, I got you," I agreed in an attempt to sound unaffected. It was strange seeing Mr. Ramirez's personality change so drastically. He seemed so easy-going and laid-back, and now he was talking about killing somebody over an envelope full of money. Not even a briefcase full of money – an *envelope* full of money. I would have never expected that from him.

"It's a big gun, but you a big guy, Jay-Jay... you can handle it," Mr. Ramirez chuckled.

"Yeah, well hopefully I won't have to use it!"

"Yeah, you be fine," he replied with his thick accent. "I do business with Sanchez for years now. You never know, though! You ready?"

"Yeah, I'm ready," I said as I tucked the big gun in the front of my pants and tightened my belt. Before placing the gun in my pants, I quickly examined

it and noticed engraving which said, “Ruger,” “.45,” and “ACP,” among other things. I had never held a real gun before. I actually never even played with toy guns because my mother had never allowed me to play with them. When we lived with my grandparents in Chicago, my mother used to always argue with my grandfather about the guns that he had on display in the house and how she didn’t like it because I was, “young and impressionable.” Maybe that’s why I always had a fascination with guns. As a young teen it was strange to have an older person entrust me with real, working firearm. I never realized they were so heavy!

“Jay-Jay!” Mr. Ramirez called out to me as I walked out the front door of the store with the gun heavy in my jeans, and the package zipped up in my FILA track jacket, “I need you to walk!” I turned around and looked at him, confused. I had planned on taking the bus. “No driving, no Metro Bus,” he continued. “It’s too much trouble!” I nodded in agreement, and started walking to make the delivery.

I don’t know if you have ever tried to hold a full-sized forty-five-caliber handgun in loose-fitting jeans without using a holster, but it’s awkward because they’re so big and heavy. Not to mention the fact that I wasn’t used to carrying any type of gun. It was a long hike from where I was on 127<sup>th</sup> Street to 95<sup>th</sup> Street and First Avenue. The gun would not stay in place during my journey. I was growing nervous that the forty-five might fall, accidentally go off and shoot me. I didn’t have anywhere else to put it, so I just walked with both hands in my jeans pockets, discreetly holding the gun so it wouldn’t move. I was focused and I arrived at my destination quicker than I anticipated.

When I arrived, the transaction went smoothly. I saw somebody matching Sanchez’s description as soon as I walked into the bodega. When I informed him that I was there for Mr. Ramirez, he took me to the back room, exchanged packages and I left. It was that simple.

I followed Mr. Ramirez’s instructions and didn’t count the money. As I was walked back Uptown, I thought about the fact that I was in possession of what was most likely thousands of dollars, not to mention a big gun that I wasn’t quite sure how to use. For a millisecond, I thought about hopping on a bus and taking the train back to Philly, and not giving Mr. Ramirez his money.

The thought quickly passed, though. It was a devious idea, and there was no reason for it. Mr. Ramirez had always been nice to me, and I had told him he could trust me, so I felt obligated to live up to my word. I put the thought out of my mind and thought about the fact that when I got back to his bodega, there would be two hundred “hard-earned” dollars waiting for me. For the rest of the walk I rapped to myself. I wished I had my portable CD player with me so I could have listened to the new Mobb Deep CD that had just been released. It was called “Hell on Earth,” and it was my favorite CD of the year. I had memorized the entire CD after hearing it only twice. I rapped to myself as I walked, and before I knew it, I was back at Mr. Ramirez’s bodega.

“Jay-Jay,” Mr. Ramirez greeted me with open arms. “That was quick!” We walked to the back room and I handed him the envelope with the money in it. He opened it and counted it in front of me. “Very good Jay-Jay! That was so fast! You sure you didn’t take the bus?”

“Naw, Mr. Ramirez,” I assured him. “I just walked fast.”

“Yes,” he smiled. “I know!” Mr. Ramirez patted me on the back. He must have had somebody follow me to make sure I did what I was told. I couldn’t blame him – it *was* my first time. “You did say I could trust you! Here’s your money Jay-Jay!”

