

Ulterior Motives

by Mark O'Neal,

Published: 2008



Table of Contents

Prologue



Chapter 1 ... thru ... Chapter 29

Epilogue ...

* * * * *

This is a work of fiction that contains imaginary names, characters, places, events and incidents not intended to resemble any actual persons, alive or dead, places, events or

incidents. Any resemblances to people, places, events or incidents are entirely coincidental.



Prologue

I grabbed a seat at the bar in Billy's Bar and Grill, my favorite restaurant, and ordered a beer and a shot of whiskey. It was unusually empty for a Friday night, and all of the giant plasma televisions had the Houston Lightning vs. the Phoenix Rattlers basketball game on. The Lightning disposed of my team, the St. Louis Wolves, in seven games, and I couldn't bear to watch them play because the wounds of defeat were still fresh. I would always go to Billy's when I arrived back in town from college, or when I finished playing pro basketball by summer. I haven't taken a drink in five years, but today's drama gave me a good reason to drink.

"Would you like some hot wings or some other appetizer with your drinks?" the waitress asked.

"No, thanks," I said, still in a state of shock from the inauspicious events that happened hours ago. I was in a daze, and I felt no signs of snapping out of it in the immediate future.

"Are you okay?"

"No, I'm not. I just want my drinks, please."

"What happened, honey?" the waitress inquired.

"Do you want to talk about it?" She was a stunningly attractive young woman who looked at me with eyes like a nurturing and concerned mother. She also looked familiar, but I couldn't place her face.

"Look, I don't mean to be rude, but I need to get to the embryonic stage of intoxication right now. If you don't mind, I rather not talk about it. Thanks for asking though."

"Very well. I'll bring your drinks right away. I'm sorry I bothered you." She had a perplexed look on her face like she knew me and was baffled because I didn't recognize her. Maybe she's from the old neighborhood, or maybe we went to the same church, I thought.

I looked and felt like a train wreck—the kind of feeling you get when you find out that your best friend is cheating with your girlfriend. But this felt a hundred times worse. I was also angry, confused and heartbroken all in one instance. What would you do if somebody betrayed you in the worst possible way imaginable? Moreover, someone I haven't seen in over twelve years was responsible for taking from me the most precious thing that can be taken from a person.

The waitress brought my drinks, and I gulped the whiskey shot down without hesitation. The whiskey burned as it went down my throat, and it burned even more as it entered my stomach. I haven't slept or eaten much since Thursday morning, and I began to sweat profusely.

"That will be seven dollars and fifty cents, sir."

"Here's a ten. Keep the change."

"Thank you. Let me know if you need anything else, okay? Anything."

I nodded as I wiped my face with a napkin. I immediately followed my shot up with the beer and finished it in a minute flat. I flagged the waitress down for another round. She just finished taking orders from people who arrived a few minutes after I did, and the crowd was starting to pick up.

"Hit me again," I requested.

"Okay," she said. "Do you just want a shot or a shot and beer?"

"Give me a double shot with the beer. Thank you."

"You're welcome. I'll bring your drinks right away."

Feeling inebriated would numb the pain that I was feeling temporarily, but I knew I'd pay for it later. I also hoped no one would recognize me—I was in no mood for autograph signing. That wouldn't have been a problem a season ago when I was at the end of the bench. I would have just blended in by looking like the stereotypical tall and lanky young men of my generation with a t-shirt, baggy jean shorts and Nike sandals on. I figured that as long as I stayed in my seat, nobody would notice me.

However, that was going to be next to impossible because I felt a bathroom break coming on very soon as the beer and whiskey began to take a toll on my bladder. I also started feeling lightheaded because of the alcohol and sleep deprivation, and I was certainly not thinking clearly—rage has totally consumed my mind at this point.

I was at a crossroad. There I was, Maurice Ousley, a twenty-five-year-old rising NBA star faced with the biggest decision that I would ever make in this juncture of my short existence. Whatever happens next will change my life forever.

Chapter 1

Yesterday.

I arrived at the Lambert International Airport about an hour before my flight—anxious to get back to Chicago to see my family. Even though we didn't advance out of the first round of the playoffs, everyone is crowning us the next up-and-coming contenders for next season. I also had a breakout season as a combo guard—twenty points and six and a half assists per game after spending the first two years on the pine, and my phone was ringing off the hook from potential endorsement deals. Not bad for the last pick in the 2005 Draft from Union University.

I wrapped up my business calendar with the Boys Association of St. Louis and booked the first available flight home. St. Louis is where I live, but Chicago will always be home.

I own a condo in downtown St. Louis, and my complex consists of a melting pot of young, urban professionals and retirees. I consider myself to be a low-key, thrifty young man who is very personable and normally loves to interact with common, everyday people.

All of my neighbors affectionately know me by my nickname, Mo, and I got all of them season ticket packages.

Suzette Goldman, who is my next-door neighbor, gets my mail when I'm away and prepares an occasional home-cooked meal for me. She treats me like the son that she never had, and I really appreciate her for it.

I have everything that I need within walking distance—there's a movie cinema, several grocery and convenient stores, fine dining, a mall, and the stadium is right in the middle of downtown St. Louis. I can hop on the Interstate and be at the airport in about thirty minutes.

I had a little time to kill before my flight, so I walked toward one of the kiosks to buy myself bottled water and a newspaper. The airport was somewhat crowded for a Thursday because of Mother's Day weekend, and I got two autograph requests in a matter of fifteen minutes. I didn't mind at all—I was just enjoying being free of my hectic schedule for a few weeks.

"Mo! Mo Ousley!" exclaimed a fan. "Can I please have your autograph? You are my favorite player on the Wolves."

"Sure, no problem. What's your name?"

"Joe...Joe Hawkins. Here, you can sign this notebook, please."

Joe,

Thank you for your generous support.

Maurice Mo Ousley

"Thank you so much, Mo. I hope the Wolves win it all next year."

"Thanks Joe, we'll surely give it our best shot."

I shook Joe's hand, and I walked toward my departure gate to wait on my flight. St. Louis expected great things from the Wolves next season, and I all that I could think about was not letting the fans down. Minutes later, my cell phone rang, and I didn't know the number.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Maurice, how are you?"

"Is this Stephanie?" I said, surely with a very puzzled look on my face.

"Yeah, silly, you don't recognize my voice?" Stephanie said cheerfully.

"No, it's not that...it's just that it's been three years since we talked. You totally caught me by surprise."

Stephanie Davison was my college sweetheart for almost four years, but her family never accepted me because of where I grew up—the south side of Chicago. Stephanie comes from Virginia's Black aristocracy, so I clearly wasn't from the right pedigree according to her family.

Three weeks after graduation, she broke up with me and started dating a pro football player who played for the St. Louis Bisons. I haven't seen or spoken to her since.

"I see your cell number hasn't changed. I figured it was a shot in the dark that I'd catch you."

"Why would it," I said sarcastically. "I'm not hiding from anyone."

"I guess I deserved that. Look, can we meet somewhere and talk? There's a lot I want to say...I want to apologize for everything."

"There's nothing to say, really. Besides, I'm flying to Chicago today, and I won't be back for at least a month."

"Hey, baby, I'm truly sorry, and I didn't mean to leave you hanging like I did. It's just that...I was young and immature, and I was too weak to stand up to my family in regard to you."

"You have no idea what you put me through. I gave you four years of my life, and you walked away without so much as a goodbye. It was as if I meant nothing to you, and to see you with that guy...."

"Andre...Andre and I are over. I could never love him the way that I love you."

"Love? What in the hell do you know about love? Did you love me when your father called me a worthless social climber who wasn't good enough for you...did you stand up for me then?"

"Look, I said I was sorry...."

"Your weak-ass apology doesn't mean anything to me. This trip down memory lane has been fun, but I'm pressed for time. Do me a favor and lose my number, okay?"

"I don't want to leave things like this, Maurice. I realize I still love you."

"It's not always about what you want, Stephanie. It took me a long time to forgive you, but I had to in order to stay sane and move on. I beat myself up for months wondering what I did wrong. But then it hit me...it's just like basketball. You can hold your head up high with no regrets when you give everything that you have, win or lose."

"You forgive me?"

"Yes, Stephanie, I forgive you, but I can never forget about what happened between us. We can't pickup where we left off ever again. The most that I could ever give you is friendship."

"I can't be mad at you, Maurice. Friends it is."

"Take care, Stephanie."

"Bye, Maurice," she said coyly.

A part of me was glad that Stephanie called because it allowed me to release any residual feelings of anger I had toward her. Now I can truly move on and date someone else without any emotional baggage.

A few moments later, my cell phone rang again. I checked my caller ID and saw that it was my stepfather.

"Hey, Dad."

"Hey, Maurice, what time does your flight get here?"

"My flight lands at ten thirty," I said after I yawned.

"I'm going to take a quick nap as soon as I get on the plane. I've been up since six."

"Well, you come home and relax as long as you want. I'm so proud of you, Son."

"Thanks, Dad." I'll see you in an hour or so."

"See you later."

My stepfather's name is Brent Ousley, and he's been in my life since I was twelve. He adopted my younger sister and me two years later after he married my mother, Joyce Woods-Ousley, God rest her soul. She died of breast cancer when I was only fifteen. My younger sister's name is Erin Ousley—a rising star in Hollywood who is shooting her latest movie titled, *The Smoking Gun*. We are two years apart. My stepfather has been a solid rock in our lives since my mother died ten years ago. Nicole, who is the oldest of my stepfather's children, made partner at the most prestigious law firm in the Washington D.C. area. Nicole, Erin and I showed him our gratitude by buying him a new home in Manteno, Illinois, a town on the southern outskirts of Chicago, and a brand new BMW.

My stepfather also has a son—Brent Jr. Junior is a twenty-year-old convicted felon who's always in trouble, and he's out of jail to serve the remainder of his five-year bid on house arrest for drugs and weapons charges.

Suddenly, I found it extremely difficult to keep my eyes open. My motor has been running nonstop since training camp last October, and I was in desperate need of a break.

We are now boarding for Flight 124 for Peotone, Illinois. Please have your boarding pass ready....

I got up from my seat to board the plane when I saw my teammate, Malik Stinson, about to get in line ahead of me. He is the star power forward of the Wolves who leads the team in scoring and rebounding. He was the lone NBA All-Star representative from our team this year, and he is in the running for league MVP.

"Malik!" I shouted.

"What's up, Mo? What are you doing here?"

"I'm on my way to Chicago to see my dad and little brother. What do you have going on this weekend?"

"I met this fine-ass woman named Tanya Ross downtown at lunchtime a couple of days ago...she was at this breast cancer awareness conference at the Blanchard Hotel. She's from Chicago, and she invited me to come visit her."

"Wow, that's so cool, man. How long are you going to be in town?"

"Just for the weekend. Hey, you've got to come to this party with me on Saturday. It's at a secret location on the north side, and Paul Carter and Brian Dawson of the Chicago Comets are throwing it. Are you down?"

"Yeah, I'm down. What time are you going to the party?"

"Probably around ten or eleven. Where does your dad stay?"

"In Manteno."

"Damn, what a coincidence. Tanya stays in Park Forest. That's not too far from you. I can scoop you up at nine thirty, and we can head over there."

"Hey, man, how in the hell does a native New Yorker like you know your way around Chicago so well?"

"What can I say, I get around."

We both laughed at his remark. As we approached the entrance to the plane, the ticket agent was staring at us with a big smile on her face. Suddenly, some of the passengers in addition to the ticket agent started clapping and cheering for us.

"Congratulations on a terrific season, gentlemen," the ticket agent said. "Can I have both of your autographs?"

"Of course you can," I said.

"Me too," a passenger said.

"No problem," Malik said.

As we were signing autographs, I couldn't help but think about how blessed we were to have the life that we were living. I was in a great place now after all of the hardships and pain that I've experienced throughout my life. After we finished signing about a dozen autographs, we boarded the plane and claimed our seats in first class.

Coincidentally, Malik had a window seat on the right side of the plane directly across from my window seat. I had got a burst of energy after signing autographs—forgetting how tired I was moments ago.

"When did your cheap ass start flying first class, Mo?"

"I'm frugal, not cheap. Now that I'm about to get a fat contract extension, I don't have to pinch pennies anymore."

"Good for you, man. Now you don't have to be afraid to hang out with us big spenders. You can start by coming to the boat with me tonight."

"I thought you were visiting Tanya this weekend. Sounds like you're going to be in the streets the whole time."

"Don't get it twisted, Mo. Going to the boat is my ritual whenever I come to Chicago. A couple of hours at the Hammond casino, and I'm out. After that, Tanya has me for the rest of the weekend."

"So you're bringing sand to the beach on Saturday, huh?"

"Yeah, man...a true playa can mack with or without a someone on his arm. You can bring someone and make it a double."

"I don't hang with any women in Chicago anymore, Malik. I got a few female friends back in St. Louis, but I'm not about to fly any of them up here for a party."

"Relax, Mo. I'm sure Tanya has some friends that you could hook up with."

"Cool...I can do the blind-date thing. I never had a problem meeting new people."

"Speaking of hookups, when are you going to hook me up with one of your gorgeous sisters, homeboy?"

"Never. I'm not letting you anywhere near Nikki or Erin, playa," I said, laughing as I watched the ramp personnel load the luggage.

"Ah, come on, man...my intentions are strictly honorable. When I saw Erin for the first time before I knew that she was your sister in the movie *My Sweet Revenge*, it was love at first sight for me, bro."

"Yeah, right, Malik. You fall in love at least one week."

"What, I can't fall in love?" he said, holding his palms up with fake sincerity.

"You need to focus on getting to know Tanya, amigo."

We went back and forth for about a minute or so before the flight attendant brought us beverages. We talked the whole flight about the season, life, what we wanted to do in the future—it was always like that whenever we got together. The Wolves drafted both of us in 2005, and we have the same birthday in the same year. We are kindred spirits who have very similar personalities, but there are fundamental differences as well.

Malik is a free spirit who has people in and out of his house like a revolving door. He has two of his brothers, a cousin and three friends from his childhood

staying with him. I'm a free spirit also, but I'm somewhat aloof at times and live alone. He usually travels with an entourage, and I travel by myself most of the time.

We arrived at the Peotone Airport in about forty-five minutes, and we walked over to baggage claim together. The Peotone Airport is about the size of Midway Airport, and we were at baggage claim in no time.

"I'll call you on Saturday when I'm on my way to get you," he said.

"Cool, I've got some running around to do in the afternoon, but I'll be home around six."

"Alright. Hey, do you need a ride to your dad's house?"

"No, thanks, my dad is coming to get me."

"Okay, I'll see you Saturday."

"Peace, my brother."

Chapter 2

I reached for my phone to let my stepfather know that I've arrived at the airport. Malik and I had gotten our luggage from baggage claim about five minutes earlier, and he took off.

"My flight just arrived about fifteen minutes ago," I said, wiping some sweat from my brow.

"I'm double-parked right in front of Terminal One," Brent said.

"Okay, I'm coming right out."

I grabbed my luggage and started walking toward the exit. The balmy weather was perfect—seventy degrees, sunny and not too humid. It was ninety degrees in St. Louis already, and it wasn't even June yet.

"Hello, Son," Brent said.

"How have you been, Dad," I said, hugging my stepfather.

"Good, Son. How was your flight?"

"It was short...I didn't get a chance to take a nap because I ran into Malik, and he was on the same flight as I was."

"How is he doing? He took the loss pretty hard at the press conference."

"Malik is alright. He's all business on the court, but he's a totally different person off the court."

"Come on, let's go. I don't want the cops giving me a ticket for being parked out here."

"You've got the ride shining, Dad...with all of the bells and whistles. Did you just come from the car wash?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. There's no rain in the forecast all weekend, so I took a chance."

"It always seems to rain the day after I wash my car," I said.

"Ain't that the truth," he said. "Hey, do you want to go Billy's and get some breakfast?"

"Yeah, that's fine. It's always cool to go back to the old neighborhood."

"I know it's your favorite place."

"I can vision three scrambled eggs and three buttermilk pancakes right now."

"What about the sausage or bacon?"

"I gave up pork and red meat five years ago."

"Suit yourself. I have a taste for some bacon."

"Hey, Dad, I've been thinking...it's time Junior knew the truth about my past. I have felt for a long time that if he knew the truth about my time on the streets, it would have saved him a trip to jail."

"I think you're right. You can talk to him when we get home."

Traffic was light on Interstate Fifty-Seven, and Billy's Bar and Grill is a twenty-four hour restaurant located on Eighty-Seventh and Justine. Rush hour traffic usually subsides around nine o'clock, and there appears to be no current obstacles between me and a hot plate of eggs, grits and pancakes.

"Are you going to ever coach high school basketball again? I think you're great with kids...you taught me a lot."

"I don't know, Son. Maybe. I'm really enjoying retirement right now."

"I understand. It's time to pass the torch to the next crop of coaches."

"I know you would make a great coach someday, Son."

We both smiled. My stepfather had finally found the elixir to heal his broken heart. He was finally at peace with himself and adjusting to an empty nest before Junior came back. He was at a point in his life where he could cherish all of the memories of my mother without grieving.

It took him a long time to get over her death.

Our smiles would soon turn to immediate concern as we both noticed that a car has been following us since we left the airport. Nothing really stood out about the car—a rust-colored 1987 Caprice with tinted windows. But I did notice it had Indiana license plates that read *MR GRIM*.

"Did you notice that a car has been following us since we left the airport?" I asked.

"Yeah, I noticed it by the time we hit city limits at 111th Street. We're three blocks away from the restaurant. As long as we stay on a busy street, they might be less likely to try us."

"It won't make a difference. If they're out to get us, a busy street won't stop them. If they want the car, we have to give it up."

"Your absolutely right. It's a brand new day."

We parked in the lot behind the diner, and the Caprice continued to travel east down Eighty-Seventh Street. It appeared that we weren't targets after all.

"Looks like we might be in the clear," he said.

"Let's not be too presumptuous. My gut tells me that they might be back."

We parked and walked toward the diner when the car slowly crept through the alley. We stood frozen as the car stopped in front of us. The passenger side window lowered, and the barrel of a nickel-plated, nine-millimeter Glock was pointed directly at us. I could smell the stench of marijuana coming from the car so strong that I was buzzed on contact and suddenly feared taking my next piss test.

"Get your asses in the car," the passenger said.

"What's this about?" I asked. "If you want the car, take it."

"We don't want the car, Maurice. I won't ask you to get in again."

My stepfather and I grudgingly sat down in the back seats—still high from the second-hand weed smoke. “You have no idea who you are messing with,” I said calmly, looking in his eyes for any sign of fear and trying to rattle him mentally.

“I know exactly who I’m messing with, man,” the passenger said. “Pay attention because I’m only going to say this once.”

“Don’t say another word, Maurice!” Brent shouted. “Let him talk.”

“My name is Russell, and my partner’s name is Grim. We are hit men contracted to collect one million dollars from you by Friday night at exactly midnight. Let me give you one last warning...don’t even think about going to the police because it’s a cop who contracted us for the job. We will take Mr. Ousley as collateral, and if you fail to comply with our terms, he is dead. We will meet you in the warehouse district on 122nd and Torrence. Now grab your father’s phone and get the hell out!”

I honored my stepfather’s wishes by keeping my mouth shut as I climbed out of the back seat. I felt awkward as Grim sped off—I never allowed anyone, even after I got out of the drug game, to disrespect me like that until today.