He counted out some money from the envelope I had just given him and handed it to me. I thanked him and then counted it as I organized it in my wallet.

“Mr. Ramirez, this is two-hundred and fifty dollars!”

“You get a bonus for doing a good job,” he smiled.

“Thanks!” I replied.

The fact that Mr. Ramirez had given me a bonus made me happy that I didn’t try to run away with his money – not to mention the fact that I realized he had somebody following me and he probably would have tracked me down and killed me! That experience taught me that there should be honor between people, even if they are conducting illegal activities. There needs to be order *somewhere*. People shouldn’t be so greedy. If you’re doing your job

and people are treating you well, you should be satisfied with that. That's why I didn't steal Mr. Ramirez's money. He was cool, and besides, my father taught me to be a man of my word. That's *one* of the problems with a lot of people in the drug game. They are too greedy. They always want to try to trick or rob the next man for what he has. If you've saved up your money by selling for somebody else, then buy in bulk from the supplier; don't try to rob him! If he's cool, why do you have to go behind his back and stick a knife in it? I think if everybody thought and behaved that way there would be less occurrences of unnecessary violence and murder in the drug trade. On the other hand, if somebody crosses you and refuses to follow these rules, then you have to deal with that person accordingly.

The way I see it; and I am by no means trying to promote drug use or sales, you are never going to be able to stop the drug game. Even without going into so-called government "conspiracies;" on a local level, there are always going to be people taking drugs, and so there are always going to be people who make themselves available to sell drugs. It's just like any other business; you know, supply and demand. There are some really ruthless people who create drug addicts by pressuring people to try drugs even though the person never did drugs before. Or maybe the person uses what can be considered a "less harmful" drug, such as weed, and the dealer laces it with a hard drug like angel-dust or coke, without telling the customer. People like that are malicious, and they need to be dealt with maliciously.

I have always held the belief that anybody who manipulates somebody into doing something they don't want to do, especially if it is going to hurt them, is a piece of trash. But if somebody is *already* a crack-head and somebody else just happens to supply them with the crack they are "feening" for, and they profit from it, I viewed that differently. You would probably view it differently too if you have ever been around when a crack-head walked up, twitching, fidgeting, begging for some crack – and I do literally mean begging. Sometimes if they don't have enough money, they'll offer to give you sexual favors in exchange for drugs. I'm not only referring to women. Sometimes, male crack-heads are so desperate to get high that they will offer it! It's really disgusting. It happens in real life, not just in the movies. So, as you can see, somebody is always going to profit from the sale of illicit drugs. The elite-controlled government are the ones who started and

perpetuate the drug trade, so when I was younger, I never really blamed people who were desperate for money for profiting from it. But that's a whole different book, and I'm getting off the subject again...

Anyway, I made deliveries like that for Mr. Ramirez every week for the next three or four months. I couldn't resist the urge to continue making deliveries for Mr. Ramirez due to the fact that I had made two-hundred and fifty dollars for about an hour and a half's worth of "work," which was all walking except for about five minutes. I was so excited that I told Damien that day when I got to his apartment.

"So... you finally joined the family business?" he laughed. "Now Tisha can stop thinking I'm the one corrupting you. You went and corrupted your damn self, my nigga!"

"Yeah, son," I agreed. "I've been corrupt from the womb!"

"Well now that you're in this shit," Damien said, "I really got to tell you everything I know! Number one – you need a gat at all times if you're going to move any type of weight."

Mr. Ramirez hadn't let me keep the gun he had given me for the delivery. He only let me borrow it when I made deliveries. That was fine with me since I wasn't known around the neighborhood for hustling. I wasn't involved in hand-to-hand transactions – yet. But Damien strongly encouraged me to get a gun, and I wanted one anyway, so a couple of months later I obtained a gun for myself. It wasn't a big forty-five like the one Mr. Ramirez had let me borrow; in fact, it was only a twenty-two-caliber pistol, which was considerably smaller. Considering the fact that I had stumbled upon it and had stolen it, I couldn't really be picky about what kind of gun it was. It was a little bit too small for my liking, though, so I only kept it for a couple of months before selling it to one of my classmates. I then bought myself a shiny, chrome nine-millimeter handgun. I loved that nine. That was a nice gun! It was a good size for me too; not too small like the twenty-two.