I had to eat my words—risking my stepfather’s life wasn’t an option.

I felt my blood boiling underneath the surface of my head as I began to think of ways of killing both Grim and Russell. The past I kept buried for twelve years has resurfaced in a way unimaginable—the kidnapping of my stepfather. It was very clever the way they snuck up on us without drawing any attention to themselves.

I stood in the parking lot for at least five minutes trying to figure out why a dirty cop was trying to bleed money out of me. Maybe it’s someone from the task force sent to take down my crew twelve years ago. Someone knew my flight information and where to find me. The clock was ticking, and I had to come up with a game plan. I had to know who was behind this, and I knew that I needed a wolf to catch a wolf without involving the police.

Chapter 3

Grim and Russell drove Brent Sr. to a secret location somewhere in Indiana—no doubt a drug spot ran by the biggest street gang in Gary—the Cobras. They turned out to be somewhat hospitable in spite of the circumstances because they stopped at a McDonald’s and got Brent a Quarter Pounder combo meal. It wasn’t Billy’s, but Brent felt that something was better than nothing.

“I hope you’re comfortable back there, Brent,” Grim said.

“I’m fine despite the marijuana smoke,” Brent said.

“Let me ask you something...how do you guys making a profit by smoking the stuff that you’re supposed to be selling?”

“That’s a good question, Brent,” Russell answered.

“What makes you think that we sell drugs?”

“Come on, Russell, it’s always drugs. Too many Black men feel like slinging dope is the only way to make a living in this country.”

"For your information, pops, we don't sell drugs," Grim said. "We're are paid strictly to kill people."

"That's even worse," Brent said with a look of disgust.

"What gives you the right to be so damn self-righteous?" Russell said. "No one said anything while we were killing Iraqis over in Baghdad."

"You served in the Gulf?"

"Yeah, Brent, and there wasn't a band or a job waiting for us back home after serving two tours of duty," Russell said.

"We do what we have to do," Grim added.

"That's an honorable thing," Brent said. "I'm an ex-marine too...I served in the Gulf War in 1991."

"I thought you looked kind of young to be Maurice's father," Grim said. "How old are you, about forty?"

"Forty-six."

"Yeah, you look more like Maurice's older brother than his stepfather," Russell said.

"While we're getting acquainted...being all friendly and hospitable, if I have to kill you because Maurice can't deliver the goods, I won't hesitate even though I won't like it," Grim said.

"That goes double for me," Russell said.

"Thanks, I think," Brent said with slight hesitation.

Grim pulled up at the spot in one of the roughest neighborhoods in Gary. There were a few apartments, some vacant lots, a couple of abandoned buildings and a mom-and-pops grocery store on the corner. There was broken glass and trash everywhere—a street-cleaning truck hadn't been down the block in months. This was going to be Brent's home for the next couple of days. It was about little past noon, and all was quiet—for now.

Chapter 4

I decided to peruse my old neighborhood to find out some answers. I figured someone from my past had to know Grim and Russell. Jesse Owens Park was a good start—located on Eighty-Seventh and Jeffery Boulevard with the neighborhood high school across the street. I honed my skills on those basketball courts, and watching the next crop of young stars brought back some great memories.

I parked on the south side of Eighty-Seventh Street, and got out to watch some of the guys play. I didn't recognize any of them—I haven't stepped foot in this park in a few years. That was when I noticed Blue, a guy who went to the same grammar school as I did, watching the game on the other side of the basketball court. He was a year ahead of me, but he looked much older—like life had dealt him a bad hand. He had forty ounces of liquid crack in his left hand and a Newport in his right.

He had been in and out of jail over the years with a rap sheet as long as my arm, and I had some street credibility with him because of my two-year stint in the drug game. Once I saw him, I decided to walk toward him to see if he would recognize me first before I said anything to him. He looked up at me as I stood almost a foot taller than he did. He had a big grim on his face, and by then I knew that he figured out who I was.

"What's up, Mo?" Blue said.

"How have you been, Blue?" I asked, giving him a firm handshake and a hug.

"I've been cool, man... trying to keep my head up, bro. Hey, good job this season, man. You had the Lightning on the ropes, and that was the best game seven that I ever watched. That damn Flash Tucker was just unstoppable though."

"Thanks, Blue. It wasn't easy guarding him. I was able to bother his shot somewhat, but he's so quick."

"Yeah, man, you checked him about as good as anybody could."

"Yeah, you're right. No one was going to stop him that night. It looks like we got some talent out here, huh?"

"A couple of all-state players. That guy in green Nike t-shirt is Derrick Palmer, and he's going downstate to Union next year. You might want to talk to him and give him some advice or something."

"That's a good idea, Blue, I will. But before I do that, I need to ask if you know anything about two guys from Indiana named Grim and Russell?"

"Grim and Russell..." he said, pondering the two names.

"Yeah, Grim drives a an old rust-colored Caprice with Indiana plates that read *MR GRIM*."

"Nope. Never heard of them. Hey, did they threaten you... because I can put the word out..."

"No, nothing like that. I was just wondering... I met them at a party a couple of days ago, and they were asking questions about some of the guys from the old neighborhood, that's all."

"Oh, okay. Before you go, I just want to say that I'm proud of you, Mo. Most of us didn't make it out of here, but you did."

"Thanks again, Blue, that means a lot to me."

I shook Blue's hand again and walked toward Derrick Palmer to introduce myself. He instantly recognized me, and I signed his jersey. I gave him the rundown on Union University—the pitfalls, pro and cons of the school. We talked for about fifteen minutes before I decided that it was time to call Bull, to find out who Grim and Russell were and who their employer was.

I waited for my cell to get a good signal before I called him. I haven't spoken to him in a couple of weeks because my schedule has been very busy.

"Bull," I said.

"Is that you, Mo? How have you been, man?"

"Yeah, Bull, of course it's me. Who else would it be?"

"What's wrong, man?"

"Can you meet me at Jesse Owens Park right now?"

"Sure, give me about ten minutes. What's going on?"

"I'll tell you about it when you get here."

"Alright, peace."

“Peace.”

Wilbur Johnson is my best friend, and we have known each other since high school. He hates his first name, so everyone calls him by his nickname, Bull. We were teammates on the high school basketball team all four years. Bull was the enforcer on the team who gave us the toughness needed to win two State Championships.

Once Bull graduated from high school, his life took a different turn. He got mixed up with some shady people in the summer before he was supposed to go to Union University with me. Somehow he got probation after getting pinched for a few pounds of weed. Because of this, Union backed out of their scholarship offer to him. He couldn't find work or afford college tuition, so he turned to the streets.

I continued to watch the guys play basketball until Bull got to the park, and some Hispanic young men were playing soccer on the football field several yards away. It continued to be a beautiful day weather wise—seventy-five degrees and little breezier than it was at the airport because I was close to Lake Michigan—about three miles north of the park.

“Hey, Bull!” I shouted, waving my arms in the air to get his attention.

“What's up, dawg?” Bull shouted back with a big smile on his face, and we gave each other a firm hand shake and a hug, the customary Black man's greeting. “It's so good to see you. Anyway, congratulations on a great season.”

“Thanks, man.”

“So, what's going on, Mo?”

“Two guys named Grim and Russell kidnapped my dad, and they want one million dollars by Friday at midnight or else he's dead.”

“Kidnapped? Grim and Russell...do they drive a old-ass, rust-colored Caprice?”

“Yes, my friend. They said a dirty cop employed them to kidnap Dad, and I'm determined to find out who this damn cop is.”

“Those guys are *Cobras*. Grim and Russell are ex-marines from the Iraqi War who are hit men for the gang. Grim got his name and reputation from the dozens of bodies that he has sent to the cemetery. Grim is short for *Grim Reaper*.”

“Thanks for the history lesson, but the hell with Grim. I'm going to smoke that bastard if anything happens to my father... wait a minute... how do you know all of this?”

“Calm down, Mo! You're not a killer.”

“I'm not the choirboy that you think I am, Bull. I asked you a question.”

“The summer I got pinched for weed... the people that I took the weigh for were the Cobras. I ran with them for five years before I got out of the game completely. Russell started dropping bodies for them a couple of years ago, and I think Grim just joined them.”

“Who do you think this dirty cop is?”

“I don't know, but give me a few hours to see what I can find out on these streets. Hey, have you told Junior yet?”

“No, I haven't been home yet.”

“Let's meet up at Pepe's Tacos across the street in about three hours, and we can tell him together, alright?”

“Alright. Thanks, Bull, I appreciate this.”

"You don't have to thank me, Mo. I owe you...I owe you for everything. Don't worry, we're going to get your dad back."

"Okay. Be careful, Bull."

"I will."

Chapter 5

It's been over three hours, and I still haven't heard anything from Bull. I kept mulling the morning over and over in my head, but I came up with nothing. I drove around neighborhoods on the southeast side of Chicago and south suburbs like Dolton, Harvey; and Hammond, Indiana to ask several other acquaintances about Grim and Russell.

Nobody knew one iota of information—it's almost like they were ghosts.

The Cobras run the entire city of Gary, and they even have a few territories in the south suburbs of Chicago.

However, I couldn't figure out the reason why no one knew Grim or Russell. It's a little after four o'clock, so going home right now would be a possible nightmare because of rush hour.

I drove back to the Pepe's Tacos parking lot and waited for Bull. My appetite was nonexistent, and worry from the morning's events was starting to make me antsy.

Finally, Bull entered the parking lot after I waited an hour.

"What did you find out, Bull?"

"I spoke to my connect named Pooh on the inside of the Cobras operation, and he has some incriminating pictures of a cop, some powerful politicians and some Cobra muscle making a hand-to-hand drug and cash exchange with some Columbian drug smugglers. He is waiting for the right time to sell them because this kind of information can get you killed."

"Is he willing to sell them to us, and is that the cop I'm looking for?"

"Yes, he wants to sell us the pictures, but I don't know who the cop is. He might be the dirty cop responsible, but the Cobras have several dirty cops on their payroll."

"Alright. When does he want to sell them?"

"He wants to meet Friday at three o'clock at these abandoned warehouses in northwest Gary to sell the pictures for \$10,000."

"I guess it's a reasonable price considering the fact this cop might be the wrong guy. I'm willing to take the chance, so set it up."

"Alright. What are we going to do in the meantime?"

"I know Friday is a day away, so I've got to figure out how to raise one million dollars fast. I'm doing well, but I can't just put my hands on that kind of money instantly."

"How much do you have right now?"

"I've got \$500,000 of liquid cash stashed away in a safe place."

"Man, that's a lot of cheddar. I wish I had some cash for you, but I only got \$5,000 in the bank."

"Don't worry about it. The info you gave me is worth just as much as money, thanks."

"Anything I can do to help, let me know. But there is one thing that I don't understand...what cop do you know has a personal ax to grind with you?"

"I asked myself the same question, and the only thing that I came up with was a cop from my past."

"A cop from your past? What does that mean?"

"It's possible that one of the cops from the task force assigned to bust up my crew twelve years ago wants to make me pay."

"Your crew? Did you sling dope?"

"Yeah, I did. It's not something that I talk about, and I'm definitely not proud of it."

"Wait a minute, you were only a kid. How did you run a drug crew?"

"I found a group of guys ages twelve to seventeen with one common goal willing to follow me and get paid. My biological father taught me everything that I needed to know about the drug trade before he abandoned my sister and me. I clocked paper nonstop from the age of twelve for two years before the Feds raided us."

"You were only twelve when you started out, so how did you manage to run your business without one of your crew members trying to take advantage of you?"

"I have a knack for getting people to follow me. I'm not saying this to brag...I used a cerebral approach to run my business instead of fear and intimidation. I treated each member of my crew like a partner, and everything that I said made sense to them."

"You held out on me, man. I thought we were friends."

"We are friends!" I shouted. "This isn't who I am...that part of me is dead, man. Do you want to hear the rest or not?"

"Yeah, go ahead," he said sarcastically.

"Anyway, like I was saying, we made a ton of money for two years before the Feds infiltrated my operation. But we didn't sling the traditional way by fighting for corners. My right-hand man had a cousin who owned a couple of lofts in secluded areas that we used as fronts. We opened up two members-only nightclubs and sold strictly cocaine and marijuana to complement the liquor sold at those clubs."

"How did you keep the police from raiding the clubs?"

"We had a few cops on the payroll just like the Cobras have, and people needed an ID card with a magstripe to enter the club. There were doctors, lawyers, accountants, pro athletes, businessmen and even cops. There were well over fifteen hundred people on the list at the time."

"How did the Feds bust up your crew?"

"An undercover cop posing as one of the members got on the inside and learned our daily operation. He gathered up enough evidence to shut us down and put us away for a long time."

"If all of this is true, why aren't you in jail right now?"

"If this is true? What is that supposed to mean... when have I ever lied about anything?"

"You lied by omission, Mo."

"I didn't lie about anything! My past is my business! Other than my dad, no one knows about this. And for the record, outside of my man's cousin, none of us did any time because we were minors."

"I'm sorry I overreacted. It's just that we've been friends for so long, and we never kept anything from one another."

"This is the only secret that I have, Bull."

"So what did you get, probation?"

"Yeah, I got five years probation, and 500 hours of community service. The only reason that I got off was because my dad was a friend of the District Attorney at the time. My dad was able to get the DA to give all of the guys probation, but if I so much as had gotten busted for jaywalking, the DA would have reopened the case and charged me as an adult."

"Wow, man, that's incredible. I have a new found respect for you, Mo."

"You don't have to give me props for that. I'm not proud of being a drug dealer."

"I know. So, what happened to the owner of the clubs?"

"His name is Sean Wilks, and he took ninety percent of the weight because he was twenty-six at the time that we got raided. He was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison for all of the drug counts."

"He's still locked up, right?"

"Yes, but I hired Sean one of the best defense lawyers in the Midwest, and he got his sentence commuted to twelve and half years because the lawyer was able to prove that there wasn't a pattern of violent acts occurring while we were selling dope in his nightclubs. He gets out this year."

"Do you ever go to visit him?"

"At least twice a year. I visit him whenever we play Chicago or in the summer. He has a wife and two kids, and I gave them half of my drug money to live on because I felt guilty about him taking the rap for all of us."

"Damn, how much is half, Mo?"

"Half of 1.2 million dollars. I spent one hundred thousand to get Sean's sentence reduced, and I buried the rest in my stepfather's backyard. I had it stashed there until we moved him out of the city."

"Does your stepfather know about your drug money?"

"No, and I want to keep it that way."

"I have one more question, and I hope it doesn't sound dumb...but why haven't you touched that money in twelve years?"

"That's a legitimate question. I haven't touched it because I profited from the addictions of hundreds of people, and I'm afraid of the bad karma waiting for me around the corner. I'm in a different place in my life right now, and I feel like I've paid my debt to society."

"You're a better man than I am. I would have spent that money the first chance that I got."

"Yeah, and your ass would have been in jail. I couldn't spend a damn thing with the Feds watching me."

"I guess you've got a point. Hey, are you ready to go and tell Brent what's going on?"

"We can get out of here as soon as the traffic dies down somewhat. I know Junior is wondering where Dad and I are, but let's wait until about six."

"That's cool, Mo. I'm going to buy myself some tacos. Do you want something?"

"No, thanks, go ahead."

Food was the last thing on my mind. I was plotting how I was going to come up with the other half of the money. I talked to my broker, and it was no way to access my money before Monday.

I watched some of the students walk by and listened to the mindless banter coming out of their mouths. I thought about how much easier life was when I was in high school. After my somewhat tumultuous pre-adolescent years and in spite of my mom's death, high school was the best four years of my life. The only two things that I had to worry about was studying and basketball.

Life was hard financially for us after my mother left my biological father, Haden Fox. He lost his factory job when I was six years old. He couldn't find work afterward, so he started hustling. My mom tolerated it for about two years before she finally got fed up with his lifestyle.

However, she never found out about my father showing me how to cut cocaine or heroin.

Bull walked out of the restaurant with a large bag of food. He had enough for an entire army—his appetite was always ravenous.

"Why didn't you eat in the restaurant? You don't have to worry about me...I'm cool out here by myself, man."

"What, you don't like my company?"

"No, that's not what I meant... I just needed to think for a few minutes, that's all."

"You're worried about how you're going to come up with the dough, huh?"

"Yeah. I can't come up with anything."

"Relax. I got a plan. I'll tell you about it when we get to the house."

"Okay. I'm down for just about anything right now. Let's get out of here when you finishing eating."

"Alright, just give me a few minutes."

"Say, what's that on your back seat...a book about learning Portuguese? Are you planning on going to Brazil?"

"Yeah, I'm planning on going there with my girlfriend."

"You have a new girlfriend?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"Look at you...being all secretive and everything."

Hurry up so we can out of here."

Chapter 6

Brent was sitting on a bed with his arm handcuffed to the upper part of a stationary wooden bedpost that was connected to a queen headboard. Grim was sitting in a chair across the room watching The Jerry Springer Show on a thirty-seven inch, plasma television. Russell had stepped out for a moment—probably en route to score more marijuana, buy some takeout or both.

"Let me know when you need a bathroom break," Grim said.

"I'm alright for now," Brent answered. "What's with these handcuffs, man? I not going anywhere with that big-ass Rockweller in the front living room."

"I'm not taking any chances, Brent. You are an ex-marine, and I don't know what tricks you have up your sleeve."

"Fair enough. Can we watch something else besides this daytime drama? There has to be a game on or something."

"Jerry Springer is the show, man. When it goes off, we can watch the NBA playoffs, alright?"

"Alright. Let me ask you a question, Grim. Who has it out for my son?"

"That's classified information, Brent. My employer wishes to remain anonymous...strictly business, nothing personal."

"Don't be fooled by Maurice's clean-cut image. He has a somewhat dirty past, and he will get to the bottom of this. You are underestimating him."

"I'm not the least bit worried about Maurice. My employer knows everything there is to know, and that's that."

"Alright...alright, whatever you say. If you don't mind me asking, how old are you?"

"I'm twenty-five."

"I see. You have an athletic build. Did you play football?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. I was an all-state running back in California, and I tore my ACL at the beginning of my senior year in high school. All of my scholarship offers dried up after that."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Grim. I coached high school basketball for twenty years before I retired."

"Did you play basketball when you were younger?"

"Yes, I did. I was an all-state point guard in high school, and I played for Union University for four years."

"No desire to go pro?"

"I didn't have the height, speed or quickness to play at the pro level even though I had the knowledge of the game. I realized I was more suited to coach rather than play."

"I felt I would have made it to the NFL if it weren't for my knee injury. I ran a four-three in the forty-yard dash."

"With that kind of speed, you would have definitely written your own ticket. So, what part of California are you from?"

"I'm from Compton. I joined the Marines to escape the gangs. I beat a guy half to death for hitting my sister. It turned out that he was part of the Bloods, and they were going to kill me if I didn't leave Compton."

"Have you been back home since then?"

"Yeah, plenty of times. After what I've seen in Iraq, I'm not afraid to die anymore, and besides, the guy whose ass I kicked was killed five years ago in a drive-by shooting."

"What did you see in Iraq?"

"The blood...the carnage... I saw that stuff on a regular basis. I was standing maybe a few yards or so from one of guys in my unit. We cleared the street and secured the area, or so we thought. Moments afterward, he was shot in the head

by one of the Iraqi militants with an M16 rifle. The whole top of his head was blown off, and I still have nightmares about that day.”