After a few months of making deliveries for Mr. Ramirez, I came into the bodega on a Saturday to pick up a package from him, and he told me that he was going to quit the business and move to Puerto Rico. He had a minor heart attack earlier in the month, and he figured that at his age, the stress of selling

drugs was too much on him. He and his wife had decided to sell the bodega and move back to Puerto Rico, and this would be the last package that I would take for him. I took it, and when I came back, he gave me four hundred dollars. He invited me to come over his apartment the next Saturday for lunch, but I wasn't able to make it, because I had plans with my family—remember them? I said goodbye, wished him well and thanked him for the bonus.

At that point I had some money saved up, and a bunch of friends and new family – Damien, his family and his mother, in New York. Besides that, I had a beautiful, chrome nine and no idea what to do with myself. I had been planning to leave home when I was in the position to move to Harlem, but I still felt badly about it. I had all these new connections and a little bit of money, but I still loved my family. I didn't want to abandon them. I was doing an extremely good job at living a double-life. In my parents' eyes, it looked like I had made a full spiritual recovery and was back to being a good, young Jehovah's Witness. To the contrary, however, I had been developing into a gangster *with* morals. I'll have sex with a female, maybe even on the first night, but not if she had a boyfriend. I'll sell drugs to you, but only if you're already an addict. I'll break you're jaw, but only if you provoke me. I'll shoot you, but only if you're trying to harm me or somebody I care about. If I see you victimizing an innocent person, or a woman or a child, I'll do my best to make sure you regret it! Maybe Crystal was right – maybe I *was* the “perfect young thug!”

I hadn't really been making a whole lot of money since Mr. Ramirez had moved back to Puerto Rico. I had been making about seventy-five dollars a week working with my father in his cleaning business. When Mr. Ramirez moved, I fell back from the whole drug “game.”

I had grown accustomed to the money, but I hadn't been spending it as fast as I had been making it, so I had a nice amount of money saved. I kept it locked in a small fireproof box, which I kept hidden under my bed. I kept that box locked at all times, and I would count the money at least twice a day. The most I ever had saved at the time was about three-thousand, two-hundred dollars. I would withdraw a couple hundred dollars when I needed it. I would then count the rest of the money several times before I placed it neatly,

in order; large bills in the back, and smallest bills in the front, back into an envelope and into the box. Then, I would lock the box and check it at least two or three times to make sure it was locked before I was satisfied. Most times, I would even leave the room, but feel an overwhelming urge to return to the room to check the box one more time to make sure it was locked. This ritual was part of my daily routine, even when I didn't need to take money out of the safe.

In those days my life basically consisted of the following: I went to school several days out of the week, I went to all of the religious meetings with my parents and acted like I was a good Witness; you know, the whole "double-life" routine. At night, on weekends and on days I would skip school, I found myself in Harlem, sometimes in North Philly, West Philly or South Philly, doing my own thing. I contemplated whether or not I should just make the permanent move to Harlem and not have to deal with the stress of leading a double-life. Like I said before, I had money, and I also had plenty of resources in New York to start a new life.

It wasn't that simple, though. I loved my family. I couldn't just abandon the family who had raised me and had shown me love for my whole life. Some people can do that pretty easily, but I couldn't. I've always considered myself a pretty loyal person. Not to mention the fact that I had blood relatives in Harlem and other parts of New York I ran the risk of meeting up with. Things might get complicated for me if I just tried to disappear but didn't explain what was going on to my family and I randomly happened to cross paths with one of my aunts in New York!

For the time being, I figured I would be better off just "playing my position." Living a double-life was extremely stressful, but I had been managing successfully so far. I did both pretty well. My family thought I was this good guy, for the most part. My father grew suspicious at times, probably because he saw things in my personality that reminded him of himself, when he was young and wild. He would say, "I know you think you're slick Jackson, but I've been around the block more than you have!" Or sometimes he would accuse me of being on drugs. It was funny because he would accuse me of being high when I wasn't even high. Like if I had too much energy, or if I was really irritable, "for no apparent reason," he would just come right out

and ask me, “are you on drugs?” Then he would get mad because I would always deny it, and we would wind up in a very heated argument.

The funniest thing about it was that I did smoke weed, but not often. At that point, I was probably only smoking about once or twice a week, if that. My father was acting like I was some type of junkie. He used to smoke weed all the time and snort coke on a regular basis when I was a kid. Even then, he wasn’t a junkie, he kept a decent job and money and helped pay the bills and was a good father, so I don’t know how he thought he could tell that I was smoking weed from the “way I was acting.” As soon as I would come in the house, I would brush my teeth, floss, use mouthwash and change my clothes if they smelled like weed. I wasn’t even smoking that often, so it couldn’t have been causing me to act crazy or anything like that. I started to feel like he was looking for something to yell at me about. I hadn’t even touched any other drug yet. That is until one day when I was in Spanish Harlem with my friend, David...

It was a Friday afternoon, and I had cut school that day and caught the train to New York. Damien and Tisha had some family matters to attend to, so I made plans with this Puerto Rican guy I was cool with, named David. I met up with him earlier that day and we hadn’t really been doing too much of anything. We had just been hanging out in Spanish Harlem all day. We spent a while playing handball with some of his friends. After we finished, David wanted to go back to his place, in the Wagner projects, to pick up some money so we could go back Uptown and shop on 125<sup>th</sup> Street. We talked on the bus ride back to his family’s apartment.

“Yo, Dave,” I began, “since I’m back in Spanish Harlem, I want to holler at that shorty I met back day.”

“Dog!” he exclaimed, “you still tripping bout Alexis? Wasn’t that like five months ago, son?”

“Yeah son,” I replied. “But shorty was a fucking dime, though!”

I had initially met Alexis while sitting on the stoop of David’s building back in September. I started a casual conversation with her, but after finding out that she was dating somebody, I decided not to pursue it any further.



“What happened with that anyway, kid?” David asked. “Why you ain’t fuck with shorty – I know you was feeling her.”

“Man,” I replied, “when I was talking to shorty, I asked her if she had a nigga and she said she did, so I ain’t even continue with the conversation on that tip, you know? I ain’t going to try to holler at a jawn who already has a man. That’s fucked up, you know?”

“Jax,” David responded as he smiled and looked out the window, “you got some fucked up morals, fam! You carry guns, push weight and shit... won’t think twice about hurting a nigga on some real shit, right? But you won’t fuck with a shorty if she says she got a boyfriend? You wild, B! I’ll fuck a bitch even if she’s married – I don’t give a fuck!”

“Yeah,” I responded with a sigh. “Well, that’s what’s wrong with most motherfuckers, B. Y’all don’t respect shit! There are too many females out here who don’t have a man and will fuck you for free to be going out fucking with girls you know are already with somebody. That shit really fucks me up! Too much pussy is never enough for motherfuckers! That’s why I don’t trust these trifling-ass hoes and these shiesty-ass niggas, man! Everybody is so fucking shady, man! Damn! What the fuck is wrong with people?”

I leaned back in my seat on the bus. I had drawn attention from people sitting around us. I hadn’t realized my tone had grown so loud and that I had become so visibly agitated. David looked at me and shook his head, but I felt that I was the one that should have been shaking my head at him and everybody who thinks like him. I was a young teenager, and yes, I probably did have “fucked up morals.” But when everything is falling apart and you don’t have anybody in the world to trust but your girlfriend or wife, I would imagine that you would really need to be able to rely on that relationship. I would have liked to be able to have that one day. In fact, I thought I might need that in the future. After observing the way most people behave, however, I doubted it. Even people like David. He was a cool friend, but he had no respect for relationships. I was no saint either, but I didn’t cheat – I just didn’t date at all. I told girls from the beginning that we were not going to be monogamous. I wasn’t ready for that yet. I contemplated our conversation on the remainder of the bus ride.