“Is that why you drink whiskey and smoke marijuana so much?”

“Yeah, I get drunk and high everyday to numb the pain and avoid having nightmares. I’m so jacked up mentally that I couldn’t function at a regular nine-to-five gig without wanting to beat the crap out anyone who I felt disrespected me.”

“I didn’t come close to any type of combat in Desert Storm. My only battle was withstanding the 120-degree heat and dodging scorpions. Listen, I know somebody who can talk to you about your nightmares.”

“Who...a shrink? I’m not crazy....”

“No, I’m not saying that you’re crazy. Everyone needs help dealing with problems at some point in his life. I talked to my therapist years ago after the death of my wife, Maurice’s mother. She helped me deal with my grief.”

“I get it. I might have to take you up on that someday.”

“Well, if I make it out of here alive, I’ll give you my therapist’s name and number. Hey, I think I’m ready for that bathroom break now.”

Chapter 7

The traffic on Interstate Fifty-Seven was very heavy, and I knew we wouldn’t reach Manteno before seven o’clock. Bull was trailing me with his music blaring—he was several hundred yards behind me, and I could still hear the bass of his \$5,000 sound system shake the entire frame of his Escalade truck. We were forty minutes in, and we hadn’t reached 167th Street yet when my stepfather’s cell phone rang. It was Junior—I knew he wouldn’t stop calling until he got an answer.

“What’s up, BJ?”

“Where the hell are you, and why isn’t Dad picking up?”

“I’m stuck in traffic on the expressway. I’ll be there soon.”

“Alright. Hurry up, and I’ll see you in a few, Mo.”

I dodged a bullet because I hadn’t figured out how I was going to tell Junior that Dad was missing—his visceral response to this was a guaranteed tirade, I thought. I have been known to be a hothead at times—but Junior’s temper was ten times worse.

The flow started to pick up once we passed 167th Street, but there was one prick in the left-hand lane moving very slowly and holding up traffic. I got on his bumper to make him speed up to no avail, and I finally went around to pass him in the right-hand lane.

It was a little passed seven when I pulled up in my stepfather’s driveway. Bull was right behind me—his loud music surely disturbing the neighbors nearby.

“Turn that music down, Bull! This isn’t the damn ghetto!”

“I’m sorry, Mo. I got a little carried away...Jay-Z’s cut is my joint, man.”

“Whatever, man. I need to figure out how to tell BJ that Dad got kidnapped.”

“Just tell him the truth, Mo. You know he’s going to blow up at first, but he’ll calm down once you explain everything to him.”

"You're right. Let's go inside."

As we walked toward the house, I couldn't help but marvel how majestic it looked—a two-story house with six bedrooms, hardwood floors, marble countertops and twenty-foot-high ceilings. The grass was perfectly manicured, and the entire property resembled something out of a home and garden magazine. I turned my key in the lock, and we walked in. Junior was waiting for us in the living room.

"What's going on, Mo?" Junior asked. "What's he doing with you, and where's Dad?"

"It's a long story BJ, you might want to sit down for this," Bull answered.

"What happened...is there something wrong?"

"Dad and I got jacked today. Two guys named Grim and Russell kidnapped Dad, and they want a million dollars by Friday at midnight or else he's dead. A dirty cop contracted them for the job, so we can't go to the police."

"Jacked? Damn, I can't do anything with this low jack on my ankle. A million dollars...you have to give it to them, Mo." Junior wasn't his usually contentious self and was surprisingly calm considering the circumstances.

Maybe he's grown since his time in prison, or maybe it hasn't truly registered yet that our father has been kidnapped.

"I've got \$500,000 right now, and I can't cash in my stocks until Monday. I got to find a way to get the other half by tomorrow night."

"I've got a plan to get the other half," Bull said.

"My cousin rolls with the Marauders, and he gave me the combination to their safe at the dope house where he serves weed and crack. He's underage, so no one will suspect him."

"How will you be able to get inside and rob the safe?" Junior asked. "It won't be easy to get in and out of the Marauders' dope spot."

"That's where your brother comes in. Mo can be a decoy by pretending to be lost while I sneak in and empty out the safe."

"Stop right there!" Junior shouted. "That's a stupid plan, Bull...someone would figure out that Mo was responsible for the safe getting cracked because everybody would remember his face and link him to the time of the robbery. Meanwhile, you would be free and clear because no one would know who you were outside of your cousin."

"He's right, Bull. That plan might draw more heat to me and my family."

"Well, do you two have a better plan? I don't see how this plan can fail because Mo will be signing autographs while I..."

"You would say something like that, selfish bastard!" Junior blasted. "I don't know why Mo keeps your dumb ass around."

"Shut up, BJ, before I kick your ass!" Bull shouted.

"Both of you shut up," I said. "We're supposed to come up with a plan together, not fight."

"I'm cool, Mo," Bull said.

"I'm not sorry for what I said because it's the truth. I don't give a damn if I ruffled Bull's feathers."

"Whatever, BJ," Bull said angrily.

"Look, we are in a crisis right now, and I could really use some help without all of this bickering," I said.

"I have some jewelry worth about \$500,000 that I stole from some rival drug dealers before I went to the pen," Junior said. "I have Rolex watches, platinum chains and rings in a safe deposit box at First American Bank. I also know of a fence in the southwestern suburbs that will probably give me fifty to sixty percent value for it. You can have it to free Dad, Mo."

"You robbed some drug dealers?" I said rhetorically. "Your ass is crazy, BJ. I'll see if I can borrow the rest from Malik."

"Sounds like you got everything covered, Mo," Bull said. "I'm going to bounce."

"Wait, Bull. I'm going to need someone to watch my back when I cash in this jewelry. I don't feel comfortable carrying that kind of money around."

"Done. When do you want to do it?"

"We can go in the morning. I'll pick you up at nine."

"Alright, I'll clear my morning schedule and see you later," Bull said, turning toward Junior and looking at him with contempt. "BJ."

"Wilbur," Junior said with equal disdain.

Bull walked out and shut the door behind him. I looked at Junior as he shook his head with an intense frown on his face.

"I can't stand him, Mo. Look, I know you don't like people telling you what to do, but take some advice from your little brother. Bull has never had your best interests in mind, and I could see it...even as a kid. He's jealous of you for who you are and what you have."

"So what are you really saying, BJ, that I should cut him off?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. I know that people should be loyal to their friends through thick and thin, but Bull is as shady as they come. I never told you this because I was afraid to ruin your friendship with Bull years ago..."

"BJ, what are you talking about?"

"I was thirteen at the time, and it was about two weeks before your graduation. I was with my friend Anthony, and we were walking home from baseball practice when I saw Bull and your ex-girlfriend Michelle hugging and kissing in the Walgreen's parking lot on Eighty-Seventh and Stony. He didn't see me, and I never said anything about it. I realize now that I should have said something sooner... I'm sorry, Mo."

"You don't have anything to be sorry about because it wasn't your fault. Everybody could see that he was a self-serving, backstabbing bastard...but why couldn't I see it? I'm going to keep this under wraps for now because I need him to watch my back tomorrow. That explains why Michelle became distant and eventually broke up with me in the summer after high school graduation."

"I'm only trying to help you see the truth about Bull, but he's not worth you beating yourself up mentally."

"I know. I was just thinking about how I can't seem to keep a woman. I've had two relationships that lasted exactly four years each."

"Don't beat yourself up about that either. You made the mistake of picking two women who weren't compatible with you. You're a generous, giving person, Mo. Both of your ex-girlfriends were stuck-up and selfish. Face it, bro, you place too much stock in looks and not enough stock in substance."

Junior was right. Michelle was narcissistic and flighty, and she could be downright vicious at times. She was a cheerleader who was the most popular girl in school, and she didn't hesitate let everyone know it. Stephanie was a pampered princess who came from a rich and controlling family, she encroached my boundaries on a regular basis, and she expected me to cater to her every whim. I made a promise to myself that the next time I fall for someone, it will be the real thing—not an illusion of the perfect relationship.

"Damn, you make a strong argument, BJ. How in the hell did you get so wise?"

"I have five great role models. Too bad it took a five-year jail term to make me see the light."

"Better late than never."

"Hey, what about Mom, Nikki and Erin...should we tell them about Dad?"

"No, that's not a good idea. There's no sense in worrying them about this. Nikki and Erin can't help us from opposite sides of the country, and Mom would just worry herself sick even though she hasn't been with Dad in almost twenty years. We're going to get him back tomorrow, and we can tell them afterwards."

"Alright, Mo."

"You said I shouldn't beat myself up about Bull, but the truth is that I've been holding on to this secret for years. I have something to share with you also."

"What is it?"

"Twelve years ago, I got pinched for dealing drugs. I was fortunate enough to avoid getting sent to boot camp or worse, and thanks to Dad's connections, I got off with five years probation and 500 hours of community service."

"I don't believe you...your straight-laced ass didn't deal any drugs," he said with a bewildered look on his face."

"It's the truth, BJ...you were probably too young to remember. All of those nights when I was supposed to be helping my uncle with his office cleaning service...that was just a front. I put together a crew of about twenty guys ages twelve to seventeen, and we made money continuously for two years before the Feds raided us."

"Come on, man, give me a break. You and a bunch of teenagers sold dope on the south side of Chicago?"

"No BJ, give me some credit. You ought to know that I don't do things the way everyone else does them. I knew that fighting for corners wasn't an option. My right-hand man Justin had a cousin who owned two nightclubs, and his clubs were a front for selling the cocaine and marijuana."

"How did you control the type of crowd that came in? Did you have a VIP list or something?"

"Now you get it, man. The point I'm trying to make here is that no matter what method you choose to get ahead illegally, the Feds are always one step ahead of you. They shut us down in two years, and I covered every angle I could think of...background checks on the patrons, cops on the payroll, an accountant to make the books look legit..."

"I must admit, I could see you running your business the way that you did. You always try to think outside of the box. However, why did you decide to deal drugs?"

"I sold drugs because I was good at it."

"That sounds original. You have to give me more than that."

"Okay. I realize that the Maurice you know and love today is a total square, and he couldn't have pulled off being a drug dealer back then or ever. What you don't know is that my biological father showed me all of the tricks of the trade at the age of eight. So you see, I never had a true childhood since, and in my father's mind, he was going to make society pay for the hand that he was dealt by slinging dope."

"You never talk about him...is he dead?"

"No, he isn't. He lost his job when I was six, and he started serving soon afterward. He didn't want my mother to find out that he was teaching me how to cut and sell dope because he knew she wouldn't understand. Right after he got sentenced to life in prison for shooting two cops in a drug deal gone bad, he apologized for exposing me to an ugly world. He said he was only trying to toughen me up because society was never going to give a Black man a break."

"Have you ever gone to see him?"

"No, I haven't seen him since the bailiff carted him off to jail from the courtroom after sentencing."

"So, I guess you told me this story because you feel guilty for not sharing it with me sooner? It's not your fault because you or Dad couldn't give me any advice back then."

I was a hothead, and after Dad kicked me out, nothing was going to save me from a trip to prison."

"I should have at least tried...."

"Prison saved me, bro. I would be dead if I would have stayed in these streets. I'm still glad that you told me though. You give me more hope that I can make something out of myself."

"Of course you can, BJ. You are the only one that can stop you."

"Thanks, man."

"Hey, how well do you know your fence...is he trustworthy?"

"I've dealt with him for a year and a half, and I never had any problems with him. His name is Josh Kersey, and he's located in Justice, Illinois. I'll call him right now and set it up."

"Cool, I'm going to bed. See you in the morning."

"Alright, Mo. I'll call my bank in the morning so that you won't have any problems getting the jewelry. Hey, where's the meeting tomorrow?"

"In the warehouse district on 122nd and Torrence. Goodnight."

Chapter 8

I tossed and turned all night long—restless from Thursday morning events. I finally got out of bed at about seven, and I took a shower, brushed my teeth and got dressed. Junior was still asleep, so I tried to be as quiet as possible.

I had a full morning on my plate that consisted of picking up Bull, getting my money out of storage, getting Junior's jewelry out of his safe deposit box and liquifying the jewelry at the fence he gave me. Junior had rented his safe deposit

box with a fake alias and social security number right before the Feds seized his drugs, guns and cash at the apartment he rented in the southwest suburbs.

The jewelry was the only thing left from his life of crime.

Before we moved my stepfather to Manteno, I dug up my money and called Justin Anderson, my ex-partner in crime who was still in the life. He was able to get me fifty clean bundles of one hundred dollar bills for ten cents on the dollar. I put the money, some old clothes and furniture in storage at Safeway Self-Storage Company in Hazel Crest. I was saving the money for a rainy day, and now it was storming.

I left the house at eight—heading toward the southeast side of Chicago to get Bull. I always thought two steps ahead—I needed Bull watching my back because anybody could be staking out Josh’s operation and waiting for someone to rob.

It was the middle of rush hour, so I got off of the Interstate at 127th Street to avoid the backup. I went eastbound to Halsted and northbound on Halsted to Eighty-Seventh. Bull lived two blocks from Jesse Owens Park on Eighty-Eighth and Luella Avenue. I pulled up in front of his house at eight fifty-five and got out the car to ring his doorbell. I stood on his porch for about thirty seconds before he answered the door.

“On time as usual,” Bull said, grabbing his morning paper and throwing it inside of the house.

“I’ve got a lot of running around to do this morning, and time isn’t on my side, Bull,” I said. “I’ve got less than twenty-four hours to come up with this money.”

“Did you remember to call Malik?”

“I’m going to call him as soon as we head over to Junior’s bank to get the jewelry.”

“Okay. What other stops do you have to make?”

“I’ve got a couple of other people to see. I just need you to watch my back while I cash in this jewelry, and I’m going to drop you off at the barbershop. I know you have clients scheduled, and I don’t want to tie up your day.”

“It’s cool, Mo. I cleared my schedule today, so if you need me for anything else, let me know. Besides, I have to meet Pooh today at three for the pictures.”

“Alright.”

Something in my gut didn’t feel right, and my instincts have never failed me before. Bull’s extreme helpfulness had me bothered somewhat. It was totally out of character for him to offer anything unless you asked him. He is quick to take and slow to give. I realized at that moment I didn’t trust Bull anymore because of what Junior had told me about him.

I decided it was a good time to call Malik about borrowing the money. I hated asking anyone for money under any circumstances. He picked up on the first ring.

“I see that you’re up already,” I said.

“Yeah, Tanya and I are about to go to breakfast in about thirty minutes. What do you have going on today?”

“Things are a mess right now. My dad and I got jacked yesterday. Two thugs held us at gunpoint, kidnapped Dad and demanded a million dollars by Friday at midnight or else he’s dead.”

“Kidnapped? Why didn’t you go to the police?”

"It's a long story...some dirty cop is responsible for this, so I can't involve the police. I'll fill you in with the rest of the details later. I'm going to have 800 long by noon, and I need to borrow 200 from you today...I'll pay you back next week. I can't cash in any of my stock until Monday."

"Sure, man, anything you need. I won some money on the boat last night, and I can get the rest from my bank."

"Excellent, man. I need it in hundreds, and I'll meet you at my house at one o'clock."

"Done. I'll see you later."

I flipped my phone closed and gave my undivided attention to the road. I didn't have much to say to Bull—finding it to be extremely arduous to weigh the pro and cons of my friendship with him and deciding whether or not to remain friends. We've been through a lot together, and it would have been very difficult to just throw eleven years away over a girl who broke up with me years ago.

"Why are you so quiet, Mo?"

"I've got a lot on my mind, man. I need to know something."

"What?"

"Why haven't you told me about Michelle, you damn hypocrite?"

"Michelle...what about her? I haven't seen her since high school."

"Don't play dumb with me. BJ saw you hugging and kissing her in the Walgreen's parking lot right before high school graduation."

"I'm sorry, Mo, I just didn't know how to tell you..."

"I'm sick and tired of hearing you say sorry, man. I can't believe that in seven years, you couldn't figure out a way to tell me the truth."

"I know...it's no excuse. I should have told you, but the longer I waited, the more difficult it got. I was young and stupid, and I let Michelle's beauty cloud my judgement. I hope you can forgive me someday."

"I don't know, Bull. It makes me wonder if you're harboring more secrets. Maybe BJ is right about you...you only care about yourself and forget about everybody else."

"That's not true, Maurice. You're my man through thick and thin. I would never disrespect or betray you ever again."

"Alright, let's drop it. We were all very young, and everybody makes mistakes. Besides, I was eventually going to break up with her anyway because we were having problems our entire senior year."

"So you forgive me?"

"Yeah, man, it's water under the bridge. I needed to get it off of my chest."

I'm not the type of person who gets off by seeing someone beg. Once I'm able to vent, I'm done with it. I didn't hold a grudge against Bull because I wasn't too mad about the circumstances anyway.

Junior's bank was located in Hyde Park, and it was always a hassle to find parking. Once we got there, I had to circle the block three times before a parking space opened up. The bank parking lot was full, and I'm sure many of the people who parked in the lot went to places other than First American Bank.

"Are you coming inside or staying in the car," I asked.

"Go ahead, I'll stay here and sightsee."

"Alright. I'll be back in a minute."

I was able to park about a half block away from the bank, and I briskly walked toward the front entrance. I passed by this gorgeous young lady dressed in a tight-fitting, navy-blue blazer, a short skirt and three-inch heels that accented her shapely calves. She was exiting the bank as I was walking in, and we both turned around simultaneously to get a quick glance at each other. I smiled at her, but I was pressed for time and couldn't small talk.

She smiled back, appearing to be in a hurry also.

I walked over to one of the personal bankers and said, "Good morning, can you help me?"

"Good morning, sir, how can I help you?" she said.

"My brother should have called this morning and spoke to someone about a third party opening his safe deposit box. He sent me to retrieve the contents inside of it."

"What's your brother's name?"

"Joe Black," I said, laughing on the inside at the triteness of his alias.

"Okay, sir, I'll get the manager for you in a moment."

"Thank you."

I stood in the middle of the bank for a brief moment while I waited for the bank manager. The bank was fairly crowded due to Mother's Day weekend—cash withdrawals for fine dining, gifts or fabulous weekend getaways for the most important ladies in their lives, I thought. I loved my stepmother, Arlene Harrison, but I missed my mother terribly.

The bank manager came out of his office and walked toward me to greet me. He looked like the archetypical banker—six foot tall wearing a dull-looking blue suit and square-toe loafers. He strongly resembled a young Robert Redford. "Maurice Ousley?" he asked, extending his hand to me.

"Yes, good morning," I said, firmly shaking his hand.

"My name is Peter Brock, and I've been expecting you. Your brother called this morning and explained everything to me. If you can sign the list for me, I will escort you to the safe deposit boxes in the back."

"Sure," I said, reaching for a pen in my back pocket.

"Alright, let's go to the back. Your brother wants to close his account with us, and he has authorized you as a third party to sign all of the necessary paperwork. I hope your brother gets well soon...I lost my brother to testicular cancer a couple of years ago."

"Oh, yes...thank you, Peter."

I thought for an instance about how Junior had become an accomplished liar. I spent about fifteen minutes filling out paperwork before I was able to leave. I requested a small box to stuff the jewelry in so that I would draw the least amount of attention to myself.

I quickly walked back to the car and saw Bull trying to get some young lady's phone number. Bull couldn't control his salacious impulses as I overheard him trying to convince the young lady to come to his house with some lewd comments.

"I see not a whole lot has changed, Bull," I said.

"Excuse my manners, sweetheart," he said. "This is Maurice."

"How are you," I said, shaking her hand.

"And this is Connie."

"Nice to meet you, Maurice," she said.

"Likewise."

"We're pressed for time, Connie," Bull said. "I'll call you tonight when I get home, okay?"

"That's fine, Wilbur, I'll talk to you later. She turned to me and smiled. "Bye, Maurice, it was a pleasure meeting you."

"Take care, Connie." Both of us watched her stroll west down Fifty-Third Street toward the restaurants and boutiques. She was very sexy, but she looked like a handful. Bull always seemed to gravitate to trouble, and he craved racy women."

"Wilbur? I thought you hated your name?"

"That was high school. I'm a grown-ass man now. Besides, the name Bull doesn't sound very smooth."

"You're damn right about that."

We immediately cut the small talk short and headed to Justice to meet Josh about selling the jewelry. I saw the irony in the name of the township, and I prayed that the police didn't stop us for anything. They weren't very friendly on that side of town.

There was no margin for error, and the game plan had to be executed perfectly. Getting busted with stolen jewelry would be like losing your star player in game seven of the NBA Finals, but the game being played here was for keeps.

Chapter 9

Brent was starting to get restless and wanted to be free of being handcuffed to the bedpost. It was impossible to slide the handcuffs off because the headboard was connected to the upper and middle part of both rear bedposts by four two-inch-long tips. This created a narrow space between the upper half of the bedpost and the headboard which made it easy to bound someone to the bed by sliding an open handcuff through the opening and locking it.

He knew in his mind that risking his children's lives as well as his own life by trying to escape wouldn't be an intelligent thing to do. However, Brent hadn't succeeded in convincing Grim or Russell that the handcuffs were unnecessary.

Grim left at a few minutes past eleven o'clock to walk Spike, the Rockweller, and pick up a few items at the neighborhood grocery store. Russell was watching the eleven o'clock news while Brent was trying to make small talk with him.

"Were you in the same unit as Grim in Iraq?" Brent asked.

"No, I wasn't," Russell said dryly.

"Where are you from?"

"Enough with the questions. I don't mix my personal life with business."

"Damn, you're a tough nut to crack. If you don't feel like talking, Russell, it's okay."

"No, Brent, I don't feel like talking. Do me a favor and shut up while I try to watch the news."

"Fine, suit yourself. Before you get too comfortable, can you unlock the cuffs so that I can take a piss, please?"

"No, I'm watching the news right now. You can wait until it's over or piss in your pants."

"Look, that is the last time you will disrespect me. Please unlock these handcuffs and let me use the bathroom."

"Go to hell, pops."

Suddenly, Brent angrily stood up from the bed and snapped the wooden post with his bare hands. He snatched his handcuffed wrist away from the broken post and marched toward Russell. Russell stood up with a startled look on his face, and before he could reach for his gun, Brent gave him a right-handed jab to the ribs. Russell grabbed his left side—grimacing in extreme pain as Brent promptly slugged him again with a left hook to the right side of his face.

Russell was knocked unconscious with the precision of a well-trained boxer in five seconds flat. Brent stepped over Russell's motionless body and walked toward the bathroom.

Chapter 10

It was almost eleven fifteen when I parked in front of Black Diamond Pawnbrokers, the pawnshop that Josh owned. His shop was also a front for a lot of illegal activity, and my heightened awareness was in high gear. I checked the perimeter for any strange people or suspicious activity once I stepped out of the car, and Bull followed my lead as we walked toward the pawnshop.

"I know it's a fine time to ask, but are you strapped?" I asked.

"Yeah, I've got the Glock in my pants."

"Alright, let's go inside."

We walked in, and there was a massive guy standing by the door doing security. He was my height and outweighed me by at least a hundred pounds. Josh was sitting behind the corner watching the news on twenty-seven inch television hanging from the wall.

"You must be Maurice," Josh said. You could never commit a crime because you would stick out like a sort thumb."

"You're absolutely right, Josh, and that's why I shoot ball for a living," I said, shaking Josh's hand. How's business?"

"Business is slow, but I can't complain. Who's your friend?"

"My name is Wilbur," Bull said.

"Pleasure to meet you, Wilbur. Step into my office, Maurice, and Wilbur can wait for you out here."

"Alright," I said. "Let me show you what I have."

We stepped inside of the office and Josh shut the door. Everything looked meticulously organized, and he had a huge safe that stored an enormous amount of cash.

"Hum, you have Rolex watches, platinum and gold links and bracelets here...and a diamond ring," Josh said, checking the cut and quality of the diamond with his loupe.

"I can give you 350 for all of this."

"That's fine."

"Your brother was one of my best customers, and I miss his business. When will he be off of house arrest?"

"Sometime in August, but he's done with selling drugs."

"I'm glad to see him go straight even though he brought a ton of money to me because he's a good kid. However, there is one thing that I'd like to share with you about your brother, Maurice."

"What it is?"

"Brent had a very thorough routine that didn't bring any heat to my business for almost two years. He didn't get pinched because of something he did...someone close to him drop the dime on him."

"I don't follow you...who could have possibly ratted him out?"

"I don't know. Your brother worked alone to avoid the danger of someone setting him up. His drug trade wasn't his bread and butter...he sold weed just to get by in between jobs."

"In between jobs? What jobs are you talking about?"

"Brent was an excellent jewel thief. He would stake out jewelry stores, drug dealer's houses, rich people's houses, you name it. We made a ton of money together."

"I see, Josh. Thanks for the info."

"You're welcome. Give Brent my best."

"I certainly will."

Josh gave me a duffel bag to put the money in, and we left. My wheels were spinning at a million rpm, and I was totally baffled at this point.

Who set Junior up? I pondered.

We hopped on Interstate 294 and headed to the storage warehouse in Hazel Crest to get my cash. I was ahead of schedule, and Malik was going to meet us at one o'clock with the remaining two hundred thousand.

So many unanswered questions swirling inside my head, and I had no clues to any of them. It was a good thing that I was an excellent basketball player because I sucked at being a detective.

"How much did he give you for the jewelry?" Bull asked.

"He gave me 350 for it. Reach in the bag and get a bundle for the pictures of the cop."

"Ten grand in hard cold cash," he said, thumbing through the bundle like a book or a deck of cards.

"I've never seen anyone who loves money as much as you do."

"Yes, I do, and I'll do almost anything for it."

"Almost anything, huh? Being a barber doesn't pay enough?"

"I make a decent buck, but I plan to be a millionaire someday."

"I'm sure you will be. If you ever come up with a solid idea for a business venture, I'm here for you."

"Thanks, I appreciate that. Hey, can we stop and grab something to eat?"

"Damn, greedy bastard. All that you think about is food. I'll stop at the McDonald's on the corner."

Chapter 11

Russell lied unconscious—stretched out across the floor with a black eye and a couple of bruised ribs. Brent sat in the chair that Russell occupied moments ago and watched television. Grim walked in with Spike a few minutes later.

"Yo, Russ, I can't believe that milk costs six bucks a gallon now," Grim said, walking toward the only bedroom in their diminutive apartment. "Russ...what the hell happened here?"

"I needed to take a piss, but Russell wouldn't unlock the cuffs," Brent answered.

"Who are you, the incredible hulk?"

"I'm sorry about the bed, I let my temper get the best of me. You need to tell your partner in crime to be more respectful of his elders."

"Damn, man, I hope you didn't kill him."

"He'll live."

"Why didn't you try to escape?"

"And go where exactly? I still don't know who this cop is and why he has it out for Maurice. My escape would only put my family in more danger because I don't know what this cop is capable of."

"Oh well, I guess we don't need to cuff you anymore...give me your arm. You could have taken us both out yesterday if you wanted."

"You're right, but nothing is more important than my kids. I'll risk my own life for theirs."

Grim kneeled down and shook Russell until he regained consciousness. Russell was still seeing stars and didn't remember what happened.

"What am I doing on the floor?" Russell asked.

"My damn head feels like someone hit me with a sledgehammer."

"Pops knocked your ass out because you wouldn't let him use the bathroom," Grim said, laughing as he took seat on the bed.

"Yeah, I remember what happened," Russell said.

"Shoot this bastard!"

"Calm down, Russ. We ain't shooting anybody. Besides, we don't get paid if he's dead."

"Get out of my chair!" Russell shouted.

"You better listen to Grim and calm yourself down," Brent said, rising up from the chair. "One more snide comment from you, and I'm going to drop you right where you're standing."

"Both of you relax. I bought some food and it's in the kitchen...help yourselves."

Russell slowly rose from his chair when his cell phone rang. Tupac's song, *Ain't Nothing But A Gangsta Party*, was his ring tone. He checked the caller ID and went outside on the porch.

"Hey, Uncle Stew, what's up?"

"I've got another job for you, but you're doing it alone."

"Why not give it to Grim...he's got to get his feet wet eventually."

"No, there's too much at stake here. Do you remember Bull?"

"Yeah, he left the Cobras a few years ago, right?"

"Right, and I need you to waste him and Pooh at three o'clock today."

"What did they do, if you don't mind me asking?"

"They are trying to blow my whole operation sky-high by leaking some pictures of me and some Gary politicians making a drug buy to the Press. I need them executed quickly and cleanly."

"Consider it done, Uncle Stew. Where are they going to meet?"

"Go to the abandoned warehouses on Cedar and Brimstone at two forty-five and wait for them."

"Okay, I'll call you when it's done."

Uncle Stew, a.k.a. *King Cobra*, underestimated Pooh and never thought in a million years that someone within the organization would be clever enough to double-cross him. He has secretly ran the Cobras for fifteen years, and in his mind, he wasn't about to let a two-bit hustler like Pooh destroy what took him a decade and a half to build.

Meanwhile, Russell felt this was the perfect opportunity to prove to his uncle that he was worthy of a partnership. He thought he overpaid his dues by spending two years in the trenches.

"I got a run to make, ladies," Russell said. "Don't think I've forgotten about you, pops."

"I'm sure you haven't, boy," Brent said with a smirk on his face. "We can settle this right now."

"Both of you chill out," Grim said. "You need to remember that you're still a hostage, Brent. I'm two seconds away from forgetting about the money and shooting your ass."

"Now you're talking, Grim!" Russell said gleefully.

"Alright!" Brent exclaimed. "Don't talk about it, be about it! If you got the balls, shoot me, punk!"

"Don't tempt me, Brent. I might be hotheaded, but I'm not stupid. The last thing I want to do is piss off a cop with an ax to grind, and this cop made it perfectly clear that he personally wants Maurice to hand over the million dollars to him."

"Don't worry, I'll shoot his ass," Russell said.

"Everybody calm down, I said," Grim reaffirmed.

"Go handle your business, Russell, and Brent, get yourself a beer out of the fridge or something."

"No disrespect, Grim," Brent said. "Let's squash it."

"Cool, whatever," Grim said, reaching in the refrigerator for a beer. "It's too early in the day for this."

Chapter 12

Junior had just finished his daily workout and was about to take a shower before the phone rang. He thought it might have been Maurice, so he answered on the first ring.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Brent, it's me. Do you want me to come by and hang out with you today?"

"Hey, Marcia. I was going to call you, but I have a family situation right now that needs my immediate attention."

"What's wrong, baby?"

"I can't talk about it. The less you know, the safer you'll be."

"I'm a big girl, Brent. I can handle it."

"It's not a good time to talk or hang out right now. I promise I'll call you later on tonight."

"Okay, Brent. I'll be expecting to hear from you, and if you don't call, I'm going to show up at your front door."

"That won't be necessary, baby. I love you, and I'll talk to you later."

"I love you too. Bye."

Junior met Marcia Wilson at an Internet chat room a year ago while he was in prison. Marcia is a junior at Trenton University in downstate Illinois majoring in journalism. They would fall in love and chat online every day afterward until Junior got released on house arrest.

Junior took a shower and got dressed before the doorbell rang. He assumed it was Marcia because she has called from her cell before and rang the doorbell afterward.

He opened the door, and it was Malik standing there with a large silver titanium briefcase in his right hand.

"You must be Malik," Junior said, extending his hand toward him.

"What's up, BJ?" Malik asked, greeting Junior with a firm handshake. "I've heard so much about you that I feel like I know you already."

"Not all bad things, I hope."

"No, man, Mo thinks the world of you. I know I'm a little early, but the urgency of the situation made me rush over here."

"Yeah, time is running out on us. Hey, I want to personally thank you, man. My dad means everything to me, and your loan is a tremendous help to us."

"You don't have to thank me... Mo is like a brother to me, and I'll do anything for him. I'm glad to be in a position to help."

"I appreciate it, Malik. Do you want something to drink...we got pop, beer, water..."

"Give me a beer. It's the off season and I'm going fishing."

"That's funny," Junior said laughingly. "The Lightning gave you guys hell."

"Yeah, especially Flash Tucker. It should be against the law to be able to move that fast. I promise a different outcome next year if we meet up with them again."

"Your team can start by drafting a point guard. Mo is too big to be guarding someone half his size for the entire playoff series."

"You're right, bro, but we don't pick until the second round this draft because we traded away our first round picks for the next two years. Our only hope is free agency."

“Anyway, I know you got something going on this weekend. I’m tired of being cooped up in this crib, so I might as well get the blow-by-blow details of some party going on this weekend.”

“As a matter of fact, Mo and I had plans to go to a private party on the north side tomorrow. The Comets are throwing it and there’s going to be some top-choice women there.”

“Sounds like a real blast, Malik. I want to hear all about it on Sunday because we are going to get my dad back safe and sound tonight.”

“That’s right, BJ, safe and sound.”

Chapter 13

I got my stash from the storage company with no complications and headed home. Raising this amount of cash so quickly wasn’t as difficult as I thought it would be.

I was anxious to set up this meeting and get Dad back—wondering what I was going to do to occupy my time until midnight.

I arrived on the block and saw Malik’s rental car parked in the driveway. It wasn’t quite one o’clock yet, and I appreciated the fact that he rushed over here as soon as he could.

When we stepped in the house, Junior and Malik were drinking beer and watching SportsCenter.

“What’s up, fellas,” I said. “Do you remember Bull, Malik?”

“Yeah, what’s up, Bull?” Malik asked.

“Nothing much, Malik. I’m just taking things day by day. What’s up, Junior?”

“Bull,” Junior said, nodding his head and still angry from last night’s argument with him.

“Let’s tally up this money,” I said. “We can put all of the money in my briefcase except forty large. We got more for the jewelry than I anticipated.”

“What did Josh give you for it?” Junior asked.

“He gave me 350 for it,” I said.

“Where’s the other ten?”

“I gave it to Bull for the pictures that his Cobra connection has of the cop who may be responsible for Dad’s kidnapping.”

Suddenly, Bull reached in his pants and whipped out his Glock. He racked the slide of his gun and pointed it at us with a sadistic grin on his face.

“Everybody put your hands up!” Bull shouted.

“What the are you doing, man?” I perplexedly asked.

“I want you to slide the money over here,” Bull answered. “Enough with the damn questions.”

“We’re not going to give you anything, asshole!” Junior shouted.

“Everybody stay calm,” Malik said. “Give him what he wants. Nothing is worth dying over.”

“How are we going to get Dad back?” I asked. “We need that money, Malik.”

"Screw the small talk," Bull said. "Give me the cash before I shoot you, Mo."

"So, this is what it all comes down to, Bull," I said. "You're going to piss away a friendship over some damn money."

"That bastard was never your friend, Mo," Junior said. "Now you see what I've been saying all along."

"Shut your trap, BJ," Bull said. "I never liked your ass anyway... I should shoot you right now."

"Why, Bull?" I asked. "Haven't I always looked out for you? If it wasn't for me, you'd still be selling drugs."

"What, a little penny ante job at the barbershop, Mo? I guess I should be grateful, huh? You didn't take me with you, man."

"Take you with me? You're not my child, Bull."

"I could have been your bodyguard or something...roll with your entourage."

"Fool, I don't have an entourage. I was making the league minimum for three years, and I certainly didn't have enough money to carry your ass around."

"What do you mean you didn't have enough money? You can wipe your ass with hundred dollar bills for life... I had to rob you because you weren't doing anything but sitting on that stash, Mo."

"Still the same selfish asshole always looking out for number one. I'm not going to be able to play basketball forever, and there's nothing wrong with putting away some money for my future."

"You don't have to explain anything to him, Mo," Junior said. "You don't owe him a damn thing."

"I'm warning you, BJ. One more word and I'm going to shoot your ass."

"Here, take the money and get out!" I exclaimed. "I promise you that we will meet again soon, and I'm going to kill you, Bull."

"You can't kill a fly, square. Oh, by the way, BJ, I was the one who dropped the dime on you."

"We will see you soon, Bull," Junior said. "You better hope Mo finds you before I do."

"Just get out of here, Bull," I said, kicking the briefcase over to the spot where Bull was standing.

Bull bent over to grab the briefcase and walked out the door. There was someone waiting for him outside in his Cadillac truck. It was probably the guy who was supposed to be selling the pictures to me named Pooh. I realized at that moment there was no end to Bull's greed as he beat me out of ten grand and stole the rest of the money. I finally got the answer to my question about who turned Junior in to the Feds. It must have been when we visited Junior at his place years ago, and Bull saw the cash and drugs on the kitchen table.

"Don't worry, Mo. I'll give you the million, but you have got to find a way to buy some time until Monday."

"No way, Malik. I appreciate the kind gesture, but I'm going to find Bull and kill him. BJ, where does Dad keep his gun?"

"Now you're talking, big bro. He keeps it in the study room."

"Wait a minute," Malik said. "You can't kill anybody, man. You have too much at stake here...we will find another way to get your dad back."

"There a lot you don't know about me. I'm from the streets...from the gutter. Nobody disrespects me like that, nobody."

"I'm from the streets, too. I came from the Bed-Stuy projects in Brooklyn, and I worked my ass off to get my family and myself out of there. You don't have to forget where you came from, but you don't jeopardize your future by doing something stupid."

"We can't let Bull get away with this," Junior said. "Hell, I'd smoke the bastard myself if I didn't have this tracking device on my ankle."

"And go back to prison for life, man?" Malik replied. "There has to be a better way to handle this mess."

I stepped inside of my stepfather's study and reached in the top drawer for his gun—a nine-millimeter Beretta. I racked the slide several times to make sure that there wasn't a bullet in the chamber, I held the gun in my hands as I stared at it—it's been twelve years since I last touched one. It didn't feel strange to hold the gun—it felt like riding a bike. I released the clip to make sure that it was full and reloaded it before sticking the gun into my shorts. Marching toward the front door, I attempted a quick escape before Malik stopped me.

"Where are you going?" Malik asked. "Better yet, I'm going with you to make sure that you don't do anything crazy."

"Fine, let's go."

"Be careful," Junior said.

Chapter 14

Bull and Pooh were on their way to Gary to meet some reporter with the incriminating pictures of King Cobra and a couple of Gary politicians making a drug buy with the Columbians. They planned to expose the entire drug operation to the Press and skip town.

"How much do we have?" Pooh asked. "The plane reservations are set. By this time tomorrow, we will be sitting on the beach in Rio de Janeiro."