## Chapter 13...

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David and I finished the rest of the bus ride in silence. When we arrived at our stop and exited the bus, David went into his apartment. I told him that I would wait outside on the corner and smoke while he retrieved the money from his apartment.

I hated the wintertime, but it was an unseasonably mild afternoon in early February, so I didn't mind waiting outside for a couple of minutes. I leaned against the brick wall of the building, reached into the inside pocket of my blue New York Yankees jacket and pulled out a box of Black and Mild cigars. As I lit one and began to smoke, a passing car caught my eye. It was a very nice car, and at first, I thought that it had only caught my attention due to the fact that it was so attractive. It appeared to be a brand-new Ford Mustang, with a shiny black finish and large, chrome rims so shiny that they were almost like mirrors. The tints on the windows were so dark that they almost matched the midnight-black paint job. As I admired the car for about five seconds, I realized it hadn't just caught my eye because it was so nice. The vehicle caught my attention because it had slowed down as it approached the corner I was standing on.

I stared hard, trying to look through the tinted windows; an impossible feat considering how dark they were. I looked up at the traffic light and realized that it had been green the entire time. My instincts told me that the person in the car must have slowed down to look at me. Those natural instincts had been made sharper by the training I had received from my father, my grandfather, and more recently, from Damien. When you lived the type of life I was living, you have to be very aware of what is going on around you. The moment somebody catches you slipping is the same moment you can end up lying in a pool of your own blood.

All of a sudden, the black Mustang abruptly pulled off. I watched as the car sped through the light. I could smell the tires burning and the loud noise of the tires screeching irritated my ears. At that moment, an eerie feeling came over me, and I sensed that something was strange. It seemed like something was not right, and I grew somewhat anxious for David to come

downstairs so we could head back Uptown. I put the cigar up to my mouth and inhaled once more before tossing it to the ground. As I exhaled, I reached for the handle of the gun strapped behind my belt and my jeans on my waist. I gripped the gun tightly for about thirty seconds, closed my eyes for a moment and envisioned opening fire on the black Mustang should it drive up in an attempt to target me in a drive-by shooting. I had no idea what the problem was. After reflecting on the matter, I reached the conclusion that I wasn't welcome in Spanish Harlem.

I looked at my watch. It hadn't even been five minutes since David had been in his apartment. I immediately pushed the thought that he had set me up out of my head. Why would he do that? There was really no reason for that. It wasn't like I was some drug kingpin, and neither was he. We were pretty good friends. I damn sure hadn't messed with one of his girlfriends!

"Whatever," I said to myself, under my breath. "I ain't scared of a motherfucker anyway. I'm ready for war – whoever wants it!"

I looked past the tall buildings towards the grayish-blue sky. I figured it really didn't matter if I died today in some type of random, bullshit shootout or mistaken identity, drive-by shooting. I was out here living this lifestyle, not because I didn't care whether I lived or died, but because *I actually really wanted to die*. I didn't want to "go out like a punk" and actually kill myself. I figured I would just live my life recklessly and somebody would kill me one day. But whoever killed me would have to **earn** it! That's why I kept a gun with me on most occasions.

As I concluded that line of thinking, the black Mustang pulled up to the corner, tires screeching to a halt. The driver's side door swung open, revealing a tall, thin Puerto-Rican man who had previously been hidden by the extremely darkly tinted windows. He hastily walked towards me, cursing and screaming. It took a moment for me to process what he was saying.

"What the fuck are you doing, selling on my motherfucking corner, son?" the young Puerto-Rican man screamed.

"What, nigga? Your corner?"

“I’m tired of y’all niggas trying to take over these motherfucking blocks!” the young man screamed. He was so angry and was screaming so wildly that saliva was flying from his mouth.

“Yo, son, you better fall the fuck back!” I commanded, confused. What was he talking about? I wasn’t trying to take over any block in Spanish Harlem. I was just waiting for David to come out of his apartment!

“Motherfucker, I’m a kill you!” the man said angrily, screaming at the top of his lungs. “I’ll teach y’all Black motherfuckers to try to sell on any corner in Spanish Harlem!”

He quickly reached for his waist, shoving a yellow bandana, which was tied around his belt, to the side, revealing the handle of a pistol. It was at that very moment when I realized I was going to have to shoot this guy. He wasn’t going to listen to me... he wasn’t going to allow me to talk or explain. That’s the way it was in the streets – “no rap” is what we called it. I was going to have to kill him, or he was going to try to kill me. I knew I wanted to die in the streets and I knew I wanted somebody to kill me. I had also known that it could be any day – but it’s crazy when you realize that day might be today!

I watched as the young man gripped the handle of his gun. At that point I no longer understood most of what he was saying because he was screaming in Spanish. At the same time, I was in the process of pulling my gun from my waist. I had initially gripped the gun when the Mustang first drove by. When the car pulled up again, I gripped my firearm once more and hadn’t let go since.

At the very moment the Puerto-Rican man had drawn his gun and began to wave it in the air, David came running out of his building waving his hands and screaming at the two of us.

“Dante’... Jax, what the hell are y’all doing? Chill the fuck out!” he screamed. He placed his hand on the young, Puerto-Rican man’s shoulder. “Dante’! What the fuck are you doing drawing a gun on my nigga for, son?” he exclaimed, out of breath from running.

“You know this motherfucker, Dave?”

I was in shock, but still, David's timing had been impeccable. If about ten more seconds had elapsed, I would have quickly drawn my own gun, and shot the hostile Puerto-Rican man in his chest. Or, he would have already shot me. It would have been ironic, even just plain stupid, that either one of us would have been murdered over a mistake. But I wasn't going to just let him kill me for no good reason!

"Jax," David started, "this is my man Dante'... Dante', this is Jax."

David motioned for Dante' to put his gun away as he tried to catch his breath. I had never completely drawn mine, and I was smart enough to know that you never draw your gun unless you plan to use it. Besides, there are too many cops around in New York, and it was the middle of the day. Dante' looked like he was several years older than I was – he should have known better.

I brushed my feelings of animosity aside as Dante's mood immediately changed from that of murderous hatred to that of camaraderie. He greeted me, apologized and actually hugged me. He then stated something to the effect that, "anybody who David is friends with must be cool." Dante' asked us what we were planning on doing and David told him we were going to catch the bus back to Harlem to go shopping. He offered to give us a ride, which David quickly accepted. I wasn't so sure. I mean, this guy had just pulled a gun on me!

"My fault about all of that bullshit back there, dog," Dante' apologized for the second time as we rode up Second Avenue. "There have been some Black motherfuckers coming to Spanish Harlem and killing Puerto-Ricans for corners over here. I thought you were one of them, posted up, trying to take over or some shit like that!"

"Don't trip over that shit, my nigga," I replied nonchalantly. "We're good." His explanation was good enough to justify his over-the-top reaction. I knew I would have to watch Dante' in the future, though. I could tell that he was a loose-cannon, and very unpredictable, even by the way he spoke.

After leaving Harlem, the three of us went back to Dante's house. He had a three-bedroom, split-level condominium in Spanish Harlem. I could tell by the size of his apartment and the way it was furnished that he was handling

his drug business shrewdly. It was obvious he was making a lot of money, especially for someone as young as he appeared to be.

“You get high, Jax?” Dante’ asked as we walked through the front door into the living room.

“No doubt, son! I got lungs,” I replied confidently. “It takes a lot for me to get bent, though.”

Upon hearing my response, Dante’ glanced at Dave with a smile.