"We have a little over two million dollars total," Bull answered. "One million that we stole from rival drug dealers, and I just ripped off Maurice for a million and change. We are going to live like kings down there. One dollar is like three in Brazil."

"Did you make a bid on the house?"

"Yeah, we are going to get it for \$35,000. Four bedrooms and two baths."

"Solid. I can imagine all of the girls that we are going to have in that house...partying everyday of the week."

"Yes, this is the life that we always talked about. It's nothing here for us anymore. They don't want to give a brother a chance with a criminal record."

"And no more slinging dope for the Cobras. They have had me boxed in a corner for too long...be grateful that you got out of the game when you did."

"The game never really leaves you, Pooh. I stopped slinging dope for the Cobras, but I didn't stop hustling. I sold weed to some of my clientele at the barbershop, and I boosted clothes from the warehouse trucks that I robbed."

"I guess you had to find a way to pay for this gas guzzler. What are we going to do until three o'clock? "

"We can go to your crib and pack the things that you're taking with you. We can wire the money to our offshore account with this fence I found in Justice and drive to Miami after we meet with this reporter."

"Cool, I'm only taking one bag, and the rest of my stuff can stay behind. Hey, what are you going to do with this truck?"

"I'm selling it to a guy in Miami. I placed an ad on a free classifieds website and found a buyer. He's going to meet us at the airport with the money and take the truck. "

"How much are you selling it for?"

"Twenty thousand. It has fifty thousand miles on it, and I needed to get rid of it fast."

Pooh lives in northwest Gary—about two minutes away from the abandoned warehouses. It was a few minutes past two o'clock, and they parked in front of Pooh's apartment to gather up his things. They were all smiles as they envisioned their new life in Brazil. Pooh never finished high school, and in his mind, selling drugs was the only way that he could achieve the *American Dream*.

"Damn, when is your landlord going to cut the grass?" Bull asked. "It looks terrible."

"The only time I see that bastard is when the rent is due," Pooh answered. "Trying to get him to fix things is like trying to contact the President."

"Anyway, let's get your stuff and bounce. I don't want to waste another second here."

"I feel the same way, bro. As a matter of fact, I'm going to call the reporter and see if he could meet us a little earlier."

"Good idea. Let's make it about two thirty."

Chapter 15

Malik and I hopped on Interstate Fifty-Seven heading north to Interstate Eighty. I was on my way to Gary to recover the money from Bull and Pooh. I was going to give Bull one chance to hand over the money before emptying the entire clip into his portly body. He was never in top shape before, during or after basketball season; and he really let himself go after we graduated.

"Where are we going?" he inquired.

"Northwest Gary. I'm rolling the dice...Bull must have forgotten that he told me he was going to meet Pooh there for the pictures."

"Or he could have been lying about it."

"True, but it's the only lead that I have."

"Hey, are you alright, man? What Bull had said about BJ was bogus."

"Yeah, I'm cool. He was just trying to push his buttons, that's all. He's a jealous, back-stabbing bastard."

"Look, is there anyway that you can get in touch with the kidnappers... I can get the money on Monday if you can stall them."

"No, I can't...they just told me when and where to be. I have to get that money from Bull and the clock is still ticking."

"Look, I know what it feels like to be mad enough to kill someone. I was always in and out of trouble when I was a kid...I stole cars, I sold weed. I did what I had to do to get by because my mom had to take care of six kids by herself."

"We have more in common than you know."

"You were in the game?"

"Yeah, I ran my own crew for two years before I got busted. We made about twenty-five million dollars selling weed and coke out of a couple of lofts that my partner's cousin owned at the time. The lofts were used as member-only nightclubs, and those clubs were fronts for our drug operation."

"So, the Feds raided you, huh?"

"Yeah, I buried my stash in my dad's yard before I got busted, and I was fortunate to only get probation."

"I got probation, too. I got into fight with this guy who was bullying my younger brother. He tried to give me a buck fifty before I jarred the razor loose from his hand..."

"What the hell is a buck fifty? I'm not from Brooklyn."

"One hundred fifty stitches, man. Yo, didn't you see Tupac's movie *Above the Rim*?"

"I get it, Malik. So what else happened?"

"Anyway, we were going at it in the hallway of the school right after fifth period before a couple of teachers broke up the fight. We got sent directly to the principal's office, and they search me to see if I had a weapon of my own. That's when they found the bag of weed on me. I was suspended and got probation."

"Looks like we made the most of our second chances, right?"

"Right, and that's why you can't blow it again."

"Alright, I promise I won't unload the clip into his ass, but I will shoot him in the knee caps if he doesn't hand over the money."

"Hey, why does the cop who took your stepfather have a beef with you?"

"I don't know, man... I've been racking my brain trying to figure it out. Maybe it's some DEA agent who raided us years ago."

"Strange...and they knew when and where to find you."

"I haven't figured that out either."

I was driving about ninety mph before seeing some flashing lights about a half-mile ahead. Watching state troopers catch speeding motorists reminded me of lions hunting down zebras or cheetahs tackling gazelles on the open plains of Africa. I wasn't trying to get stopped, so I slowed down.

All that I could think about on the way to Gary was the dissolution of my friendship with Bull. I must say I definitely didn't see what happened moments ago coming. I was totally caught by surprise, and I felt almost as bad as when my mother passed away. The moral of the story was to be careful whom you call your best friend because he or she may or may not feel the same way about you.

"Do know exactly where they are supposed to meet?" he asked.

"No, but I'm going to ask for directions at the nearest gas station."

"I know we're pressed for time, but can you stop at the rest area so that I can buy a water or juice. All of this excitement has got me parched."

"Damn...alright. If you weren't my friend, I'd tell you to rough it."

Chapter 16

Detective Blaine Stanton just finished his fourth cup of coffee at his desk while finishing up paperwork from last night's activity. He had been pulling sixteen-hour shifts for the last month because the Eastern District has been understaffed due to several officers retiring and several officers being killed in the line of duty.

The Gary Police Department was losing the war on drugs, and roughly eighty percent of the drug trafficking in Gary could be attributed to one man, King Cobra. Detective Stanton had been chasing King Cobra to no avail for three years, and he always seemed to be one step behind Gary's biggest drug kingpin.

Stanton signed off on his report from last night, a homicide involving a hit-and-run accident in Gary's financial district. There were no witnesses as it occurred sometime after midnight Friday morning. He motioned toward the coffee machine with his empty cup when Sergeant Roper stopped him.

"Why don't you go home and take a couple of days off, Stanton?" Sergeant Roper said.

"I wish I could, Sarge," Stanton answered. "I'm up to my eyeballs in open cases that I need to close before the end of the month."

"You're no good to me out there if you aren't one hundred percent alert. I can't afford to lose another officer to this street war, and you are gambling with your life, detective."

"Duly noted, sir. I've got another lead in the King Cobra case, and as soon as I follow up on it, I promise I will take a few days off."

"Enough with that King Cobra nonsense, Stanton. As far as I know, that son of a bitch doesn't exist. You have been chasing this dream for three years, and you don't have one shred of evidence to show for it."

"Come on, Sarge, cut me some slack. I've been so close to busting his ass this year, but I couldn't get one of his lieutenants to roll over on him."

"You couldn't get his lieutenant to roll over on him because there was no one to roll over on. If you cut off the head of the snake, the snake will grow a new head. There are hundreds of these assholes waiting in line to wear the crown."

"I will take a vacation the moment I..."

"Take it now, detective!" Sergeant Roper exclaimed. "That's an order."

"Alright, Sarge, whatever you say."

Sergeant Roper walked away from Stanton's cubical, and Stanton proceeded to get his fifth cup of bitter-tasting black coffee. He decided not to defy a direct order from his superior and picked up the phone to book a flight to New Jersey to see his brother. He hasn't seen him in a couple of years, and a weekend getaway

sounded like a great idea. His partner Detective Bob Nolan tapped him on the shoulder before he could dial the number.

"Who are you calling, Stanton?" Nolan asked.

"Sarge made me an offer that I couldn't refuse," Stanton answered. "I'm taking the first flight out of here to Jersey to see Bristol and his family."

"That's a good idea, partner. You need a break."

"I know, but I got a lead that I need to follow up on."

"King Cobra, huh?"

"Yeah, but Roper ain't buying it."

"I can work the case for you while you're gone. I also got some info that I want to share with you...we can possibly blow this case wide open if everything checks out."

"What have you got?"

"I just found out that King Cobra is really a cop masquerading as a drug dealer from my informant. He is a mole in one of our precincts. My informant delivers newspapers for the Gary Gazelle, and he overheard one of the reporters talking about getting hold of some photos with King Cobra and a couple of prominent figures making a drug deal."

"King Cobra is a cop?" Stanton said rhetorically. "This prick has been under our noses the whole time, and that's why he has always been one step ahead of us. Who's going to cough up the goods?"

"Believe it or not, two of his very own underlings are snitching on him," Nolan answered.

"When and where?"

"Today at three o'clock, but my informant didn't get a chance to hear where the meeting is going to take place."

"If you were going to meet someone in private with something this explosive, where would you go?" Stanton asked.

"Somewhere secluded like an abandoned warehouse or something," Nolan retorted.

"Damn, I don't know where to start. We can check the abandoned steel mill here in east Gary or the vacant warehouses on the northwest side of town."

"Let's stakeout the steel mill first...we had better hurry, it's about two thirty."

"I guess I have to put my mini vacation on hold."

Chapter 17

Bull and Pooh arrived at the vacant warehouses in northwest Gary to deliver the goods to the reporter—the incriminating pictures of King Cobra. Pooh was able to contact the reporter and reschedule their meeting for two forty-five instead of two thirty.

It was two forty when they pulled up in front of the abandoned remnant of a once thriving local economy. They got out of Bull's truck and waited.

"He should be here any minute," Pooh said. "I finally know how it feels to be free."

"There's no other feeling like it, my friend."

"Hey, how do you feel about betraying Mo?"

"I thought I'd feel guilty about it afterward, but I surprisingly don't feel a thing. Besides, he was never going to touch that money anyway."

"Spoken like a true criminal."

A late-modeled blue Ford drove up the gravel-laden road and parked alongside Bull's truck. Wally Newman was a new hire of the Gary Gazelle—a recent graduate of Trenton College, and this story could possibly be his big break.

He got out of his car with a pen and yellow notepad.

He was a clean-cut kid—about six foot tall, blonde hair and a thin build.

"Good afternoon, guys," Wally said, extending his hand to Pooh and then Bull. "I'm Wally."

"My name is Roger, but my friends call me Pooh,"

Pooh said. "And this is Wilbur, but everyone calls him Bull."

"Very well. I don't like my first name much either...my friends call me Scooter. You were the one who contacted me, huh?"

"Yes, let's get down to business," Pooh replied, reaching down in his bag for the pictures.

"Hey, that's Detective Stewart Millsap and Senator McDonald making a drug buy with what appears to be Central American drug smugglers," Wally said.

"You got it," Bull said. "We just learned who Millsap was last week. His identity was top secret."

"People inside of his own organization don't know who he is?" Wally asked.

"Nope," Pooh answered. "The less people know of him, the less likely someone would be able to set him up."

"This story will be in the early morning edition guaranteed," Wally added. "These pictures are going to change everything as we know it."

"Leave our names out of it, Scooter," Pooh said.

"Absolutely," Wally replied.

In the blink of an eye, Russell charged toward them aiming the barrel of his nine-millimeter pistol at the reporter's head. He let off three shots before Pooh was able to reach for his gun and shoot Russell in the stomach. Two bullets almost simultaneously pierced the heads of Wally and Bull—both dead instantaneously. The third shot missed Pooh's head by an inch, and that inch proved to be a costly one for Russell.

Russell stumbled to the ground clutching his stomach. His body was quivering, and he was coughing up blood.

"You're slipping, Russell," Pooh jeered. "You're supposed to aim for the center mass, not the head. You're still a good shot, but almost only counts in horseshoes."

"Go to hell," Russell sighed, grimacing in excruciating pain.

"No, stupid...that's where you're going. Send me a postcard when you get there."

Pooh hopped in Bull's truck and sped off. Bull's murder didn't seem to affect him at all as he thought about keeping the entire two million dollars for himself.

He jumped on Interstate Ninety and headed west to Interstate Fifty-Seven—destination Miami, Florida.

Chapter 18

It was a quarter to three, and I just got directions from the attendant at the first gas station off of the Interstate. My stepfather's car had GPS, but it was no good to us unless we asked for directions because we didn't know what street the warehouses were on. We weren't far from where we had to go because we entered Gary on the northwest side of town.

We approached a dead end and turned right. The empty warehouses were now visible as we drove down the dusty, narrow road. There wasn't a soul in sight—the perfect place for a secret meeting.

“Do you see anything, Malik?”

“I see a blue car on my side about a half block down.”

We pulled up next to the car, and that's when we discovered the three dead bodies of Bull, Russell and the reporter. Malik and I looked at each other in a state of disbelief.

“What the hell happened here?” he asked.

“The guy with the blue bandanna around his head was one of the guys who kidnapped my stepfather,” I answered. “I can't believe Bull was somehow mixed up in this. He recently told me that he'd do anything for money...now I truly know what he meant by that.”

“Come on, man, I know Bull is a reprehensible jerk, but even he couldn't stoop this low. Besides, we don't have all of the facts yet.”

“Facts or no facts, my dad is history without that money. I could care less about Bull right now...he was dead to me anyway after what happened at my house.”

“Do you think Pooh is the one who got away with all of the money?”

“Yes, there's no honor among thieves...he possibly killed everyone and fled with the money. Let's get out of here before someone sees us.”

“Wait, there's something in the White guy's hand...it looks like some photographs.”

“There's also a pen and a notepad on the ground next to him. Maybe he's a reporter or detective.”

I pulled the photographs from his hand and discovered who was responsible for this sordid mess. The prime guy in the pictures was the same guy who infiltrated my organization. Detective Stewart Millsap is the one responsible for my dad's kidnapping, and he probably got my flight information with a wiretap on my dad's phone.

“The guy...the guy with the Chicago Cubs jersey on is the same guy who got inside of our daily drug operation and shut us down twelve years ago. He is Detective Stewart Millsap, the asshole who is trying to extort money from me.”

“Millsap probably wants the stash that you buried in your dad's yard before you got pinched.”

“Exactly, but these pictures might be better than cash because now Millsap can’t just take the money and kill my stepfather or me. These pictures give me more leverage.”

“You’re right, but this whole plot doesn’t make any damn sense, Mo. Why would he go through the trouble of snatching up your stepfather for a mere one million dollars when he’s probably the biggest drug dealer in Gary?”

“I don’t know, but we need to get out of here now.”

We jumped in the car and drove off. Seeing Bull with that slug in his head was starting to mess with my psyche. I didn’t talk much on our way back to Manteno—I started putting some of the pieces together once I had time to think.

I knew *who* was responsible for everything and *what* was at stake, but I couldn’t figure out *why*. Millsap was the one responsible for the kidnapping, but his motives were unclear. Bull and Pooh intended to expose Millsap’s drug operation to the Press and skip town, but he figured out what they were plotting and sent Russell to kill them before the story leaked. Russell shot Bull and the reporter, but he probably missed the shot at Pooh before Pooh returned fire and shot him in the stomach.

“Are you alright?” he asked. “You barely said two words since we left Gary.”

“No, I’m not. As mad as I was at Bull, I didn’t want to see him end up like that...he didn’t deserve to get his brains blown out.”

“I know he was your friend, but you don’t know what kind of dirt he has done in his life. You weren’t around him much after high school, so he was probably into all types of stuff.”

“I know your right, but it still hurts to think about it. I’ll be alright, though.”

I continued to replay the events of the last couple of days repeatedly in my head. I’m sure Millsap wanted to get his hands on my stash, but it was more to the story than that. He wouldn’t have waited twelve years to collect a million dollars from me—something else must have triggered this sudden attack on my family, I thought.

Chapter 19

Stanton and Nolan realized that they drew a blank at the eastside steel mill and rushed over to the vacant warehouses on the northwest side. It was minutes before three o’clock, and they feared that it might have been too late.

“Can you drive any faster, Nolan?” Stanton asked. “We’re going to miss them.”

“I going as fast as I can,” Nolan countered. “It’s Mother’s Day weekend, and we are in the middle of afternoon rush hour traffic.”

“My gut is telling me that something has already went down. I got a feeling that we are going to be walking in on a homicide.”

“You might be right because if King Cobra is a cop, he undoubtedly knows about the meeting with the reporter.”

They arrived at the vacant warehouses only to learn that they gambled and lost. Nolan got on the horn and called for backup and forensics. They put on their latex

gloves and began to survey the area for any possible clues that would solve the puzzle. Nolan checked Bull's gun and discovered that it hadn't been fired, but he found that Russell gun was still warm.

"We have one of the shooters right here," Nolan said. "I'm sure ballistics will show that bandanna man shot the reporter and big man, but the second shooter returned fire, hit bandanna man and fled."

"We also have two additional sets of enormous footprints," Stanton added. "Both footprints are well over a size twelve."

"What...we have a possible Bigfoot sighting?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

Stanton lit a cigarette and sat on top of the hood of the squad car. Nolan continued to look for clues while Stanton observed backup entering the warehouse roadway.

There were three patrol cars total heading toward the crime scene. Sergeant Roper was the first to pull up.

"What are doing here, Stanton?" Roper asked. "I thought I gave you a direct order to take some time off?"

"I'm just backing up my partner, sir," Stanton answered. "We were following up on a lead...a couple of Cobra grunts were supposed to deliver some incriminating photographs to the reporter. As you can see, we were too late."

"Where are the photos?"

"There was a second shooter, sir," Nolan interjected. "He was the one who shot the man with the bandanna around his head, and he most likely fled with the pictures."

"Alright. Let forensics do their job and have a report on my desk pronto."

"I'm right on it, sir," Nolan said.

"Let's go back to the station," Stanton said.

Chapter 20

We were lucky to avoid rush hour traffic becoming too heavy, and we pulled up in my driveway a few minutes before four o'clock. I sighed as I got up from my seat and shut the door. Malik got out of the car and adjusted the pants of his white Sean John sweat suit.

"What's our next move," he asked.

"I'm going to the city to clear my head, and you are going back to your girl," I replied. "I've ruined your afternoon, and I can't put you in anymore danger."

"It's okay, man. Tanya understands the situation, and I can meet up with her later."

"No, man, I insist that you go home. I promise I will keep you posted...besides, our team can't afford to lose both of us."

"Now is not the time to be making jokes."

"Who said I was joking? Go ahead, I'll be fine."

"Alright, Mo. I'm here if you need me."

"Thanks...thanks for everything."

"Wait, are you sure that the photos are going to be enough?"

"Yes, the pictures give me all of the insurance I need. See you later."

I gave Malik a hug and firm handshake, and he drove away. I reached inside of my shorts and pulled out my stepfather's gun. I realized that the person who I had become wasn't the drug dealer of over a decade ago. I put the gun in the glove compartment and walked in the house.

Junior must have been upstairs in his room or the weight room because he wasn't downstairs. Or maybe he was on his computer.

"BJ!" I shouted. "Come downstairs, bro!"

"I'll be down in a second, Mo," Junior answered. "I'm in the bathroom."

About a minute later, Junior ran down the stairs—anxious to know what happened. His light skin looked flushed as if he ran a marathon.