“Son, I got something else for you!” Dante took off his jacket, revealing a tattoo of a lion’s head wearing a five-pointed crown on his forearm. Between his tattoo and his yellow bandana, I put two-and-two together and came to the conclusion that he was affiliated with the Latin Kings street gang. He went into a small safe next to his couch and pulled out a bag of white powder – cocaine.

Considering I had never snorted cocaine before, I had second thoughts at first. The non-verbal peer-pressure, however, made me ignore my reservations. As if using a natural reflex, I quickly separated a small mound into a line, without prompting or instructions, and separated the long line into shorter lines with the razor blade I kept in my mouth. I then snorted two lines, right after David exclaimed, “Be careful... that shit is so pure it’ll clear out your nose!”

I lifted my head, and saw my two associates watching me. I felt somewhat dizzy, and then felt my nose begin to drip blood. About five seconds later, a plug of blood dropped from my nose and splattered on the floor, followed by a continuous, heavy flow of crimson fluid.

“Oh, shit!” the three of us exclaimed in unison. I rushed to the kitchen sink and did everything I could to stop the bleeding. After about ten minutes, my nose had completely stopped leaking. I didn’t even feel the high from the cocaine at first. I cleaned up the apartment, where I had bled, and Dante cleaned up the coke.

“Y’all weren’t lying about it clearing out my nose, huh?” I chuckled, although it wasn’t really very funny to me.

“Yeah, your virgin nose couldn’t handle that raw shit!” Dante’ laughed as he heard keys jingling at the front door. “We cleaned this shit up right on time, too. My younger sister’s home and she don’t like the drug shit. She’ll start riffing every time!”

David looked at me as if he had forgotten to tell me something earlier.

“Oh, yeah... Jax...” David began.

“Hey y’all!” A beautiful, nicely dressed, Puerto-Rican girl, with long, dark, curly hair walked through the doorway and greeted us. The extremely attractive, teenaged girl captured my attention immediately. She was friendly, and she had a familiar voice and face. In fact, she had a *very* familiar face. Wait a second – *that’s Alexis!*

Dante “introduced” Alexis and I, and I stood up from the sofa where I had been sitting. I did so nonchalantly. I didn’t want to seem too excited to see her – I had to be cool about the whole situation. It was ironic because David and I had just been talking about Alexis on the bus ride to his apartment.

“Yeah, I think we’ve met before,” Alexis said with a familiar half-smile as I took her hand in mine.

“How you doing, Alexis? I’m Jax,” I reintroduced myself. “We met back in the fall when I was chilling with David.”

Alexis stared at me, smiling, for about ten seconds without saying anything before she started to speak again. She gazed into my eyes just long enough for me not to feel uncomfortable. She held my hand the whole time.

“Yeah... I definitely remember you Jax. You’re a respectful-type of nigga.” Alexis turned and spoke to Dante’ and David. “Do y’all mind leaving me and my man, Jax, alone so we can chill and talk?”

“Naw... it’s cool,” Dante’ replied. “Let’s go chill in the other room and roll a blunt. I got that new NBA Live ‘97 for PlayStation,” Dante’ stated quietly to David as they left the room.

Alexis and I sat on the sofa, watched television and talked for a while. She asked me a lot of personal questions, as if she really wanted to get to know me. At first, I thought it was really cool that she was so interested in



me, but then I started to feel like a naïve trick who was falling for some game, so I switched it up and began to talk more about her. She explained that she lived in the apartment with her brother, Dante', but that she looked forward to moving into her own apartment that summer when she turned eighteen, a month after she graduated from high school.

"I love my brother," Alexis explained, "but he's a nut-ass nigga sometimes. He's a Latin King and he hustles... that's how he can afford all of this. I'm not trippin' about that, but he's always wilin' out and pulling guns on people and shit! He's going to get shot one day, and I'm not trying to get caught up in his shit!"

"Yeah," I replied, laughing to myself. "I know what you mean. Dante's a wild dude. He's alright, though."