"Bull is dead."

"What? You shot him?"

"No, we found him with a slug in his head. We also found one of the kidnappers and a reporter dead next to him."

"A reporter? One of the kidnappers? I'm confused."

"That makes two of us. I do know that Bull and his partner in crime, Pooh, were going to give the pictures of Detective Millsap, the same cop who turned me in years ago, to the reporter. Somehow Millsap found out what was going on and sent one of the kidnappers to the vacant warehouses to kill all three of them. He shot Bull and reporter, but Pooh shot him and took the money."

"Dammit, we needed that money for Dad. What are we going to do now?"

"Relax, BJ. Take a look at these."

Junior grabbed the pictures and studied them. His look of concern immediately transformed into a sigh of relief.

"That's Millsap, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is, and we are going to make copies of them just in case something happens to me or Dad."

"Right...leverage. I'll scan them and print copies."

Junior went to my stepfather study and printed several copies of scandalous photographs. I went to the kitchen and grabbed myself a bottled water and couple of Granola bars. The Chicago Sun newspaper was on the kitchen table, so I decided to thumb through it to see if I could find an article that caught my eye. I didn't feel like reading the sports section because I still haven't gotten over our playoff loss to Houston. I came across an article titled *Family Mourns Loss of Slain 5 Year Old Boy In Englewood*. I read a couple of paragraphs before I stopped to flashback to my own childhood.

I realized how lucky I was to have reached twenty-five, and I couldn't understand why innocent children repeatedly fell victim to gun violence in our country. I followed a certain code when I sold drugs, and even though I never had to draw my gun on anybody, I never would have randomly fired shots into a crowd of innocent bystanders. I finished my water and Granola bars, and as I entered the living room, Junior came out of the study with copies of the photos.

"I've been meaning to ask you something since this whole thing started," he said.

“What?” I inquired.

“How did the kidnappers know where to find you, and how did they know you’d be in town?”

I paused, scratched my head, took a deep breath and said, “I wish I knew, but that’s the million dollar question...no pun intended.”

“Damn, I almost forgot how corny you are.”

“Whatever, man.”

“Look, I know Bull was your friend, but I’m not sorry that he’s dead. Even though prison saved my life, he stole five years from me.”

“I understand how you feel, but the fact of the matter is that I don’t know exactly what I feel right now. I got three or four emotions tugging at me, and I’m going to the city to clear my head before meeting with the Cobras.”

“So, I’m probably not going to see you before you meet with them, huh?”

“No, I’m going to Billy’s to have a drink before meeting with them.”

“Drink? When did you start drinking again?”

“I think I need one under the circumstances. I’ll see you soon.”

“Keep me posted, alright?”

“Absolutely.”

I gave Junior a hug, and I stepped away to get a good look at him. I wanted to take a mental snapshot of him just in case something happened to me. I grabbed the original photos and stepped outside. I turned around and took a moment to stare at the house before I left. I wanted to savor every significant moment in the event of my untimely demise.

Chapter 21

Brent and Grim sat in the living room and waited for Russell to come back. The news was on television, but neither one of them was paying attention to it. Brent was wondering if Maurice was able to raise the money, but he knew that the money didn’t guarantee their safety. Grim wondered where Russell was because he didn’t want to meet King Cobra for the first time without his nephew being present. The prospect of meeting him alone had made him apprehensive.

Russell had told Grim that King Cobra wanted to make the exchange tonight himself because he had a personal beef with Maurice and was going to kill him and his stepfather. King Cobra was supposed to meet them at five o’clock to discuss the details of tonight’s meeting.

“Where’s Russell,” Brent asked.

“I don’t know,” Grim answered. “He should have been back by now... King Cobra will be here by five.”

“Who is King Cobra?”

“He is the one responsible for your kidnapping.”

“I thought that was classified information?”

“It was, but he personally wants to meet with you and Maurice tonight.”

“Why does he need to meet with me? Does he know me?”

"You will find out soon enough because it's almost five o'clock."

Both of them continued to sit in the living room while the news was still on. Spike was asleep next to Grim's chair, and Grim picked up the remote to turn up the television.

There was a triple homicide in northwest Gary today. Three men were murdered at the abandoned warehouses on Cedar and Brimstone...

The headline caught their attention, and the news reporter reeled off the names and backgrounds of Russell, Bull and the reporter. Grim jumped up and started pacing the room.

"Damn, what am I going to tell him?" Grim asked. "I've got to tell this man that his nephew was murdered today, and I don't know what happened."

"Calm down, Grim," Brent said. "It wasn't your fault...he didn't tell you where he was going."

"I know that...and you know that...but King Cobra might not be so understanding of the situation."

Five seconds later, the doorbell rang. It wasn't quite five o'clock yet, so Grim didn't know who was at the door.

He opened the door, and it was King Cobra standing there in the flesh.

"You must be Grim," Millsap said. "My name is Stewart... Stewart Millsap. You may have heard that I'm King Cobra, or something like that."

"Pleasure to finally meet you, sir," Grim said nervously.

"Let's discuss tonight's details...but first, Pooh murdered my nephew...."

Millsap noticed that Brent wasn't bound to anything, and he frowned. Brent gave him a contemptible glare and stood up to give him eye-to-eye contact.

"I know who the hell you are," Brent said without blinking an eye. "You are the dirty cop who tried to send Maurice to prison."

"Yes, I am, Brent," Millsap said. "It's been a long time."

"Not long enough."

"You two know each other," Grim asked.

"Yes, Brent and I go way back," Millsap answered.

"Brent, let's talk about how your stepson stashed away one million dollars and lied to the Feds about what happened to it, shall we?"

"So that's what this is about, Millsap? It took you twelve years to come up with a kidnapping scheme to steal money from my son?"

"I'm not stealing anything. We recovered money from every member of the crew except him. That money belongs to me, and I want it now."

"Nonsense, you wouldn't have waited this long for a million dollars, kingpin. There is definitely more to the story than you are telling."

"And your stepson was the ringleader of that drug operation, not Wilks, right?"

"Whatever, Millsap. Look, Maurice will have your money by midnight."

"He better have it, or else you're dead."

Brent shook his head and sat back down to watch the news. Millsap turned his attention to Grim and pulled out a cigarette.

"As I was saying, Pooh killed Russell today and possibly has some photos of me in a compromising position," Millsap said.

“He’s got photos of you making a drug buy or something, sir?” Grim inquired.

“It’s not ‘or something...’he’s got photos of me making a drug buy with some powerful people present. If I don’t recover those pictures, it’s going to cost me plenty to prove that I’m not the guy orchestrating the drug transaction.”

“So what’s our next move?”

“It’s a gamble, but I have to report Bull’s truck stolen so that we can track Pooh down. If he doesn’t have the pictures, he will take the rap for Russell’s murder and possibly the murders of Bull and the reporter.”

“And if he does have them....”

“Then I’ll call my lawyers.”

Chapter 22

I entered city limits at about five ten, and I got off of Interstate Fifty-Seven at the Ninety-Ninth Street exit. I wanted to stop at the Walgreen’s on Ninety-Fifth and Halsted to get a bottle of rubbing alcohol that I forgot to pack and some Orbit chewing gum before I went to Billy’s.

Traffic was heavy on Halsted as people rushed home from work to pick up children from daycare, pay bills or do last minute grocery shopping for Mother’s Day.

I parked the car and went inside. The store was crowded, so I gathered my items and quickly went to checkout. I got a couple of stares, but no one approached me for an autograph. I would have signed them, but I would have kept the small talk to a bare minimum.

I was out of the store in a flash despite the crowdedness, and the bar was about two miles away. My old house where I grew up was on the way, so I decided to drive down the street of my former residence on Eighty-Eighth and Morgan. The neighborhood had changed since I lived there—kids didn’t play outside anymore, boys didn’t play baseball anymore, but guys still hung out at the nearby liquor store.

I drove down Morgan and pulled up at the house. I parked so that I wouldn’t be blocking the street and sat there for a minute. It was the first time that I have seen the house since my parents split up years ago. I wondered who lived there—what type of family owned the house. The grass looked great, and the house itself was well kept.

I saw enough and pulled off. Before I got to the corner, someone parked their car in the middle of the street and blocked the path to the intersection. I waited patiently for about two minutes, and the guy in the car still didn’t move. There were plenty of spaces on either side of the street, but he decided that the middle of the street was a perfect place to sit in his car. Traffic was beginning to pile up, and people were starting to blow their horns. He probably didn’t hear the sound of the horns because his music was extremely loud. Finally, I decided that I’ve had waited long enough, so I respectfully walked over to the guy’s car to politely ask him to move.

"Excuse me, sir, can you please move your car over to the side so we can get by?" I asked calmly.

"What?" he asked angrily, reaching over to turn down the music.

"Can you move your car to the side. I'm in a hurry," I said, realizing that politeness wasn't going to work with him.

"Forget you, punk. I'll move when I'm ready to move."

"Why do you have to be an asshole, man? There are plenty of parking spaces on either side of the street."

I was heated at that point, and whatever happened next would be beyond my control, I thought. I would have ordinarily given this bastard a pass, but the last couple of days had put me over the edge.

"Do you know who I am, fool? I will blast your ass!"

"Do you know who I am? Shooting me will be the last thing you do as a free man, dumb bastard!"

I guess it was what I said, or maybe it was how I said it that made him reconsider his course of action. He looked me over from head to toe and then looked at my stepfather's car. He had recognized who I was at this point.

"I'm sorry, man, I didn't realize who you were at first. You are Maurice Ousley of the St. Louis Wolves, right?"

"Yes, I am. Look, I accept your apology, man, but it shouldn't have come down to this. You should respect everybody, no matter who they are," I said, extending my hand to him and giving him a firm handshake in order to completely defuse the situation.

"You're right. I'll move my car right now."

I walked back to my car and waited for him to move to the side of the street. I could hear people sarcastically cheering behind me as I drove to the corner.

I finally arrived at Billy's, and after the confrontation with the guy on my old block, I didn't hesitate to grab a seat at the bar. I gulped down a shot of Crown Royal and a Budweiser that I ordered in a minute flat. My rudeness toward the waitress induced regret, so I flagged her down to apologize. I didn't recognize her at first—Gabrielle Hinson attended Union University our freshman and sophomore year before she left for good.

"I'm sorry, Gabrielle, I didn't mean to be such a jerk earlier," I said.

"You should be sorry, Maurice," she countered. "I can't believe you didn't remember me...you hurt my feelings."

"I hope you can forgive me. These last couple of days have been hell for me."

"Okay, Maurice. I'll let you make it up to me over a cup of coffee or something. My shift is over in about fifteen minutes, so you can tell me all about it once I take off this uniform."

"You have a deal. I'll see you in a few minutes."

She had brought me another round of a double shot and beer before she handled her last customer. I gulped down both of the shots and drank the beer slowly—I didn't want to stumble out of the restaurant in a drunken stupor.

Seeing Gabrielle brought back memories of my time at Union University that I hadn't thought about in years. We never hooked up because I was with Stephanie, and she was dating Sam Williamson, the star quarterback of the football team at the time.

I would have loved to stay at Billy's for coffee, but I sensed that she probably wanted to get out of there. I thought Starbucks would be a good suggestion, and I remembered that there was one on Seventy-First and Stony Island. I still had a couple of minutes before Gabrielle got off, so I scurried to the bathroom to relieve my bladder.

There was a moderate crowd, and a couple asked me for an autograph before I was able to make it to the bathroom. I smiled to mask the pain that I was feeling, and I signed the notepad that the lady pulled out of her purse. I never wanted to come off as a snob to someone just because I may have had a bad day—it's the nature of the business that wouldn't allow me to say or do certain things.

I admired and envied Malik for being able to say what was on his mind regardless of the circumstances—to be able to express himself with such emotion at the game seven press conference.

Things were different for me, though. It was all about appearances, it was all about the show. I couldn't step foot outside without it being lights, camera and action.

I never had the heart to say no—feeling a sense of obligation because of the fact that fans indirectly paid my salary.

Once I finished using the bathroom, Gabrielle was by the bar waiting for me. She looked absolutely gorgeous in her tight-fitting stretch denims, white halter and three-inch stilettos that she slipped on in place of her uniform.

She stood slightly over six feet in heels—a statuesque woman with a flawless golden brown complexion, long auburn-colored hair and beautiful smile. She had an air of sophistication that most twenty-five-year olds didn't possess.

"Are you ready to go?" I asked.

"Sure," she said. "Where do you want to go?"

"Let's go to Starbucks. I could use a cup of coffee to perk me up."

"Okay. You look like you lost your best friend, Maurice... I could tell that you had something on your mind."

She couldn't have been more right. However, I didn't want to engage in any conversation about Bull's murder or my stepfather's abduction. I hadn't seen her in five years, and burdening her with my problems would only put a damper on the evening. We left the restaurant and walked toward the exit. Starbucks was about twenty or thirty minute drive from the restaurant, and I decided that it would be a good time to relax and small talk. All eyes were on us as we were leaving, and it felt like we were a couple.

We looked good together, I thought.

I didn't have to worry about bringing her back to Billy's because she told me that her car was in the shop. As we approached my car, I unlocked it with the remote control and opened the door for her.

"This is a very nice car, Maurice. I hope to have one of these someday."

"Thanks. I'm sure you will."

"So, tell me what's going on with you...I've never known you to be so down."

"I'm okay. It's just family business."

"I'm sure it is. Nobody can push your buttons like family."

"When did you start working at my favorite restaurant?" I said, changing the subject.

"Billy's is your favorite restaurant, huh?"

"Yeah, I've been coming here since high school."

"The food is alright. I started working there about six months ago, and I also do nails at a salon that's a couple of blocks away from my apartment."

"You're still the hustler I remembered from college...you made a small fortune doing nails and hair on campus in addition to working at McDonald's."

"Indeed. I can't just sit around and wait for someone to give it to me...I've got goals and dreams."

"That's great. I'm sure each one of them will come true."

"Thanks. Hey, do you remember my sorority sister, Pam Satterfield?"

"Yeah, the petite girl with the green eyes, right?"

"Right. She died of AIDS earlier this year."

"AIDS? Man, I so sorry about that. She was so nice."

"That *ho* of a boyfriend gave it to her. He was the only person she had ever been with. The irony is that he's still alive and she's gone...Pam was my best friend."

"I also lost one of my teammates from college...our backup point guard, John Gibbons."

"What happened to him?"

"He served a tour of duty in Iraq for about two years. He had settled back in his hometown of Columbus, Ohio about six months ago before he was killed in a drive-by shooting in front of his house. He survived roadside bombs and insurgent attacks for two years just to be hit by a stray bullet on his front porch. It doesn't make any damn sense."

"That is so sad, Maurice. Like Pam, John was a very likeable person."

We continued to small talk about people from Union University who we've seen, other mutual friends who have died, and the upcoming presidential election.

Moments later, we reached the coffee shop, but it was closed. It was going on seven o'clock, and it made sense that Starbucks was closed because most people are heading to dinner at that time. I didn't know any other places to suggest, and my buzz had subsided somewhat. I was lucky to have not been stopped by the police because I would have certainly flunked the Breathalyzer test.

"Looks like we're too late," I said. "Is there any place else you'd like to go?"

"I know of a place in Hyde Park called Dixie Kitchen," she said. "They serve the best Cajun food in the city."

"Sounds good, I love Cajun food. So, is this a date?"

"It can be if you want it to be, baby."

"Great. Then it's a date."

Chapter 23

It was seven o'clock, and Stanton was working on another twelve-hour day. Burning a candle at both ends was nothing new to him—a classic workaholic with no friends, no family, and no interests outside of police work and sports. He was a

middle-aged man with twenty years vested in crime fighting, and he was married to being a detective—to being the best detective on the force.

He had just wrapped up the report on the triple homicide in northwest Gary and was ready to call it the night when Nolan got a call from a detective in Kankakee, Illinois. The Kankakee police were in the process of extraditing Roger Jackson, a.k.a. Pooh, to Gary authorities tonight, and they pulled him over on Interstate Fifty-Seven outside of Kankakee with a gun, drugs and two million dollars in cash. They got an anonymous tip from someone about a stolen white Cadillac truck with license plates that read BULL.

“Stanton,” Nolan said.

“What’s up?” Stanton replied wearily, exhausted from the day.

“I just got a call from the Kankakee police...they caught the second shooter, Roger Jackson, from an anonymous tip. He was in his partner’s truck with a gun, drugs and two million in cash when they stopped on the Interstate. They are bringing him back here tonight.”

“How soon will they be here?”

“Within the hour.”

“Good. I want to interrogate the bastard the moment he gets here.”

“Do you think that he’s going to talk?”

“I don’t know. I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve, though.”

“I’m sure you do. I’m going outside for a smoke.”

“Alright, see you in a bit. I want you in on the interrogation with me. You know...good cop, bad cop.”

“Okay. Just like old times.”

Nolan stepped outside to smoke his cigarette while Stanton impatiently waited for the Kankakee police to deliver Pooh. He knew that a possible confession from him could lead to a break in the case. He had waited three long years for the opportunity to bust King Cobra, and he wasn’t going to leave any stone unturned.

Ten minutes later, Pooh arrived at the station with an orange jumpsuit on and shackles on his wrist and ankles.

Stanton directed the officer and Pooh to the interrogation room. Nolan came back from his smoke break, and he went inside the room with Stanton and Pooh as the Kankakee police officer left to fill out some paperwork.

“I know that this is a smoke-free building, but would you like a cigarette, Jackson,” Nolan asked.

“No, thank you,” Pooh answered. Stanton sat down and looked Pooh directly into his eyes with a firm and stoic expression on his face.

“Look, Jackson,” Stanton said. “I’m going to get directly to the point. You are facing life in prison without the possibility of parole or a possible death sentence because of the murder of that reporter, asshole. You have better tell me exactly what you know, or else you are going to fry.”

“I’m not saying anything without my lawyer, cop.”

“Listen, tough guy, a public defender isn’t going to help you. I know you’re too stupid to have your own personal lawyer with the rap sheet that you have, so I think it’s in your best interest to start talking before I charge you with all three murders.”

"I didn't murder that reporter or Bull, man. Russell shot them, and he tried to shoot me. I killed him in self-defense."

"How do we know that you are telling the truth, Jackson? Everybody who can vouch for your story is dead."

Besides, you only had two bullets in your clip."

"I didn't kill them...I only fired one shot at Russell."

"Okay, Jackson," Nolan added. "We're going to make a deal with you. See, we don't give a damn about Russell or Bull. They were nothing but a couple of degenerate criminals. But somebody has to pay for the young reporter's death. You can be a free man if you give up King Cobra."

"I can't do that...I'm a dead man if I rat him out. Besides, I never personally met the man."

"Cut the crap, Jackson," Stanton said. "We know you were going to rat him out to the reporter. What happened to the pictures?"

"I don't know. I gave them to the reporter before Russell shot him, and I forgot to take the pictures with me after I shot Russell."

"We didn't find the pictures on the reporter, Jackson," Nolan said. "If you are lying to us, there will be no deal, and you will spend the rest of your life behind bars at the very least."

"Alright," Pooh said. "I'll tell you everything that I know, but I need to be placed in witness protection."

"That can be arranged. Let's get to it."

"Bull and I were going to give the pictures of King Cobra to the reporter and skip town with the money. We never talked to him face-to-face, but I learned about where the next shipment of drugs was coming in. That was my opportunity to expose him and get out of the life for good."

"Who is King Cobra?" Stanton asked.

"His name is Stewart Millsap, and he is also a cop," Pooh answered.

"Millsap," Stanton said. "I know who he is. We crossed paths a number of times on different drugs cases, remember?"

"Yeah, he's in the northwest district," Nolan replied. "What else do you know, Jackson?"

"He kidnapped Maurice Ousley's stepfather yesterday, and he wants a million dollars from him tonight."

"Maurice Ousley from the St. Louis Wolves?" Stanton asked.

"Who is Maurice Ousley?" Nolan asked.

"You know...the star basketball player from Chicago. He was the High School Player of the Year in 2001, and he plays for the Wolves."

"I don't follow basketball much."

"Yeah, that Maurice Ousley, and Millsap wants to personally make the exchange at midnight."

"Where?" Stanton asked.

"On 122nd and Torrence in Chicago inside of the warehouse district."

"Wait a minute," Stanton said. "That explains why there were those huge footprints at the crime scene. Ousley is six foot six, and I bet he has those pictures."

"You're right," Nolan added. "We have to get there before Millsap kills him. But this doesn't add up. Why would Millsap go through the trouble of kidnapping Ousley's stepfather for a mere one million dollars...he probably makes that in a day."

"It has to be something personal because he is making the exchange himself. They must have some sort of past with one another."

"Where did you get the cash, Jackson?" Nolan asked. "And if I think that you're lying, the deal is off."

"We scraped up half of the money ourselves, and Bull robbed Maurice for the other half of the two million. Bull and Maurice were friends since high school."

"Who needs enemies with friends like that," Stanton said. "That also explains why Ousley was at the crime scene. He was coming after you two for the money. Those pictures are the only leverage that he has."

"That may be so, but Millsap has eyes and ears everywhere," Pooh said. "If he finds out that I gave him up, those pictures are worthless, and Maurice and his stepfather are dead."

"You're right, Jackson," Stanton said. "We have to find Ousley before midnight."

"I'm going to put out an APB on Ousley right now," Nolan said. "I guess we're done here."

"Alright," Stanton said. "I'm going to take Jackson to a holding cell until we can find protective custody for him. We'll find him someplace safe until the trial once we catch Millsap. See what you can find on Ousley...there has to be some sort of connection between him and Millsap."

"Okay, I'll get right on it."

Chapter 24

Gabrielle and I arrived at Dixie Kitchen, and parking was very limited as usual in Hyde Park. I got lucky and found a space in the parking lot. I opened the car door for her before I fed the meter, and we proceeded to walk toward the restaurant.

The area was packed with people who were dining like us or shopping. The breeze off of the lake felt great as the sun began to set. I held Gabrielle's hand while we walked, talked and laughed. Being with her helped me forget about my painful reality momentarily.

"What have you been doing since leaving Union besides working at Billy's?"

"I've been going to culinary school for the last year to become a chef because I love to cook. One more semester, and I'm done."

"That's fantastic. I'm sure you will be a great chef."

"Thank you. I can't wait until all of my hard work pays off."

We entered the restaurant, and the hostess led us to our table. It was a slight crowd, but there were still plenty of seats available. I sat next to her as opposed to sitting across from her because I loved the smell of her perfume.

"Are you seeing anyone?" I asked.

"No, I'm just focusing on becoming a chef. I've dated a few guys after I left Union...but nothing serious. How about you?"

"Nobody at the moment. I dedicated the whole season to focusing on nothing else but basketball."

"It really paid off for you because you really had a great season."

"Thanks."

"How did you stay so committed to basketball? I know you have hundreds of groupies hounding you."

"It wasn't easy, but I can be very disciplined when I have to be. One night, a groupie got passed security somehow and snuck in my hotel room while the team was in Phoenix. It was after the game, and I came directly to the hotel from the press conference. She was butt naked under my sheets, and she was gorgeous. It took every ounce of willpower that I had to kick her out of my room."

"Wise move, Maurice. You probably would have been slapped with a paternity suit three months later."

"No doubt. Speaking of paternity suits, I almost got caught up in one about a year ago."

"Get out of here! What happened?"

"I was dating this flight attendant named Tameka Richardson from Houston for about six months. Everything was going well until the end of the 2007 season. I usually come back to Chicago once the season is over, but I delayed my trip for two weeks because I wanted to take Tameka to Cancun. I flew down to Houston to spend a couple of days there before our flight to Mexico. The first night I was there, I caught her in the bathroom with a turkey baster and the condom after we had gotten busy. Needless to say, I promptly ended the relationship and flew back to Chicago."

"Oh my God! No wonder you swore out women for an entire year!"

"Yeah, I've been like a monk every since. Hey, I'm curious...what happened to make you leave Union so abruptly? It was still the middle of the semester."

"I happened to get pregnant right before Sam dumped me. He just couldn't see how a family would fit into his plans."

"He just brushed you aside like you meant nothing to him? I'm so sorry, Gabrielle."

"It's okay. Jason and I are doing fine in spite of him."

"Does he take care of you and your son?"

"No, he doesn't. I haven't spoken to him since Jason was born, and I don't think that things will change anytime soon. If Jason wants a relationship with him when he gets older, I won't stop him, but Sam and I are done forever."

"I can't believe that Sam didn't take you with him. He makes ten or eleven million a season for the Florida Piranhas, and he left you here in Chicago to struggle with your young son? I think you're beautiful, Gabrielle, and I'd never treat you like that."

"Thank you, Maurice, that is so sweet. But I'm doing okay, really. I have a great support system with my parents and my sister Gina."

"I know you are, but I can relate to your situation. Stephanie dumped me for Andre Ramsey, the star running back for the St. Louis Bisons, right after graduation. I never got a call or even a Dear John letter from her."

"I hope this doesn't offend you, but I'm not surprised that she did what she did to you. Stephanie is all about Stephanie, and I always thought she was the wrong person for you anyway."

"No, I'm not offended because you're right. Can you believe that she had the nerve to call me yesterday to apologize to me after not hearing from her in three years?"

"That's typical of Stephanie. She's my sorority sister, but she can be so selfish. Well, her loss is my gain. Any woman would be damn lucky to have you, Maurice."

"Likewise, Gabrielle. Any man would definitely be lucky to have you as well."

I leaned over and kissed Gabrielle on the cheek, and she turned her head toward me to kiss me gently on my lips. Her lips felt very soft and tasted so sweet. Afterwards, we stared in each other's eyes for a brief moment before the waitress came over to take our order.

"Hello, my name is Sara, and I'll be serving you today," she said.

"Hi, Sara," Gabrielle said. "I'm ready to order now."

"What about you, Maurice?"

"I'm ready, sweetie," I said. "Go ahead."

"Alright. Give me the shrimp scampi and a Coke."

"And for you, sir?"

"I'll have the seafood gumbo and a Coke."

"Alright. I'll bring your drinks."

I reached for Gabrielle's hand and kissed it. I was falling for her, and I hoped that she felt the same way. I never felt that way about anyone—not even Stephanie or Michelle, but I wasn't going to play myself. I wasn't going to put all of my cards on the table too soon, and being burned several times had made me extra cautious when it came to relationships.

Gabrielle was very classy and sexy, and her hazel eyes could make the most hardened criminal's knees buckle. She was the girl of my dreams, and I was completely infatuated with her.

"I hope that you're enjoying yourself," I said. "I know that I am...thank you for easing my burden."

"Yes, Maurice, I'm having a wonderful time, and you're welcome."

"I want to say something that's been on my mind since we left Billy's."

"What is it, hon?"

"Remember when you had the flat tire a few miles away from campus, and it was storming outside?"

"Yeah, I'll never forget that night. I couldn't get in contact with Sam, no one stopped to help me, and I was stranded for an hour before you came. You were a godsend to me."

"I'll never forget that night, either. We talked for hours while we waited for the rain to die down, and even though nothing happened, I felt a connection with you that I didn't have with Stephanie. I haven't been able to stop think about it since."

"I felt the same way, Maurice, but both of us belonged to other people at the time, and we couldn't act on our feelings. But we don't belong to anyone now, and I told myself that if I ever saw you again, I wouldn't let the opportunity slip away a second time. I'm crazy about you, Maurice."

"I'm crazy about you, too. I wanted to tell you earlier, but I was afraid to put my cards on the table this soon."

"Well, you just remember who said it first."

She leaned over and gave me a soft and sensual French kiss, and my body began to quiver. I was so turned on that I felt guilty—the thought of my stepfather being tortured still loomed in the back of my mind. I suddenly pulled back from her, and I saw a look of confusion in her eyes.

"What's wrong, baby? You don't have to be afraid...I would never hurt you."

"It not that...I just don't want to move too fast."

"Don't worry, Maurice. We're meant to be together. Everything is going to be alright."

The server brought us our food, and it smelled delicious. I don't know if it was that the food was good or that I was extremely hungry, but finished it in no time.

Gabrielle saw that I was done, and she started feeding me some of her food with her fork while stroking my hair with her long and stylish fingernails—she made me feel like I could conquer any demon that I was facing.

We left the restaurant, and it was now completely dark outside. It was a few minutes before nine o'clock, and I decided to take Gabrielle home. It was convenient and thoughtful of her to pick a restaurant in Hyde Park because she lived only a few blocks away. We decided to walk to her apartment because it would give us a little more time to spend together. Strolling back to the car after dropping Gabrielle off would give me a moment to sort out things and plan my next move.

Being with Gabrielle was like a breath of fresh, clean air. I was totally at peace when I was with her.

Stephanie was the complete opposite. Toward the end of our relationship, I felt stressed most of the time because there was no limit to her whims and cravings—trying to satisfy her was like falling down a bottomless pit. I was simultaneously attracted and repulsed by her constant need for attention. I truly believed God gave us two ears and one mouth to do twice as much listening as talking, but Stephanie loved the sound of her own voice so much that I rarely got a word in.

We walked up to front door of her apartment complex, and we tightly embraced each other before we had a long, passionate kiss. I was thoroughly intoxicated by the sweet aroma of her hair and perfume. I didn't want to let her go because the moment of truth was less than three hours away.

We said our goodbyes, we kissed again, I told her that I had a great time, and I'd call her later. I watched her walk up the stairs and left.

Chapter 25

Millsap was sitting at the bar of his club, The Spot, sipping on a beer and smoking a cigarette when he got a call from the top lieutenant in his drug organization. He hadn't heard anything about the whereabouts of Pooh, and in his mind, no news was good news.

"Hello?"

"Hey, boss, it's Wayne. I've got bad news for you."

"Bad news? What is it?"

"I just received a call from Detective Greenwood, and he said that they have Pooh over in the eastern district. They caught him in Kankakee with a gun, drugs and two million in cash, and he gave you up, boss."

"Damn, I had a feeling that he would. It was a gamble, but I had to know if he had those pictures. Did he give the pictures of me to them?"

"No, and according to Greenwood, Pooh didn't have them on him."

"Okay, it doesn't matter at this point anyway. I wonder where he got two million dollars...I'm sure he was planning to leave the country."

"Probably so. Do you want me to get your plane ready?"

"Yes, get the plane ready, and be prepared to run things from now on. I'm doing what Pooh probably tried to do, and I'm going to my beach home in Mexico. I don't know when I'm coming back the States, or I may not come back at all."

"Alright, boss. I'll tell your pilot to be ready to take off around midnight."

Millsap angrily flipped his phone closed—thoroughly disgusted that his multi-million dollar drug operation was up in flames. He wasn't mentally ready to leave the country and was having second thoughts about the meeting with Maurice. He was tempted to tell Grim to let Brent go, but he figured that the additional cash would come in handy because there was no time to go his various banks to empty out his accounts. He had about five hundred thousand in his safe and several offshore accounts that would provide him with more than enough money, but he had a score to settle with Maurice and couldn't let it go.

He picked up his phone and dialed Grim. It was a little past nine o'clock, and the club was still fairly empty.

"Hey, Grim."

"What's up?"

"I need you to call Maurice and tell him that we're changing the time and place of the meeting. Have him meet us in the Forest Preserve at exit Sixty-Nine on Interstate Ninety-Four at eleven thirty. I've been made, and I need to leave town immediately."

"Okay, consider it done, boss."

"See you tonight."

He closed his phone and sat it on the bar. He signaled to his bartender to bring him another beer. His bartender's name was Greg Townsend, a young man trying to put himself through school by working at his club, and he really liked Greg because he reminded him of himself when he was that age. Greg was also the operational manager, and he kept the money flowing with his brilliant ideas to bring in more customers.

"Thanks, Greg," Millsap said, twisting off the cap of his beer. "Wait a second, I want to tell you something."

"Sure, Mr. Millsap. What's is it?"

"I want to say that I love what you've done with the place, Greg. I like you because you just do your job and never ask questions. This place was a dump when I bought it several years ago, and it was only supposed to be a place to

launder some of my drug money. But you have turned me a profit every year since I hired you.”

“Thanks, Mr. Millsap. I really appreciate that. I put my heart and soul into this place and treated this place like it’s my own business.”

“You’re welcome, Greg. I’m leaving town and I don’t know if or when I’m coming back. The club is yours, and Wayne will be by here tomorrow with the paperwork.”

“Thanks, sir! Thank you so much.”

“Don’t let me down, okay?”

“I won’t, sir. I promise.”

Chapter 26

I parked in the lot by the lakefront on Sixty-Seventh and Jeffery Boulevard and got out to walk toward the bike path. The park didn’t close until eleven o’clock, so I had time to stroll and clear my head. There were several people still jogging along the path, and there were people sitting in their cars drinking and playing music in the parking lot.

There was a guy leaning his back against the driver’s side door of his car with his arms wrapped around a girl, and Lake Shore Drive was still busy three hours after rush hour.

I walked over to one of the park benches and sat down. I thought about the time I spent with Gabrielle and was still on a high from being with her. She was finally my lady, and I thought I’d never have another opportunity for us to be together once she left Union. The fact that she had a son didn’t bother me—her son was going to need a male role model just like I needed one growing up.

My phone rang, and I didn’t recognize the number.

The number on my caller ID had an Indiana area code, so I knew that it was either Grim or Millsap.

“Yeah.”

“It’s Grim. There has been a change of plans. Meet us in the Forest Preserve at exit Sixty-Nine on Interstate Ninety-Four, and be there at eleven thirty sharp.”

“Forest Preserve? What’s going on, man...why the change of plans, Grim?”

“That’s not any of your concern, Maurice. Just be there at eleven thirty.”

I hung up my phone and continued to sit on the bench for a minute. My gut was telling me that something was wrong again. I flipped my phone open, and called Junior.

“Hey, BJ.”

“Mo, is everything okay?”

“Yeah, nothing has happened yet. However, I just got a call from the other kidnapper, and they changed the time and place on me. They want to meet at the Forest Preserve on 140th and the Bishop Ford Expressway at eleven thirty.”

“That doesn’t sound right. They are probably up to something.”

"There's no doubt in my mind about it. I feel like these pictures aren't going to be enough insurance to free us of this situation. I don't think this has anything to do with money...it's personal."

"I had time to think about it, too, and it's absolutely personal. You've got to watch your back, and you can't hesitate to shoot either of them...not for a second."

"I've never had to shoot anybody before, BJ. I don't know if I have it in me."

"I have, and you would if your life depended upon it."

"But did you kill anyone?"

"I don't think so. I had to shoot my way out of a few drug dealers' houses while I was into stealing jewelry, but I never stuck around to see if any bodies dropped. All I'm saying is if you pull it, you better use it."

"Okay, I'll call you once it's over. If you don't hear from me by midnight, call the police."

"That's not going to be necessary. You and Dad are going to be fine, and I have to think positively."

"Just be prepared, BJ." I hung up my phone and continued to sit on the bench. I took my cap off and rubbed my low-cropped, wavy hair.

Once again, I was uncertain about what was going to transpire in a couple of hours. My false sense of control over the situation was shattered after talking to Junior. I realized that I was never in control of the situation, and my fate was solely in Millsap's hands. My logic now was that if he really wanted to kill us, the money or the pictures weren't going to matter. Nothing would stop him from killing my stepfather or me once he had his hands on either.

I drove toward Stony Island Avenue on Sixty-Seventh Street, and I turned left at the intersection. Driving southbound on Stony Island led to Interstate Ninety-Four at Ninety-Fifth Street, and the Forest Preserve was about five minutes away from there. There was a mini-mall at Ninety-Fifth Street, so I decided that I was going to park there to think of a game plan.

There was a gas station at Seventy-Fifth Street, and I had to stop and fill up. A homeless man walked up to me and offered to wash my windows. I gave him ten dollars and he wiped my windows clean while I pumped my gas. I thanked him, got my receipt and drove off. Once I got to Seventy-Ninth Street, I was stopped by a red light. The parking lot at the White Castle hamburger restaurant was filled to capacity. Guys with the sexy girls on the back of their motorcycles wearing nothing but bikini tops and *Daisy Duke* shorts were there. I used to hang out there when I was in high school, and watching them was like eating the same soup warmed over.

The light turned green, but the gaping traffic moved slowly as everyone was looking at the crowd of boys showing off on their bikes. The traffic finally started moving, and there was steady flowing traffic to Ninety-Fifth Street. I replayed tonight's events in my head—paying attention to every little detail. Life suddenly had a new meaning to me because of the fact that it could be my last night alive. I learned to stop and smell the roses for a change. My life prior to this weekend was always busy from the constant autograph requests to the media scrutiny.

Before the light turned green at Ninety-Fifth, I turned on some music to relax me before entering the parking lot at the mall. My defining moment was quickly approaching, and I was getting myself ready like a warrior preparing for battle.

Chapter 27

Nolan had found Maurice's rap sheet on the police computer, and made the connection between Millsap and him. Stanton had dozed off at his desk—his exhaustion had finally caught up with him. Nolan had also discovered that Junior was on house arrest by cross-referencing Maurice's and his father's name with his name. He rushed over to Stanton and pounded on his desk.

"Wake up, partner. I found out what the connection is between Ousley and Millsap."

"What connection?" Stanton said, wiping his eyes.

"Come on, I'll tell you about it on the way to Ousley's house."

They left the precinct and hopped in Stanton's car.

They both realized that a better opportunity to catch Millsap might not come around ever again.

"Where are we going?" Stanton asked.

"We're headed to Manteno, Illinois," Nolan answered. "Maurice has a brother there on house arrest, and we might be able to get some leads by asking him some questions."

"Manteno...right. I remember reading an article about Maurice and his sisters buying their father a home there. It's about an hour away from here."

"For how much?"

"A half million."

"Damn, I'm in the wrong profession. It is no way in hell I'd be able to afford a home like that on a cop's salary."

"That's why cops like Millsap go bad. I'm not in it for the money, though. I joined the force to make a difference...make the city a better place."

"I think we all joined the force to make a difference initially, but Millsap and others like him lose sight of this."

"You've got a point, but I think it all boils down to what's in a person's core...the kind of character a person has."

"Right, a person's character. When a person is faced with some tough circumstances, their character will be revealed."

"Absolutely. So what's the connection between Millsap and Ousley?"

"Ousley sold drugs as a kid, and Millsap was the undercover cop who brought him down in 1996. Ousley was too young to do any serious time...maybe about thirteen at the time, so he only got probation and community service."