"Yeah, I love him," Alexis continued. "But what can I expect? My father hustles too! He moves a lot of shit through Spanish Harlem – unfortunately." She paused as I waited for her to continue. "I mean... I just wish my family was normal sometimes, you know? Most people don't have a drug dealer for a father *and* for a brother too. That's why I work co-op for the car insurance company and I'm stacking my money so I can move out of here when I turn eighteen. I ain't trying to live with Dante' no more. I ain't trying to get shot over his bullshit. At least my father is smart about how he does it!"

"Well, why don't you live with your parents until you turn eighteen then?" I asked. It was the next logical question for me to ask if things were so bad with Dante'.

"Because," Alexis replied, "my father is mad controlling. He treats me like a child." Then she smiled as she rubbed her hand along my leg. "He wouldn't let me date a fine *papi* like you... He would wile the fuck out!"

At first, I just looked into Alexis' pretty brown eyes as I noticed how her long eyelashes framed her eyes perfectly. I enjoyed the sensation as the attractive young woman rubbed my leg and allowed her hand to creep closer to my manhood. Then I remembered why I hadn't propositioned her last time we met.

“Yeah, um... what’s up with that nigga you were messing with back in September, when I met you before?” I asked abruptly while trying to sound as innocent as possible.

“Oh... that *pendejo*, Roberto? I don’t fuck with him anymore,” she replied while continuing to caress my leg. “He wasn’t a respectful-type dude like you are.”

“I just wanted to make sure,” I replied. “That’s why I didn’t approach you on that other shit last time... because you had a man.”

“So, are you going to approach me ‘on that other shit’ this time?” Alexis inquired, batting her long eyelashes and gazing into my eyes enticingly.

My first thought was, “of course!” Then I thought to myself that I shouldn’t try to have sex with this girl that night. She was so beautiful – she might be the type of girl I would want to be with long-term. I knew if she would let me have sex with her on the first night, I would lose respect for her and it would make it difficult for me to have a long-term relationship with her. Sounds hypocritical, doesn’t it? I knew – it was, but I couldn’t help it. My sex drive was just too high to convince myself to make a rational, mature decision. I wondered why all of these girls I was meeting were so ready and willing to have sex, or at least do something sexual when they hardly even knew me. I didn’t even “spit game” like that. I just talked and listened to them like a real person.

“No doubt, I’m a approach you on that shit this time,” I replied smoothly. “I can’t let another opportunity to make you my shorty pass by.”

As soon as the words had left my mouth Alexis began to kiss me passionately. The kissing lasted for a while, then she asked me if I had any condoms. Damn! How is she going to start the whole thing and then ask about a condom?

“Naw, I don’t have any on me right now,” I replied nonchalantly.

“Well, um,” Alexis started, “don’t we need some?”

At this point I thought about the fact that I really hated condoms. They mess up everything about sex. I had a tendency to be impulsive with my “sexual escapades” so stopping to put on a condom kind of messes up the

“mood.” Plus, you don’t feel as much during sex when you wear a condom. But we didn’t know each other very well at all. With all the random, unprotected sex I had been having, my dumb-ass was fortunate I didn’t have a sexually transmitted disease or a child already. I wasn’t trying to start then! I really needed to start carrying condoms. I could run to the corner store in this mildly-cold winter weather and grab a box of condoms. *But I hated condoms!* Besides, if my parents found condoms, they would know I was having sex, and being a Jehovah’s Witness, (you forgot about that, didn’t you), there would be some drama. All of these thoughts raced through my head in about fifteen seconds, and I had to make a decision and reply to Alexis. I then verbalized an extremely bad decision I would live to regret.

“Naw, shorty,” I replied as I took Alexis’ hand and kissed her on the cheek. “We don’t need those... I trust you and you trust me, right?”

“Yeah,” Alexis replied shyly.

“I’ll try to make sure I pull out. I just don’t want to mess up the moment you know?”

“Yeah,” Alexis agreed. “Neither do I.”

Alexis and I had unprotected sex a half-dozen times that night. It was some of the *best* intercourse and one of the *worst* decisions I have ever made in my life!

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