"Hum, Millsap has an ax to grind with him, but there's more to the story because he wouldn't have waited twelve years to settle this."

"Maybe it solely has something to do with money... Millsap has made a living off of shaking down drug dealers."

"It's possible, but I doubt it. He doesn't need Ousley's million. Like I said before, it has to be something personal, but why risk everything to settle a twelve-year-old score. Guys beat drug charges every day."

"Hopefully, Brent Jr. can give us some answers."

"He'd better, or else his brother and father are dead."

"Did you ever get around to booking your flight to Newark?"

"Not yet. I'm not going anywhere until we wrap up this case. We would get another opportunity to put this asshole away because he's a guaranteed flight risk."

"I know, but you really should go see your brother when this is over. Nothing is more important than family. I'm taking my wife and girls to Florida next week."

"Going to Disney World?"

"You got it. My two little girls have been dying to go, and I promised to take them. Why don't you have a family, partner?"

"I was married once. My ex and I talked about having kids, but deep down I knew I wasn't the paternal type. She said that I loved my job more than her. At the time, I didn't want to admit it, but she was right."

"You're going to work yourself to death, Blaine. Start enjoying life a little more, alright?"

"I'm enjoying life just fine. I love my freedom...no ties to anyone."

"Suit yourself."

They were a few blocks from Brent's house in no time—a speeding car with flashing lights usually doesn't have many obstacles in front of it. It was about ten forty-five, and the neighborhood was dark and completely quiet.

Stanton parked the squad car in the driveway, and he and Nolan walked toward the front door to ring the bell.

"Who is it?" Junior asked.

"It's the police," Nolan answered. "We need to ask you a few questions about your brother, Brent."

"What's this about?" Junior asked, as he opened the door and stepped aside to let them in.

"We will ask the questions, and you will answer them," Stanton said.

"That depends on what you are trying to ask me, cop. I know my rights."

"Cut the sarcasm and answer our questions, convict," Nolan countered.

"Say what you have to say and leave."

"Alright," Stanton said. "Where is Maurice?"

"I don't know. I haven't spoken to him since this afternoon."

"Did he say where he was going?"

"No. He just said he was going to the city."

"Okay. I'm going to get right to the point," Nolan said. "We know everything...we know about the kidnapping of your father, we know about Bull's murder, and we know that a dirty cop named Millsap wants one million dollars from Maurice by midnight or else..."

"Look, cop, I said I don't know anything. You're barking up the wrong tree here."

"Maybe you didn't understand what I just said. Millsap just got made...he secretly ran a drug operation for over fifteen years, and he has nothing to lose right now. Your better tell us something or else you're going back to jail."

"You can't threaten me. I have three months to go before I'm off of house arrest, and I haven't done anything wrong. Please leave."

"Calm down, Brent," Stanton said. We are here to help you and your family. We also know that Maurice has some pictures of Millsap making a drug buy, and we know that Bull robbed him for the money today. Those pictures aren't enough to free your father and Maurice...they are dead unless we find them."

"Okay. I made copies of the photos. Here, look."

"That's Millsap alright," Nolan said.

"Maurice called me about an hour and a half ago and said that the kidnappers changed the time and location of the exchange."

"Where are they going to meet?" Stanton asked.

"They are going to meet in the Forest Preserve at 140th and the Bishop Ford Expressway at eleven thirty."

"Dammit! What time is it, Nolan?"

"Almost eleven."

"Thank you, Brent," Stanton said. "I promise you that we won't let anything happen to your brother or father."

Stanton and Nolan scurried toward the car and quickly drove off. Junior silently stood in the doorway as the taillights of their car disappeared into the darkness.

Chapter 28

I continued to sit in the lot of the mall to think. I had to go into battle knowing that it was a strong possibility I was going to be killed by Grim or Millsap. I was going to be outmatched two to one, so I had to ponder each probable scenario carefully. If Grim and Millsap both drew their guns on me, it would be a flip of a coin as to whom I'd shoot because both were more than efficient at hitting a target. But if one of them drew their gun on my stepfather and the other on me, I'd shoot the one who drew their gun on my stepfather. Hopefully, that would give him enough time to make a run for cover.

In either situation, I couldn't hesitate to shoot first and hope that my stepfather could escape—I was anticipating to be shot no matter what happened. I was afraid, but I also knew what had to be done.

Millsap had single-handedly redefined the dichotomy of cops and criminals in Gary. What used to be as clear as black and white has become one big gray area.

I thought about Junior and the fact that he initially couldn't vote because of his conviction—I thought about Blue and Justin—two guys who will probably continue to be petty drug dealers because of their respective criminal records. I guessed it was easier for society to invest tax dollars in prisons rather than schools because of the return being greater.

I learned in sociology class that prisons were built based on our third grade Iowa Basics test scores, and politicians will keep betting on us being criminals instead of betting on our potential to be productive members of society. I fell for the trap as a youth, but I beat the odds and made something of myself. Perhaps Millsap wants to make me pay in his own twisted way for bucking the system that profits from criminal activity in the community.

It was eleven fifteen, and I left the lot. I entered the expressway and drove at a steady pace—embarking upon my journey to uncertainty. I blacked everything else out as I focused totally on the road. I didn't think about the future, I didn't think about getting shot. My emotions were numb, and my focus was laser-like. I used this tactic on the basketball court my entire high school, collegiate and professional career. If I was going to get out of this quagmire, I couldn't let any distractions enter my mind.

As I exited the expressway, could barely see because of the fog settling in. There were headlights in the distance, and I slowly drove down this caliginous path of obscurity. I approached the parked cars in the heart of the Forest Preserve—I observed the insignia on Millsap's squad car and the dark tint on Grim's shabby Caprice. I parked the car and got out, and a few seconds later, Millsap, Grim and my stepfather stepped out of the police car.

"Well now, look what we have here," Millsap said sarcastically. "You're not the little squirt that I busted years ago. You've made quite a name for yourself."

"I'm very happy to disappoint you, Stewart," I fired back. "I know you expected me to end up in one of your prisons, but I'm far more intelligent than that. Are you okay, Dad?"

"I'm fine, Maurice."

"I'm not trying to hurt anybody, Maurice," Millsap said. "I just want my money."

"I don't have it. If you want your damn money, get it from your flunky, Pooh. That son of a bitch robbed me today with the help of Bull...but you probably knew that, right?"

"As a matter of fact, no, I didn't know. When the cops found Bull, Russell and the reporter, no money was recovered. That explains why Pooh had two million in cash when they caught his ass tonight."

"Good, you can get your damn money out of evidence, but that's your problem. Let my dad go so that we can get out of here. If you don't, pictures of you making a deal with the Columbians are going to the Press."

"So, you have those pictures, huh? They are worthless, and my lawyers will easily prove that I'm not the guy in those photographs."

"Whatever...let us go."

"Not so fast, Maurice. The deal was for you to hand over the cash in exchange for your dad. You reneged on our agreement. The deal is off."

Grim grabbed my stepfather and aimed his gun at my stepfather's head—one of the scenarios I replayed over and over in my head. Millsap pulled out his gun and drew it on me, and I aimed my gun at Grim. However, I froze up and couldn't shoot him. I had a split second to react, but I didn't pull the trigger. Now I had to point my gun at Millsap instead, and our lives were in imminent danger.

"Do you have any last words before you die, Maurice," Millsap said.

"If I die, I'm taking one of you bastards with me."

"Put down your gun, Maurice," Grim said. "You can't win."

"Don't do it, Maurice!" Brent exclaimed. "If you put your gun down, we're dead."

"I do have one question, Millsap," I said, aiming the barrel of the Beretta at his head. "What is this all about? Extorting a million dollars from me for something that happened twelve years ago is bull. You don't need the money, so what are you really after?"

"Do you remember the flight attendant you dumped last year? Do you remember Tameka?"

"Yeah, so what?"

"Tameka is my baby sister, Maurice. She tried to commit suicide over your sorry ass, and I'm going to kill you, worthless son of a bitch!"

"That isn't my fault. Your sister has psychological problems, man. Did she tell you the part about her trying to trap me with a baby by impregnating herself with a turkey baster? She messed up the relationship, not me."

"I don't care. I'll kill anybody who hurts my sister, right or wrong, Maurice."

I decided that I had enough of Millsap's diatribe and was ready to shoot him when flashing lights were suddenly upon us. Two cops jumped out of the car behind me with their guns cocked.

"Freeze!" Stanton shouted.

"Everybody drop your guns and put your hands up!" Nolan affirmed.

Grim, Millsap and I dropped our guns and put our hands in the air. My stepfather started walking toward us with his hands in the air. I turned around and faced the cops. They continued to aim their guns at Grim and Millsap, and my stepfather and I slid out of the line of fire with our hands still in the air.

"You can put your hands down," Stanton said, looking directly into my eyes with a sigh of relief. "It's over."

"Lay face down on the ground with your hands behind your back," Nolan shouted, as he walked toward them with his gun still pointed in their direction. Grim immediately laid flat on the ground with his arms and hands behind his back while Millsap struggled to kneel down slowly on his knees and subtly slipped his eyeglasses in his back pocket before laying flat on his stomach.

Stanton carefully walked over to back up his partner.

Nolan cuffed Grim and brought him to his feet while Stanton watched Millsap. Once Grim was completely handcuffed, Stanton handcuffed Millsap and struggled somewhat to bring him to his feet because Millsap was a very large man—about six foot three and weighed 275 to 300 pounds.

"I've waited three years to bring you down, Millsap," Stanton said. "Nobody believed you existed, but here you are in the flesh."

"You ain't got a thing on me, Stanton," Millsap countered. "I was following up a lead just like you."

"That's a damn lie!" I shouted. "He's the one behind all of this, and I'll personally testify against his ass!"

"Did you hear that, Millsap," Nolan said. "You can plead your case to the judge, prick. *You have the right to remain silent...*"

Nolan opened the rear passenger's side door and forced Grim into the car after reading both of them their rights. Then Stanton proceeded to put Millsap in the car, but he broke free of the handcuffs and gave Stanton an elbow to the head. Stanton fell to the ground and was unconscious with a gash on his forehead. Nolan reached for his Glock, but Millsap had already drawn his spare gun from his boot and shot Nolan in the chest. My stepfather and I ducked behind the car for cover as Millsap took Stanton's keys and unlocked Grim's handcuffs. They forgot about us and fled to their respective cars and drove off.

Nolan was motionless in a pool of blood. I checked for a pulse, but he was dead. My stepfather shook Stanton until he regained consciousness. I looked on the ground and noticed a piece of the frame from Millsap's glasses lying in the dirt. That was what he used to break free of the handcuffs.

"What happened?" Stanton said, still groggy from the blow to the head. "Where's Millsap?"

"Millsap shot your partner, sir," I said. "They got away, and your partner is dead. He used a piece of his glasses to unlock the handcuffs."

"Oh no!" Stanton said. "My partner is dead, and Millsap got away. I'm screwed."

"It wasn't your fault, sir. It all happened so fast."

"I'm Detective Stanton, Maurice, and it was my fault. I defied a direct order from my boss...I wasn't even supposed to be here."

"Maurice is right, detective," Brent said. "We will vouch for you if you need us."

"Thanks, but I don't think that it will help. Nolan had a wife and two kids. I don't know how I'm going to tell them what happened here."

Stanton walked over to his squad car to call for backup and a coroner. He didn't follow the proper protocol—he was overzealous in his pursuit of one of the biggest high rollers in the Midwest. His job was on the line, and his partner was deceased.

My stepfather and I stood beside Stanton in total shock and disbelief. Before that weekend, I never saw a murder before, but now I've seen four.

Chapter 29

One Week Later

I was on my way to Gary for Detective Nolan's funeral to pay my respects to one of the men who saved our lives on that gut-wrenching Friday night. He gave his life in the line of duty, and I felt compelled to offer his family my support. I created a college fund for his two young daughters, and I raised over twenty thousand dollars for them thus far.

I tried to plead a case for Detective Stanton—I gave the police the photos of Millsap and the Columbians, I described Grim to them in full detail, and I answered all of their pertinent questions, but it wasn't enough to save him from suspension with pay and a trip to appear in front of IA. I hoped to see him at the funeral so that I could thank him for being there in the nick of time.

I arrived in Gary at nine thirty, an hour before the start of the funeral. I wanted to meet Nolan's family personally and offer my condolences. Mrs. Nolan sounded really nice over the phone in spite of the circumstances, and she wanted to meet me before the start of the service to thank me for setting up the college fund for her girls.

I parked my car in the lot of the funeral home and went inside to sign the guest book. The room where Nolan's funeral was going to take place was still fairly empty—there were two couples sitting on the front pew, and the casket was open. Nolan was only thirty-seven years old, and his life was cut short by a cold-blooded sociopath.

His two girls were going to have to endure life without him, and I knew all too well what that felt like.

Millsap and Grim were still at large, and a nationwide manhunt to capture them had been unsuccessful. I felt a sense of guilt because I was indirectly responsible for the unfortunate chain of events that occurred the week prior. I had a lucid perspective on how my illicit past had a direct bearing on my stepfather's kidnapping and ultimately Nolan's murder.

I sat down on the back pew, and I started thinking about Gabrielle. We'd been seeing each other every day since our first date, and our relationship had blossomed to love. I never thought in my wildest dreams that I'd fall for someone so hard and so quickly. We went to Navy Pier, Wrigley Field, The Cheesecake Factory and to see the hit musical *Wicked* to name a few things. It was as if we had known each other forever, as was the case when we crossed paths on that stormy night five years ago. She wanted to accompany me to Nolan's funeral, but I declined her offer because I needed to face his family on my own.

I also thought about Junior's twenty-first birthday this weekend, and my sisters were flying in to celebrate it with him. They were still very upset with Junior and me for not telling them about what had happened, but they were also very grateful that neither of us was hurt. We planned to cater some food and to buy a cake for him in addition to giving him some gifts. Junior had just turned twenty-one, but his mindset was that of someone much older. Prior to his prison term, he was a seasoned drug dealer and jewel thief, and he had been living on his own as an adult at fifteen years old.

People were starting to come in, and Mrs. Nolan's limousine arrived moments afterward. Her two daughters, her parents, her mother-in-law and her brother-in-law accompanied her. Her family proceeded to motion toward the front of the room to view the body, and she recognized me and walked over to greet me.

"Hello, Mrs. Nolan," I said. "I just want to offer my condolences to you and your family, and you have my deepest sympathy, ma'am."

"Thank you, Maurice," she replied. "I really appreciate what you have done for my girls, and I thank you for coming."

"Your welcome, Mrs. Nolan. If you need anything at all, don't hesitate to ask."

"Thank you, I will."

She joined her family on the right-hand side of the room. She was holding up well so far, and her kind gesture made me feel welcomed to be there. I continued to sit in the back of the room while people entered and viewed the coffin.

The service lasted about two hours—he was a decorated officer who served fifteen years on the force.

Various officers said kind words about him when taking the podium, but there was no sign of Stanton. When the service was over, everyone lined up for the funeral procession to go to cemetery, which was about three miles away from the funeral home. People seemed to respect the dead more than the living, and nearly everyone stopped dead in their tracks once they saw a police car leading the convoy that stretched nearly a half of a mile.

I still hoped to see Stanton at the burial, but ominous clouds had entered the sky, and a torrential rainfall was moments away. It began to rain fiercely after Nolan was given a twenty-one-gun salute, and the sound of the trumpets caused

Mrs. Nolan to sob uncontrollably as she clutched the neatly folded flag tightly. The finality of death had settled in, and her brother-in-law had to hold her up because she was overcome with grief.

I always wondered why it often rained during funerals, and I concluded that God wept when the order of things was disrupted. I opened my umbrella and started walking toward my car. I could see the silhouette of a man standing beside a tree about fifty yards away as the rain continued to fall steadily. It looked like Stanton, and I began to walk toward him. I recognized him once I got a little closer.

"Detective Stanton!" I shouted. "I've been looking for you."

"How are you, Maurice?" he asked, holding a flask in his hand.

"I'm okay. I thought you'd be at the funeral, but I'm sure you had your reasons for not coming."

"Yeah, Bob's wife hates my guts. She swore that I was trying my best to corrupt her husband every chance I got...I'm sure she holds me responsible for Bob's death."

"I don't know...I wouldn't say that...."

"I would. Every time we went out for a drink after work, Beth was convinced that I had him in the champagne room of some strip club, but enough about that. I want to thank you for sticking up for me."

"You're welcome. It was the least that I could do. My dad and I would be dead if it wasn't for you and Detective Nolan."

"I was just doing my job, Maurice."

"What about Grim and Millsap? Have they been captured?"

"Not yet. We've got a couple of leads in the South, but nothing concrete."

"Damn. I might have to hire a bodyguard."

"Well, if you decide to do that, put me at the top of your list. I meet with Internal Affairs on Monday, and I could possibly be getting a pink slip."

"Don't say that, Detective Stanton. You have to think positively about the situation."

"No, I have to think realistically. I didn't call for backup, and my partner is dead. If I would have just followed procedure, he'd still be here."

"You can't beat yourself up about this. You did what you thought was right, and you did your best. You can hold your head up high knowing those two things, sir."

"Thanks, Maurice. You're a good kid."

I shook his hand, and he told me to keep in touch. I looked in the sky as I walked across the wet grass and saw a rainbow on the horizon. The sun partly appeared from behind the clouds, and the rain had dwindled down to just a sprinkle.

I was on my way to Gabrielle's to pick her up for a bunch. Malik and Tanya were going to join us downtown at Harry Carey's Restaurant, and we were going to the Sox game afterward. Tanya convinced Malik to stay another week—maybe he'll settle down for a change.

A reporter from Channel Four News spotted me and tried to flag me down for comment. I acted like I didn't see him and reached for the door handle of the car.

"Maurice, do you care to make a statement about your father's kidnapping?"

"No comment, sir."

Epilogue

Pooh was cooking breakfast for himself in a safe house in Mobile, Alabama. Stanton had kept his word by providing an adequate hiding place for him. He was out of his mind with boredom, but he had followed Stanton's instructions completely by not contacting any friends or family. The highlight of his day for the past week was watching the NBA Playoffs and *The Young and the Restless*.

It was extremely hot and humid all day long, and he stayed indoors most of the time. The only time that he came out was at night, and there was a liquor store and nightclub two blocks away from the safe house. He would routinely get a forty-ounce bottle of malt liquor as soon as the sun went down, and he went to the club to see the strippers once since he had been there.

Being coupled up in the house gave him a lot of time to think about where he went wrong in life—not finishing high school, having three babies by three different women, and numerous drug and weapons charges. He stayed drunk to wash away the sorrow and the guilt, but once he sobered up, he'd always feel ten times worse than before. His first priority was getting his GED once the trial was over. He wanted to make something of himself and provide for his three children.

Before he could finish eating his breakfast, he heard a knock at the door and got up from the kitchen table to see who it was. He looked out of the peephole and didn't see anyone.

"Who is it," he said, but no one replied. "Is anybody there?"

He opened the door and saw no one. He turned around and went back inside when someone push opened the door on his back. He turned around, and Grim was standing in front of him with his gun aimed at his face. It had a silencer on it to reduce noise, and he could escape without drawing any attention to himself.

"Grim! Oh God!"

Grim let off three shots—one to the head and two the chest. Blood and brain fragments splattered the wall as Pooh fell face first to the floor. Grim pulled out his phone and sent a text.

It's done.
